PENTECOST 16, B – September 12, 2021

20th Anniversary of 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

SCRIPTURES – Job 30:16-24; Romans 8:31-38; Luke 13:1-9; Ps. 31

*God has said: “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”* Heb. 13:5-6

Last Tuesday I got up early to take a 6:30 AM flight from White Plains to St. Louis for a 4-day meeting with our Synod Pres., VP’s, and all of the District Presidents. Our meetings didn’t begin until Wed. morning, but I planned to get there early so that I could join another DP for golf in the afternoon. I got in at 9:15… PM. My 6:30 flight, you see, had mechanical problems and was canceled, and I was rebooked onto an 11:30 AM flight. No more golf! So, I got my bag from baggage claim; dragged it (a wheel broke) to where I had a place to sit; and got my computer out. When I plugged it in, the plug promptly fell out of the cheap wall socket, so I lifted my bag to lean it against the plug. I forgot I had opened it to get my computer out, and my clothes dumped all over the floor. I bent over, put everything back in, stood up… and hit my head on the large fire alarm jutting out from the wall, slicing open my head. Aaarrrggg! Hours later, on got on my 11:30 flight… and the captain came on: “We’re too heavy to land in Chicago because of the wind, so we need 4 people to get off.” Now being in no hurry to get there, I took the travel voucher they offered and got off. I was rescheduled to fly from Newark, so the airline paid for my ride there. My flight – direct, at least – got in at 9:15, and I got into my hotel at 10:00.

But, at least I was there! Imagine having no problems, making your first flight… and crashing into a building, or a field.

This has been an emotional week for many. Pictures and reflections of people who lived through the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001 have stirred up many memories. I remember leaving a meeting in Greenwich that morning and, as I drove home, seeing an extremely long line of emergency vehicles heading down 95 to NYC. I remember calling every family in the congregation that afternoon to see if everyone was safe… and Karen Shane telling me that she hadn’t heard from John, who worked across from the World Trade Center. It was hours before she found out he was safe. And the rest of the week the skies were silent, as all planes were grounded. ***“Lord, have mercy!”***

And He does! What hope and comfort we have in God! In my sermon on the Sunday after 9/11, I quoted God’s promise in Hebrews 13:5, ***“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*** I then encouraged us to confidently respond with the next verse: ***“The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”***

What can man do to me? Obviously, much. Evil men can murder and destroy, and shatter the lives of those who are left behind. Evil men can cause great physical pain and suffering, as well as intense emotional pain and suffering. And, even people who aren’t evil can rob us of our joy in life, of our joy in living.

How can this be? The answers are found in one place: *within man*. God was not to blame for the evil of 9/11, and is not to blame for any evil. Man’s heart is evil. *Our* hearts are evil.

It is easy to see the evil in the hearts of terrorists. They rejoice at causing pain and suffering and death. The desire to do so consumes them; they spend months, even years, planning it. They are willing to suffer and die, if this can bring suffering and death to others. This is surely evil.

But so is the heart that harbors ill will and will not deal in humility with others. In our Gospel reading, Jesus is asked about some Galileans whom Pilate had killed. It was assumed that God allowed this because of their sins. Jesus berated them for thinking this. ***“Do you think that they were worse sinners than all the others, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”***

Who were the people who asked Jesus about this? They were Pharisees: people who knew God’s Word… who strove to live good lives… who were hardworking... who went to church; indeed, they didn’t miss. They appeared to be the best of God’s people. And yet, their hearts were filled with, and corrupted by, evil.

Do not think that you can say, ***“Oh, that is not me.”*** Evil is also in our hearts, for we are of the same sinful stock. Later in the day on 9/11 it was reported that Palestinians were dancing in the streets because of what had happened. My heart cried out, ***“They do not deserve to live!”*** Days later, I read an email from the Palestinian Pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. He said:

*“Never in our worst nightmares did we imagine that we would be witnessing such a horrendous event and human tragedy inflicted on our American friends. We care for every life and we pray for all those who are mourning the loss of loved ones taken away by this indiscriminate act of organized terror. Our thoughts and prayers are with you all.*

*We are aware that the media… has shown scenes of a few Palestinians celebrating this tragedy. We want you to know that these few do not speak for or represent the entire Palestinian people. What the media failed to acknowledge was the majority of Palestinians who were shocked, saddened and mournful.*

*We believe that this media campaign is biased and aims at dehumanizing the Palestinian people. Such a campaign follows the same logic of the terrorists, since it deliberately attempts to punish innocent people indiscriminately.”*

Dehumanizing: making another less than you, and considering yourself better. This is what we so easily do in our hearts. Our hearts are not right. They are the problem, for they are where evil resides and begins.

But, oh, what a loving heart we see in Jesus! His is not only a heart that is good, a heart that is filled with love. Above all, it is a heart that beats with love for us!

See how willingly Jesus humbles himself: he enters into a discussion with those whom he knows will, because they hate Him, reject His words and eventually kill Him. He calls them to repent, and so holds out the opportunity for them to be forgiven and change. He knows their sin, far better than they know it. He knows our sins, also, even if they are only of the mind and heart and are not followed up by action. He calls us all to repent. This is the most important response to the evil of 9/11.

Jesus is the One with the good heart, the loving heart. His desire for us – and also for our enemies – is for salvation. And so, He points out our sinful desires. He calls us to serve as He did: in humility, entrusting all judgment, and our very lives, unto God.

Seek the heart of Jesus! It beats with love for you, with forgiveness for you, with life for you. In the words of Jesus, in the Baptism of Jesus, in the Holy Meal of Jesus, God’s Holy Spirit brings you God’s forgiveness in Jesus, who gave Himself into death for you to save you from your sins. He gives you a new heart, the very heart of our Lord. The Lord of heaven and earth is Himself with you. So, as His own dear child and servant, you can now say: **WHAT CAN MAN DO TO ME?**

* Can man take away heaven, keep you from the resurrection to eternal life? Never! Jesus alone is the Lord of life and death, for He died our death and burst the hold of death upon us in His resurrection. He *will* raise us from death, no matter how or when we die.
* Can man take away your salvation, the forgiveness of your sins? Never! The heart of God beats for you, even to the point of death and having a spear thrust into His heart for you. God loves you so much He assumed your flesh and died for you, enduring sin’s punishment for you. In his death—upon the cross in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, and given to You here and now in His holy Word and Sacraments—your sin is forgiven by God. It matters not what others may think about you or even do to you. God is ultimately your judge, and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus God proclaims that He is at peace with you.
* Can man take away your hope in Christ? Never! ***“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you,”*** God has promised. No matter what may come upon you in your life—destruction, terror, the hatred of others, scorn, abuse, rejection—God will never abandon you. He is faithful to His promises… *always*, for His heart is true.

**WHAT CAN MAN DO TO ME?** Nothing that God will not turn to your good, even your blessing, for His eye is upon His people for their salvation.

So: do not fear, but be content. God has promised: ***“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*** So we say with confidence, ***“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”*** In the blessed name of Jesus. Amen.