Sunday, September 16, 2001
A TIME FOR HOPE
Romans 8:28,31,35,37-39

On Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, the people in our country and around the world were surprised and shocked by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington D.C., and the untold number of deaths and injuries these attacks caused. Added to this tragedy were the commercial airline planes used in the destruction and the lives of the people lost on those airplanes. The suffering and anguish are multiplied because of the torment this brings to the family members, friends, and co-workers of those who were injured and those who died, and indeed to each one of us, whether or not we had a relative, friend, or co-worker directly involved. We are in mourning, filled with rage; we are angry, anxious, afraid, and puzzled.

The suffering and death of so many innocent people raise all kinds of questions in our minds. Why do human beings do such things? What purpose does it serve? How can such acts of terrorism be prevented in the future? And the old nagging question for religious people is always there: “How can a good and loving God allow such things to happen to innocent people?” Where is God in such events?

There are no completely satisfying, simple, or instant answers to these and the many other questions we have. What we can do is turn to our faith and try to determine what guidance and direction it has to offer us as individuals and as a nation. After much study and prayer during the days and nights since the events of September 11, here is what I believe our faith has to offer in terms of guidance, strength, and hope.

First and foremost: the Psalmist wrote years ago, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble; therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change; though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam; though the mountains tremble with its tumult.” For me personally, this means that my ultimate faith in the goodness and power of God continues. It doesn’t answer all my questions. It doesn’t mean that all my fears have magically gone away. It doesn’t mean that I can make sense of this mess. I sometimes wonder, as Jesus did and as the Psalmist also wrote, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Even when I am uttering these words, I am expressing my faith in God.

Second, such events as those on September 11 remind us that in spite of the goodness and power of God, we live in a world where the power of evil is still at work and in some surprising and unexpected places. Not only is life in this world difficult and complex, it is also precarious. Sometimes when we think we are the most safe, evil appears, so that death and suffering come in unexpected ways.

Third, our faith cautions us in such evil situations not to panic so that we lose control. Panic can also cause us to quickly try to solve the problem with simple and therefore dangerous solutions, which can in many cases make the problem worse. In one of his most revealing parables, Jesus cautions us not to try to weed out the evil too quickly and thoughtlessly, lest we destroy the good along with the evil, or even in some cases give the evil more power.

I am convinced that justice will prevail, and the evildoers will be caught. At the same time, the Bible cautions us to remember that the evil that was in them is still at work in many places.

Good ideas and evil ideas are not killed by killing the people that harbor them. I am comforted by the way our governmental leaders, from the President on down, are dealing with the problems that face us. They are taking the necessary precautions but without a sense of panic.

What then, on the positive side, are some things we can do as people of faith and as good citizens in a free country? Why have I given this sermon the title, A Time for Hope?

First of all, we can give thanks and continue to be grateful that we live in a nation where, in spite of such violent and evil actions, orderliness prevails. That's why it is a time for hope. I am overwhelmed and continue to be impressed with the outpouring of help and support for the victims and their families from all over the country.

I am impressed and thankful for the speed and efficiency with which our various arms of government responded and are still responding. In recent years there have been too many people saying, "Can you name any one thing the government does well?" Even before this tragedy, I could have enumerated a long list, and now the list is longer.

I am thankful for the ordering, creating function of government in our free society, especially in such situations as we now face. I believe that, in the deepest sense, as the Bible reminds us, government officials and civil workers, whether they are appointed or elected, are to be seen as ministers of God. It is a high calling to be in public service, whether as a police officer, a firefighter, a public school teacher, an Internal Revenue Service employee, or as a governor or the President.

All of these are reasons that cause me to believe that this is a time for hope, in spite of the tragedy and suffering that is present.

In the second place, it is a time for hope because we believe in a God of hope. The Bible is, above everything else, a book filled with hope. It is filled with hope in this present world and in the future.

In the Hebrew scriptures, which we call the Old Testament, the people of Israel continued to maintain their hope despite the many catastrophes in their history. Life was frequently difficult, but hope survived. The people of God continued to believe that tomorrow can be better than today. Throughout history, people of faith have had to struggle with continuous attacks of hopelessness, attacks against the faith that life has meaning even in the midst of tragedy and despair.

The main character trait that separates a terrorist from the rest of us is that the terrorist is a person without hope. He or she only finds temporary hope in the suicidal killing of those believed to be the enemy, so that the reward is only in a life after this life.

For those of us who want to find hope in this life, in the present and in the future, we begin to create the conditions under which hope can grow, and we openly and honestly talk about and face our fears and despairs with one another. Hope is what is still there when all our worst fears have been realized and faced.

That's what M. Scott Peck was saying in the opening paragraph of his book, The Road Less Traveled. He begins by saying, "Life is difficult." Then he goes on to say that once we truly know life is difficult, we can begin to transcend it. We can move beyond it.

The Biblical stories contradict our prevalent impression that hope is dependent on hopeful circumstances. True hope is not like a thermometer — so that when conditions look hopeful, our hope rises, or when conditions are bad, our hope goes down.

The Biblical foundation of hope is frequently suffering or trouble, not good times. From that, we build endurance; out of that, we build character; and from that, we discover God's spiritual gift of hope. All of us know that we do not gain endurance from facing easy situations, but from adversity. It is through meeting adversity that we build endurance and character and become the kind of people who can confront even desperate situations with hope.

Hope is not a mood, but a quality of character called out from within us when needed. That deep hope is based on our faith that God is in ultimate control of creation and that in the long run, in spite of setbacks, in spite of terrorist attacks, God's will will be done. There are seeds of this hope not only in the Biblical narratives but in a study of history.

Some years ago, a student of Charles Beard, the historian, asked him to put the principles which he had learned over a lifetime of historical study into a few brief statements. After some thought, he offered these four statements, which are filled with hope:

The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.
Whom God would destroy, God first makes mad with power.
The bee fertilizes the flower it robs.
When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.
In the Hebrew scriptures, the prophet Jeremiah demonstrated to the people of Israel what hope is all about. The enemy was at the gate of Jerusalem. The city was about to fall. The people were hungry and sick. Jeremiah himself was in jail. Yet under these seemingly hopeless conditions, Jeremiah bought a field as a sign of his confidence that this people, this world, had a future under God.

Jeremiah could take this action because he believed this is God's creation and that being so, it is never hopeless.

For us, you can be sure, the stock markets will reopen. Like Jeremiah, you and I will again invest in the future of this country. Tomorrow will be better than today. Over the long stretch of history, God's will not only will be done, but is being done even in the midst of present circumstances, if not by us, then in spite of us.

You will also see this as a time for hope when you realize that the goal of creation under God is not some final stage of perfection, but rather the creation of what is possible for humankind in each particular stage of history. It is the struggle against the forces of evil — old ones and new ones — that arise in each period of history in a new way.

There have been and will continue to be victories as well as defeats in these struggles. But every victory, every particular progress from injustice to more justice, from suffering to more happiness, from hostility to more peace, from separation to more unity — anywhere in this world — is another glimpse of the reign of God at work in time and space. It is, in the language of the Bible, the continual coming of the reign of God among us.

The reign of God does not come in one dramatic event sometime in the future. It is coming here and now in every act of love, in every manifestation of truth, in every moment of joy, in every experience of the holy. Our hope then is not in some final victory of God in the distant

future, but in the here and now, whenever and wherever the Eternal appears in time and history.

It strengthens my hope when I remember that the power of God is found in the courage of human beings to stand up for human dignity, no matter what the odds. It strengthens my hope when I remember that God is not found only in happy endings or in one lifetime. Some problems are too grave to be solved that quickly and easily. It is God who links one lifetime to another, who joins one heroic sacrifice to another, until justice is established. My friends, that's why this time is a time for hope. Amen.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, whose love is everlasting and whose power endures throughout all generations, we remember in our prayers Your servants — the President of the United States, the Governor of this state, and all others in authority. Fill them with the spirit of wisdom, goodness, and truth, and so rule their hearts and bless their endeavors that law and order, justice and peace, may everywhere prevail. Preserve us from national sins and corruption. Make us strong and great in the fear of God and in the love of righteousness, reverent in the use of freedom, just in the exercise of power, and generous in the protection of the helpless, so that we may become a blessing to all nations. Amen.