TEN YEARS LATER
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Exodus 14: 19 – 31
September 11, 2011

In the days after their miraculous deliverance, do you suppose the Israelites did some soul searching?

They had escaped, but it had been traumatic nonetheless. They were so close to perishing, either at the hands of the Egyptian army or by drowning in the sea. It was one of those experiences that split time into “before” and “after.” The day became seared into their collective consciousness. And my hunch is, in the days following, the Israelites said that “everything has changed.”

Ten years ago today, we said the same thing - didn’t we - that “everything has changed.”

Can it really be ten years? There are children among us that weren’t even born on that 9/11.

Yet, for most of us, in our mind’s eye we can still see it: the plane slicing into the Tower; the burning Pentagon; the implosion of the Twin Towers; those icons of power and wealth falling in a surreal way; then the huge rolling ball of gray chasing people down the streets like some science fiction monster; then ash-covered people moving like ghosts; then firefighters digging with bare hands in a moonscape of destruction.

Do you remember that day the urgent need to connect with loved ones? We called everyone: “Hi, it’s me. I just needed to hear your voice. Are you okay?”

On that September 11th no relationship was taken for granted. We made sure we said the words: “I love you.”

Is that still true? The astonishing clarity we had that day about priorities, that taking time for each other matters most of all.

And in those first days we said, “How are you?” in a way that communicated we really wanted to know. Then we listened, not just to another’s words, but we listened deep for the feelings beneath the words.

Do we still do that – listen as carefully, as caringly?

In the days after that September Tuesday, we found ourselves reexamining our lives and values. We vowed to be more intentional about how we spend our time, energies, money. We’d pay more attention to our spiritual lives, we said: take time to pray; make sure our children got to Sunday School; read a book about Islam; be more patient, grateful, generous; be more mindful of how we’re living and the footprints we’re leaving on the earth.

Ten years ago, churches were full on the Sunday after, and we talked about it being not only a national tragedy but a personal wake-up call. Are we still as awake?
The names of those who died that day are engraved in the new 9/11 Memorial dedicated today – 2,977 names. I hope to get there someday and read each name.

And…and, in these ten years of our response, twice that many American soldiers have died and many more have been disabled for life. And then there are the many thousands, tens of thousands of Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani casualties, mostly people just as innocent as those who died on 9/11. Do their names get engraved anywhere?

God said to the angels in that rabbinic commentary on the text, “Those who died in the sea are not just an enemy or collateral damage. Each is somebody’s child, somebody’s parent, somebody’s loved one. And I weep for their loss.”

Who all do we weep for today?

And soon the price tag for our wars on terror will approach five trillion dollars. Those children among us who weren’t even born ten years ago will end up really paying for it – won’t they? Well, they already are paying in terms of decreasing resources for education, healthcare, economic opportunity. And that’s not just a national debt issue. It’s also a moral/spiritual challenge – isn’t it?

Of course, terrorism is still all too real. Bin Laden may be dead, but those who think like him are still there. But what have we learned in ten years about how to respond? How do we change the conditions that allow terrorists to pull others into their evil agenda?

Are there better, more effective ways to respond than military surges, smart bombs, and drones? Tactics which more and more are alienating the Muslim world.

Oh, surely our soldiers have acted with such bravery, valor, and self-sacrifice. But even our generals are now saying the real solution is not a military one. Rather, relationship and community building are the keys, which is what our religious wisdom teaches all along.

Anniversaries invite deeper reflection. So, after ten years what can we say? What have we learned? How have we grown as a people, or not? What has changed, or not changed?

How have we as a nation healed? Or have we? Have we become wiser, more ethically mature? Or are we still in a season of reaction, anger, even vengeance? Are we still acting out of hurt and fear in the world and with each other?

The Israelites ran in panic that day through the receding water. New Yorkers ran in panic that day from the rolling ball of ash. Are we, ten years later, still running in panic?

In some significant ways, though, I think there has been spiritual growth in the last ten years. For instance, many churches have countered the anti-Moslem sentiments in their communities by reaching out to and learning about their Moslem neighbors.
And right here, Peace Village, which many of you have helped make happen every year since 2003, is one great example of a healing 9/11 response. It is a wonderful week-long experience here during which children, young people, and helping adults from several faith traditions – Jewish, Moslem, Buddhist, Sikh, Christian - create a religious village of interfaith understanding and positive engagement.

The goal of Peace Village is not to evangelize or to somehow make Christianity seem better by comparison. Rather, Peace Village is about appreciating and celebrating the great religious traditions of the world, each uniquely beautiful and truth-filled.

Peace Village is one of the most important things we do as a church. It is our post 9/11 response of faith.

As will be the initiative we will share with congregations across our United Church of Christ denomination called Mission 1. You’ll be hearing much more about it, but Mission 1 is about making human hunger and food justice our Mission 1.

It is about saying to the world, the season for vengeance and war is over. It is time now to finish our national healing by focusing on our world and local neighbors who need to eat, which in the end will be the best living memorial to those whose names are etched in stone at Ground Zero.

Ten years after their Exodus deliverance, I wonder if the Israelites had some kind of anniversary day of remembrance. Maybe they even built a monument at their ground zero – the spot where they had stood and watched the sea wash back over the way they had come.

And maybe they talked about what they had learned in ten years – how they had spiritually grown since that day Moses led them across.

I’m sure they prayed gratitude for deliverance. And what else do you suppose they prayed about? Did someone boldly offer a prayer acknowledging that the Egyptians who died that day were also God’s beloved children?

Maybe someone then said: “This Exodus monument is wonderful. May many generations come here and reflect on what happened in this place. But may we also remember that God primarily works not in monuments of stone, but in the healing of human lives.”