

Thursday morning I was driving to Tucson when the news broke of the passing of Queen Elizabeth II. With thoughts of this Sunday's date in my mind, one of the persons interviewed described the United Kingdom being in CRISIS having lost her stability for the first time in 70 years, in most of their lifetimes, and possibility of 6 months before a Coronation. Several of our small groups this week had begun with a devotional on Exodus 14. After Passover when all of the Egyptian 1st-born died, Pharaoh changed from grief to attack. The people were filled with fear and doubt. Moses response was "Be not afraid. Stand firm and you will see the Lord's deliverance. The Lord will fight for you; You need only be still." That assurance is the most frequent statement in Scripture: "Peace be still, the Lord protects you."

How difficult it is for us, in the midst of loss and crisis to be still and trust God! When we were baptized and confirmed, a Minister asked and we solemnly vowed "Jesus Christ is my Lord/Savior, I Trust in him!" When we married, we naively vowed "For better and worse, for richer and poorer, in sickness and health" now years later, having lived through sickness, health, riches, strain, poverty and comfort, there have been times of doubt and fear where we questioned the limits of our vows. On this date, 4 American Airlines planes were targeted by suicide bombers to crash into the Twin Towers, The Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania. We were filled with reactions that day: Questioning if this were the end of the world; who committed this act of war; whether/where weapons of mass destruction were stored; how our Nation and the world would respond. When 3000 civilians have been killed, it is hard to be still and trust.

Twenty-one years have lapsed since that day. Remember where you were when our world suffered LOSS. I was not born when Pearl Harbor was attacked. I am uncertain if I recall the event, so much as my mother referencing, when President Kennedy was assassinated we were at the IGA shopping for groceries as the loudspeaker made the announcement. Oddly, the summer before Sept 2001, the Lectionary Catholic and Protestant churches follow for preaching had been changed, using these passages in this combination the 2nd Sunday September for the 1st time. I knew Jeremiah 4, because in Seminary I had to translate this passage from Hebrew to English, write a report on the heritage, then apply this to a sermon.

Israel's Patriarchs, Abraham and Sarah came from Ur of Chaldea, the region today we call Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, to a Fertile Crescent of land connecting Asia to Africa. Their ancestor's homeland of Chaldea later split into two monarchies Assyria and Babylon. Over 300 years, Assyria attacked Israel, until all of Israel's creations, urban developments and fortifications were destroyed, the northern 10 tribes of Israel made to disappear. Then Babylon attacked and destroyed Assyria, before turning Nebuchadnezzar's sights to make war on Judah over 30 years. Jeremiah was a Prophet of God in the remnant tribes of Judah and Benjamin, when he has this nightmare destruction of the world. According to Genesis 1, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, as the Spirit of God brooded over the face of the waters." Jeremiah 4 is the only other reference in all ancient literature to "the earth being a waste and void without light" but in Jeremiah's dream Creation is reversed until all that is left is a waste and void. On that Sunday September 9th, 2001, I recalled this being like description of a nuclear bomb! Only after 70 years following destruction of the Temple of Solomon, 70 years of deportation to Babylon, 70 years after Jerusalem was destroyed did God return the people to Israel to build anew. 70 years without stability, In a location of this kind of devastation, this scorched earth, where it seems Creation itself has been devolved to the waste and void before God. Do we imagine God cares? Does "I will not make a full end" seem a consolation?

Two days after preaching on September 9th, 2001, from 8:14 until 10:03 am Al-Quada zealots from Iraq and Afghanistan aimed Commercial airplanes at the 2 towers of American Economic Commerce, at the Pentagon and the Capitol. Try to remember where you were and what you were doing.

All of the Clergy of our Village were meeting, when we were told what happened. The Priest and I went to the local factory to provide grief counseling, as we were only a few hours driving time from NYC and many had relatives and friends there. After 3 hours of responding to laborers' fears and loss, I received a call from the President of the Medical Equipment company in our town. He stated that their engineers and telephone personnel had been unable to leave their workstations, responding to this crisis. Could I come and pray with them. I recall the cacophony of voices as 500 telephone operators in a room of cubicles all were talking and the deafening stillness as all their phones were placed on hold for us to pray. Then we repeated this outdoors with 500 Engineers, during which the President of the company described offering Stethoscopes, Blood Pressure Cuffs and AED machines for free in all 4 sites, but at that time they could find no bodies. The evening of September 11th, we held an ecumenical worship service in a Sanctuary like this, with standing room only. Rereading the same words we had preached 2 days before from Jeremiah, this was no longer an academic exercise. At those places jet fuel heat caused everything to quake & sway, there were no birds in the air, no sound of life.

I remember a woman describing that the only hope she witnessed that night was that all of the clergy and all the community, rich and poor, Republican and Democrat, stood together in loss and prayer to God.

Four years later, having sponsored a group of Refugees from South Sudan, I traveled solo to that war zone, to reunite 100 families with their now adult children. One evening as we sat around a fire, the Village leaders described that finally after 25 years of Civil War, their oppressors had come to the bargaining table because they witnessed how the United States had attacked Iraq and Afghanistan and they could be next. They described that the United States had been searching for Weapons of Mass Destruction and they knew where these had been hidden if I wanted to see?

But that had nothing to do with my coming to try to find and reunite families, who had been lost.

Which is where I find myself this morning, 21 years after that September 11th, "Be not afraid. Stand firm and you will see the Lord's deliverance. The Lord will fight for you, You need only be still." How much has been lost in these 21 years... I do not pretend to know what was right and what was wrong, only the anxiety and fear of our acting when something precious has been lost.

There are perhaps no better known or more beloved stories than these from Luke 15, about the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Family. Ordinarily preachers have taken these out of context. Remember the setting: Tax Collectors and Sinners were listening to Jesus, and the Pharisees and Scribes murmured: "This Jesus receives Sinners and eats with them." So Jesus told them about the LOST.

Allow me to suggest that these parables are not about the value of sheep or coins, but LOSS.

If you were responsible for caring for someone else's sheep and one was lost, the law required that you prove it, by rescuing a leg or some part from the wolf or bear that took it. Otherwise, you were not simply accused of mismanagement, but that perhaps you stole the sheep, eating it or selling it.

What if those ten coins represented that woman's dowry? Losing 1/10th of her Dowry, is about more than the cash value, this is her family's heritage, her value in that culture as a person, her moral character and worth, her future. Restoring that would be worth throwing a party! The Shepherd returning with the Lost Sheep... they are restoring what was lost, as well as their own reputation and trust.

What we refer to as THE PRODIGAL SON actually began as "There was a man who had two sons" so the focus of this story is on the Parent. AND what the younger son was literally saying to his father was "I wish you were dead, so I could have my inheritance now." Can you imagine that God grieves for every loss and cut-off of loved ones just as we do? This morning we pray for people in Crisis, for LOSS more than wealth or property, but loss of TRUST, IDENTITY, FAMILY and praying to GOD in this STILLNESS.