

## A Time of Trial

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The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Holy Communion  
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Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 6:1-15

“And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.” -- Matthew 6:13

An old friend of mine used to say that death is a teachable moment. He meant by that, I think, that the harsh reality of death – that one true fact that we can and must affirm about life – is one of the relatively few things still capable of breaking through the cocoon of complacency and self-absorption and inattentiveness in which most of us spend most of our time.

Death still gets our attention. Not the way it used to; you can see that in our changing funeral customs. Death used to put a stop to normal life for a week or more. There was a period of mourning. Adults did not go to work and children did not go to school; some folks didn't go to church. There were mourning clothes. Shades were drawn and crepe was draped; sometimes a funeral wreath was placed on the door. The most severely bereaved stopped eating, and neighbors brought food for the better part of a week. The body of the deceased was viewed for two or three days. Four places became the loci of activity: the home of the closest survivors, the funeral parlor, the church, the cemetery. Expected or not, death brought everything up short, and all that we considered normal came to a halt.

I can remember many of these customs from my own childhood; most of them are gone now, and I think we're poorer as a result. Ours is a death-denying culture, fixated on the things our unspoken system of belief says will save us from death: youth, wealth, arms, and technology.

We don't have time for death anymore. “Because I could not stop for death,” Emily Dickinson famously wrote, “he kindly stopped for me.” Death continues to stop for us, each and every one of us, without exception, sooner or later, and that's its first, greatest, and most stubborn teachable truth. All of us have a date with death waiting for us, and it's an appointment none of us wants to keep.

And so I'm grateful this morning that our culture, ordinarily so averse to any serious engagement with the reality of death, is pausing to remember the day of death that stunned all of us ten years ago. I remember vividly first hearing the news, as I'm sure many of you do, and I remember that vertiginous feeling as I listened to the BBC describing events as they were unfolding. And I wondered, as I know everyone did, both what was happening – although it was fairly clear by the impact of the second plane that it was not an accident but a deliberate attack – and, much more unsettling, what was going to happen. As I sat on my bed in Edinburgh that Tuesday in September listening to

the radio, I kept asking myself, What's going to happen next? We were all witnesses to death breaking open reality, and our expectations about the future were no longer clear. How many more planes were there? What were their targets? Were there other instruments of destruction waiting to wreak havoc and pain? Who was doing this?

To say that death is a teachable moment, however, is not to say that we will be taught, and that's the bright blue line that divides the United States this morning. Ten years on, if we ask the question, "What have we learned from 9/11?" the answers will separate us along political lines as clearly as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.

Conservatives will answer that 9/11 proved that the United States is making progress in advancing global democracy and capitalism because the terrorist attacks were the last desperate acts of resistance from violent, ignorant, and vicious people who want to preserve a barbaric and benighted way of life. Liberals will answer that 9/11 was – or should have been – the wake-up call to an imperial nation drunk on its own power and oblivious to its own sins. And those are the trenches where many of us are this morning, firmly rooted in our convictions in a polarized democracy with a paralyzed government. And I wonder, in my gloomier moments, if it took the terrorists ten years to win.

The text for this sermon is the third petition of the Lord's Prayer: "And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one," or as we regularly and traditionally put it here, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

If there is such a thing as an unanswered prayer, I think this is it, if we understand Jesus' words to be our request to God not to be dropped into situations where we are confronted with evil and tempted to do the right thing in response and tempted to do the wrong thing in response. Those situations confront all of us all the time, and 9/11, it seems to me, was such a moment in our collective life. And that is how I understand 9/11. It is – I don't say "was" because I don't think 9/11 is sealed in the past – 9/11 is a time of trial for this nation made up mainly of people who call themselves Christian.

The trial of 9/11 is by no means done with us because history is more like a river than a computer. History flows, connectedly; it isn't a collection of bits and bytes. We as a people continue to wear the scars of 9/11 and we always will, just as we bear the marks of the revolution, the Civil War, two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, and the various turmoils over civil rights. History is real, injustice is real, power relations and power struggles are real, and outcomes are by no means assured. We face trials, as individuals and as a people, all the time.

And so it seems to me that Jesus was either instructing us to pray unrealistically or he meant his words in a way that is different from how I've understood them, and I've decided that the salvation from the time of trial that Jesus told us to ask God for was not to be saved from entering trials, but to be saved from their results, because so often those results are going to be in the direction of failure.

Is that not the first lesson in the Bible? Give human beings a choice, and we will make the wrong one. An orchard full of fruit, only one tree off-limits, and that's the one we'll eat. You can count on it. Mark Twain's insightful summary of the story of the garden of Eden was that if God had told Adam and Eve not to eat the snake, everything would have been fine.

Closer to our time and place, Winston Churchill is supposed to have said that you can count on Americans to do the right thing after they've exhausted all the other possibilities. It's not the nicest thing that's been said about us, but there is an element of truth in it, and I believe that as far as 9/11 is concerned we will, eventually, come round right, as the old Shaker hymn puts it.

We are not there yet. On this anniversary of horror and heroism, we remain a

divided nation – bitterly divided – with no clear exit strategy for Afghanistan or Iraq, and with ominous signs that we will extend ourselves even further into global conflict if Iran continues to pursue its nuclear ambitions and if the Arab spring turns into violent Arab wars.

But 9/11 isn't over, and Jesus's instructions to us on prayer still apply. We can be saved from this trial – this hurt, this attack, this loss – if we decide to end the cycle of revenge. We still have the right and obligation to pray to be delivered from the trial of endless violence by following the path laid out for us not by a president or a congress or a general or a bunch of generals, but rather by the one in whom we see our savior and lord. We are not saved by our leaders; we are saved by our savior, and his path is not the path of military supremacy or secret intelligence; his path is the path of the cross and the empty tomb.

For ten years we have been living our Good Friday; are we now prepared to allow ourselves to be raised, as individuals and as a people, by God's grace and not by our schemes or weapons, to the eternal life of Easter? Beating our swords into plowshares, as the prophet Isaiah told us so many centuries ago, would be a good place to begin.

For God's is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.