

LIFTING OUR EYES

I lift up my eyes to the hills--from where will my help come? 2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. 3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. 4 He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. 5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. 6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. 7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. 8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. (Psalm 121, NRSV)

“I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?” This is the question the psalmist in today’s scripture lesson (Psalm 121:1) asked thousands of years ago, and it’s just as fitting today. Last September, we lifted up our eyes and saw a hijacked airliner crash into the North Tower at the World Trade Center. From that point on, our minds, our hearts, and our world were bombarded by a series of surreal events, events we watched in horror and disbelief: the South Tower plane crash, the smoke and flames, the people running, the fire trucks, the news reports, the Pentagon, a field in Pennsylvania, the towers crumbling before our very eyes.

We woke up on September 11, 2001, and lifted our eyes to a brilliant blue sky and warm golden sun. No hint of rain. No sweltering dog days of August. We lifted our eyes to the promise of a beautiful day.

It’s hard to believe it’s been almost a year since that beautiful morning turned into the darkest day many of us have ever seen. I was having this same discussion recently with a friend who said she thinks the year flew by because we were in such a state of shock and numbness at first. It took awhile for reality to sink in.

When did it become real to you? The first time I really broke down was after leading Chris’ memorial service. While we’d held Frank’s service several days before, I had intentionally avoided dwelling on it so that I could hold it together. The finality of it all hit me like a ton of bricks as I sat alone in our sanctuary listening to the last few songs chosen by his family to play after the service. I listened to Chris’ favorites, James Taylor and Jackson Browne, and then I remember the final song, The Moody Blues tune, “Your Wildest Dreams.” How differently I heard the words now, “I remember skies, reflected in your eyes. I wonder where you are, I wonder if you think about me once upon a time, in your wildest dreams.”

One year later, we’re trying to go about our lives, but the reality that our world has changed can hit us any time. There are the times we expect it: when we watch the news, read the paper, or walk by Ground Zero. And then there are the times it sneaks up on us: when we go to the drug store and find ourselves in line behind a grieving family. When we drive the BQE towards Manhattan and find ourselves staring at a hole in the skyline. When we step into a subway car that’s still labeled World Trade Center. When out of nowhere we suddenly sense an underlying sadness and emptiness inside.

I remember going to a U2 concert in October at Madison Square Garden. Colleen and I had already heard the Irish rock band back in April when all seemed right with the world. Our tickets were a gift from Frank Salvaterra. Although both concerts were filled with the same songs, the October one had an entirely different feel to it. Given the context, I found that the lyrics struck me in a new and piercing way, especially two of their songs that speak about Heaven, called “Where the Streets Have No Name” and “Walk On.” At the end of the show, their lead singer Bono brought out firefighters and police officers who had put their lives on the line at the World Trade Center. The band played a tune called, “Out of Control.” How out of control our world felt throughout that surreal autumn with the anthrax scare and the plane crash in Rockaway.

We all have our stories to tell and we all need to tell them. There is the temptation to behave as if nothing ever happened, to deal with it through avoidance. Don’t get me wrong; we all need our escapes. However, if we never talk about it, we will suffer emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually in the long run. If you’ve been burying feelings of anger, fear, or depression let me take this time to encourage you to talk to someone. It has always been helpful to me.

Many of us are shepherding children and grandchildren through this as well. The other day I drove past the city, and I pointed out the Empire State Building to my 5-year-old son, Matthew. I heard myself saying, “That’s the tallest building in New York City.” Matthew knows about September 11th, but some day when he’s older I’ll have to remind him that once there stood two buildings even taller than the Empire State Building until terrorists destroyed them. And then I’ll tell him that the real tragedy of it all was not the loss of skyscrapers, but the loss of lives, including two friends of mine, whose wives and children he knows.

He’ll ask me what it was like, what I did and how I responded. In all honesty I will tell him that for the most part I felt helpless to do much of anything except spend time with the families and pray. I did more praying that year than at any other time in my life. I prayed for my friends and their families. I prayed for the firefighters and other rescue personnel who tried to rescue the people in the towers. I prayed for families I’d never met who awaited word on missing loved ones. And I prayed and prayed for all of those families whose loved ones never came home.

I’ll tell him that I felt like the psalmist who wrote, “I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?” And then I’ll tell him where our help did come from; it’s in verse 2, “My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.” I’ll tell him about how God worked through so many generous and caring people from all around our nation and world. He’ll learn about how people lined up for hours to donate blood, how firefighters traveled here from all across America. He’ll learn about the town in Louisiana that held bake sales to buy a new fire truck for the city. He’ll hear about the church in San Diego whose Sunday School children sent us 1,000 paper cranes as a symbolic prayer for peace. He’ll learn about the things both large and small that the people in our church did to offer help and support to the grieving families.

If he asks me if I ever questioned God's love and care for people in the midst of such tragedy I'll honestly tell him no. I questioned my own ability to do all that needed to be done, but I never questioned God's love. In fact, I'll tell him that I felt the calm peace of God's Spirit in my heart despite the chaos that was breaking out all around me.

Today's psalm talks about this peace when it tells us, "God will not let your foot be moved, God who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, God who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (vv. 3-4). Amidst all of our sleepless nights, God has been awake. God has been present. God has sustained us and equipped us to be there for one another throughout this terrible ordeal. I felt God's presence when we gathered with our community at last year's Candlelight Prayer Vigil. I felt God's presence in your responses to those who lost loved ones. I felt God's presence as we gathered on Christmas Eve to celebrate the birth of hope in a Bethlehem stable, even as we felt so hopeless. I felt God's presence as I baptized a baby and performed a wedding the Saturday after the attack.

No matter what comes down the pike, God's presence will continue to sustain us, comfort us, and strengthen us. It does not, of course, provide us with a magic shield. And so the last few verses of Psalm 121 may seem puzzling or out of touch at first glance. They tell us, "The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; God will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore" (vv. 6-8). We've all been wounded. We've all been victimized by evil. How can we listen to these verses and not question?

Rather than casting aside these verses as naïve, I see them as the promise of what is yet to come. I believe that these verses are speaking about Heaven. I believe that the God who started this planet spinning will take care of us when our time here is over. It is this faith and this hope that allows us to lift up our eyes beyond that crater in lower Manhattan. It is this faith and this hope that gives us the courage to say that this is not the end. It was not the end for the people who lost their lives last September. And it is not the end for those of us sitting here today. For our help comes from the Lord who made Heaven and earth; Heaven—a place free of terrorism and the hate that fuels it, a place free of suffering and the pain that ignites it, a place free of tears and the loss that inspires them. I believe in Heaven we will live eternally, cradled in the love of God.

We have faced dark days, and we can't predict the future. But as people of faith, we know that ultimately, love prevails. It prevails when we follow God's Spirit in our lives, and it prevails in the life hereafter. As we approach this Wednesday, the one year anniversary of September 11th, may God's peace surround us and God's presence sustain us. And as we lift our eyes to a grieving town and nation, may we also lift our eyes to God, maker of Heaven and earth, whose eyes remain forever fixed on us. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only
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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Most merciful God, comforter of all who mourn, companion of the brokenhearted, we ask your soothing peace on all who grieve. For those families who have lost loved ones, including the Quackenbushes and Salvaterras, we ask your consolation. For those who lost spouses, for those children who lost parents, for those who lost friends in the September 11th attacks, we ask your special blessing this week. Give them the courage they need to face the first anniversary of that heartbreaking day. Help all of us sense your presence in our lives, so that we may see past the darkness, and hope can take root in our hearts.

We pray for peace in this brutal world, that innocent lives might be spared, and that our broken human family might be reunited.

We thank you for all the ways you helped us make it through this past year and ask your continued blessing as we face the future.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. AMEN.

And now let us go in peace, ever lifting up our eyes to our eternal God, who has been with us since the day we were born and has promised to be with us this day and forever. In the comfort and hope of God, go in peace. AMEN.