

The Triumph of Love
The 10th Anniversary of September 11, 2001
Exodus 15:1b-11, Pentecost 13, Year A
11 September 2011
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

Moses and the Israelites have fled their enemies the Egyptians, and they have reached the edge of the Red Sea. They look behind them, and the enemy is relentlessly pursuing. Their options are to stand and fight an unassailable foe or else plunge into the deep and murky waters. It is a choice so untenable as to be no real choice at all.

We know what happens. Our first reading today reminds us. When the Israelites cry out to God in their panic and their fear, the waters part. Moses and his friends travel safely through the abyss, and when the Egyptians pursue them, Pharaoh's men are themselves drowned by God's very hand. Today's reading gives us Moses' victory song. To God, Moses says:

Your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy.
In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries;
you sent out your fury; it consumed them like stubble.

Ten years ago today, it didn't feel like that. *We* knew, then, the experience of an unassailable enemy on one side and a murky—in this case smoky—abyss on the other. We knew what it was to have no good options. The first responders to the World Trade Center knew this literally. Standing at the base of the burning North Tower when the South Tower was hit, they must have thought: “Do I run into this burning building? Do I turn around to see if more airplanes are coming?”

Ten years ago it felt as if the Exodus story were turned on its head. Instead of the waters parting to see us safely through, the towers crumbled to earth. We drowned, so to speak. There was no reprieve. We sang no victory song that day. There were no words at all.

In 2005, Richard Lischer wrote a book entitled, *The End of Words*. His thesis is that our world has become so violent, so unpredictable, so chaotic, so insane that words have lost their inherent meaning. Words are now but tools in the hands of those who wish to manipulate other people. As a lover and crafter of words, it pains me to agree with this notion. But too often today, publically and privately, words are combined to fool, frighten, or whip into frenzy, and each time this happens the Red Sea water rises just a little more to drown us.

Religious words can be among the most manipulated, and perhaps never more so than on and immediately after 9/11. Some, during those days, invoked the Prince of Peace to sound drums of war. On the opposite extreme, others utilized the Gospel to suggest that we'd brought

terror on ourselves, as if we deserved that awful day. Both extremes felt emotionally like being pushed down into the watery depths all over again.

But the most abused religious words of all spoken on and around 9/11 were those of the hijackers themselves. On United Airlines Flight 93, the terrorists were recorded saying—as they killed the pilots and ultimately crashed the plane in a Pennsylvania field—“In the name of God, the most merciful, the most compassionate...O, God, the most gracious.”ⁱ

Archbishop Rowan Williams says, “[These] religious words are, in the cold light of day, the words [of] murderers [used] in order to make a martyr’s drama out of a crime.”ⁱⁱ

In a world where the most holy and sacred words are used so cynically, so dishonestly, how *can* we ever put our faith in words at all?

But, lest we forget, there were *other* words that day. From airplanes and from the Twin Towers, dozens of trapped people telephoned family members, friends, and sometimes mere strangers on the other end of the line. Invariably, the words spoken on such calls are words of love.ⁱⁱⁱ It isn’t surprising that some of these calls express panic. What *is* surprising is the large percentage of them that evidence a remarkable calm, even as steel collapses in wrecked buildings or hijackers scream in the background. The *recipients* of the calls have fear in their voices. But the *callers* are more often steely and intent:

A newlywed says to her father, “Dad, you have to find Sean and tell him that I love him.”

A young professional says to his mother, “I love you no matter what happens.”

The voicemail message a woman leaves for her husband records, “There’s a lot of smoke, and I just wanted you to know that I love you always.”

These words overpower those other words of war and blame and terror. Archbishop Williams says of those trapped in the Twin Towers and on the planes, “Someone who is about to die in terrible anguish makes room in [his] mind for someone else; for the grief and terror of someone [he] loves. [He] does what [he] can to take some atom of that pain away from the other by the inarticulate message on the mobile [phone]...These nonreligious words are testimony to what religious language is supposed to be about—the triumph of pointless, gratuitous love, the affirming of faithfulness even when there is nothing to be done or salvaged.”^{iv}

We drowned on September 11, 2001. The Red Sea didn’t part for us. The planes crashed. The towers crumbled. Our lives, as we had known them, ended. But *we* know—we Christian people here gathered—that the waters’ depth does not lead to the grave, but rather to *resurrection*. We discover again in these telephone messages that even at the bottom of the sea,

even on the smoky 89th floor, even nose-down on a doomed airplane, *love abides*. And what is love, but God himself, and specifically the Incarnate Jesus over whom death has no power? With love—with the Christ of God, with *that* Word—we can emerge from any depth into new life.

Returning to Moses' victory song with which we began, we must ask what it would look like in *our* world for the Lord to “triumph gloriously.” Would it be the triumph of violence over violence, only this time with us as the winners? I don't think so. It is worth noting that Moses' victory at the Red Sea was immediately followed by forty years of confusion in the wilderness, as Moses and the Israelites struggled to discover who they had become. In other words, what happened next was not so cut, dried, and simple as today's reading suggests. It was not a return to normalcy, and it was not easy.

Maybe the triumph of God in our world would look very different. Maybe it would be more like the triumph—and, yes, we can call it that—the *triumph* of those facing sure death ten years ago today, who yet had the fortitude to reach out to those they loved and try to ease the other's pain. That's where God was to be found that day.

Maybe God's triumph would it be the triumph of *love*—pointless, gratuitous love: love that does not panic, love that does not run away, love that is faithful in the face of any threat.

In a world of unpredictability, violence, chaos and insanity, understanding what the glorious triumph of God looks like makes all the difference between the grave and resurrection. As we prayerfully reflect on this decade past, and as we look forward into the wildernesses ahead, we'll know which words are those of the God of love, and when we hear them we'll remember that he walks with us through every depth into new chapters of life. Like Moses, we'll say, ‘Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders *even in our lives?*’ *Amen*.

ⁱ <http://www.mishalov.com/wtc-flight-93-transcript.html>

ⁱⁱ Williams, Rowan. *Writing in the Dust: After September 11*, 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/US/09/03/ar911.phone.calls/>

^{iv} Williams, 5 & 3.