

God's Job Description and Reflections on 9/11
Sunday, September 11, 2022, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
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A number of years ago, my husband, daughter, and I were hiking on a small loop trail in Bryce Canyon. Our daughter, a young and confident hiker, moved ahead of us.

When we completed the loop, much to our concern, she was not there. The sun was setting, the temperatures were rapidly dropping, and there were reports of a sudden hail storm on the horizon. Frantic, my husband began retracing our steps, calling her name, while I waited at the trailhead to contact a ranger if need be. I questioned every hiker that emerged, asking if they had seen her, but no one had. As the minutes passed, I prayed as fervently as I ever have, fighting the panic rising in my body. Thirty minutes later, she walked out of her own accord, totally unaware that we thought she was lost! I wept with relief.

I thought of that experience as I read the lectionary readings for today. They are each about being lost and feeling separated from ourselves, God, and each other.

Jeremiah's imagery of a world in which God appears absent is grim. The book is generally considered to describe a time preceding an invasion and war that devastated the northern kingdom of Judah. It is a staggering study of creation run amok that has reverted to chaos. As we commemorate the events of 9/11, Jeremiah's description bears an eerie similarity to the immediate aftermath of the fall of the twin towers, as well as to other wars ancient and modern, and to an ecosystem seriously altered by global warming. The prophet proclaims that God is grieving at the foolishness of her children who do not know her. To "know" in Hebrew Scriptures meant not just to know about someone's existence, but to have a personal and intimate relationship with them.

The citizens of Judah were living as though they were independent from God.

The psalm is a very personal confession attributed to King David, after he created the conditions for the death of a loyal and faithful soldier, Uriah, in order to cover up an affair David had orchestrated with his wife, Bathsheba. David, a warrior king danced into Jerusalem in his underwear, victorious at the unification of the nation. Absent from his narrative is any consciousness or empathy for the violence and suffering perpetuated on those who held a different understanding of God from his. Stung by public criticism of him by his first wife (not that she didn't have good reason), he was now in transition, living a non-warrior life. He is in a serious mid-life crisis. He doesn't know who he is.

Lost and spiritually disoriented, he summoned a married woman to his bed, wielding his power over her—don't even get me started—at the cost of another man's life.

It isn't until the prophet Nathan connects David to the harm he has done and his lack of empathy, that David recognizes his injurious behavior. The psalm reflects his request of God to forgive him and create a new spirit within him.

There are many ways that we can get lost and feel disconnected from ourselves and from God. It can be triggered by a loss or a great success; an illness or sudden good fortune; disillusionment or idealism. Or it can just be the day in and day out of our lives.

We are easily distracted by those things not worthy of our souls. Furthermore, when we forget our connection to God and what is deepest within us, we find ourselves living in the house of fear, competition, and scarcity. We become less tolerant of difference and lose empathy and compassion for others. We focus our efforts on securing our own wellbeing and what's familiar to us, unaware that our fates and health are connected to everyone else and all of creation. Polarization results. At our worst, we dehumanize others, stripping their actions of any context or meaning, except as being our enemies.

We perpetuate horrific things when we live in fear and alienation. The list is long and the earth herself groans like a person in labor, longing for renewal and repair.

That's why we need to get our story about God and ourselves clear. We need to gain clarity about ourselves. To that point, I want to say two things. First, we are created in the very "image and likeness" of God. Our identity must build on this foundational goodness. It is our true identity "hidden in the love and mercy of God. "Image" is our true identity as children of God and "likeness" is our ability to remember and lean into that very identity.

Secondly, we are radically interdependent and we need God and each other for full joy and emotional health. It is God through whom we live, move and have our being. We are not capable of being the captains of our own ships nor definers of our own worth. Our worth is given to us by God, not made by our achievements nor lost by our failures. We are dependent on being loved, and we love because we are loved first. We can live our lives as if we are separate from God and each other, but we aren't. We need God to connect us to God's Spirit within us, and all around us.

Which brings us to the concept of sin. Many Christians were taught that they were born into original sin not original blessing—"corrupt from the womb", in the language of the psalm. Yet, what most people call "sin" is the symptom of sin, not the delusional state itself! The word sin means to "miss the mark" like an arrow that misses its target. Sin separates us from our deepest selves and each other. It is a state of believed autonomy from God and others, a self-destructive illusion that we are separate and alone. This state is the true basis and motivation that leads to all "sin."

"Sin" describes a state of living outside of union, in which the part poses as the Whole. The word "sin" has been used to shame, which does not really help or change people except perhaps at the level of conformity. That old story associates "sin" with personal behaviors and individual moral unworthiness. For that reason, it has become a largely ineffective moralism without any grounding or power from core identity.

When we know we are the beloved, and so is everyone else, we grow in compassion and tolerance for difference. We are far more capable of exploration and change; creativity and joy. When we know we are loved beyond measure, no matter what, we can tell our whole stories—the good, the not so good, and even sometimes, the ugly, without fear or shame. We still need confession and reparation to heal ourselves and those injured by us, not for God’s sake, but for ours.

We also need to clarify who God is. Jesus and our gospel reading can help us.

The parables that Jesus told to the participants of the dinner party at which he was a guest, declared that God is always seeking us, even those we think God should not bother with. God is determined to connect and find us, like my husband and me when we thought our daughter was lost—except that God has infinite capacity to bond and love. Where the pharisees saw undesirable people to separate themselves from; Jesus saw beauty and treasures of immeasurable value. When they categorized people as either worthy and pure, or unclean and devalued, Jesus cried BS. Jesus was and is the good shepherd, as God is the good shepherd; like a woman seeking precious things that are lost.

The First Nations version of the gospel used today, utilizes Eagles feathers, rather than a coin. In native culture, the eagle feather represents connection to the Spirit and freedom from all that is false. Although not in the lectionary for today, this particular segment of scripture also contains the story of the prodigal son. God is a crazy parent overwhelmed with joy about the safe return of a child, way too happy to be preoccupied with their failures and shortcomings. This is the God that we have and if we are not careful, our view of God can get really tiny and distorted. God’s clear and specific job description is to undo division and fracture. In mystery, Jesus was and is The Great Re-connector—the “Creator Sets Free” from the illusion of separation.

Our model for living our lives together is God who is God-in-relationship.

God Creator, Re-connector, Sustainer. A waterwheel of love and honor, creating Unity across difference, forever uniting, forever celebrating difference. This is the source that empowers us to live into beloved community. Union with God is all about awareness and realignment. We didn't create our union with God and we can't break it.

Following that deep and wondrous inner knowing, a whole new set of behaviors and lifestyle will emerge. But we must first come to experience God's love. Then we will—almost naturally—be moral. We will see with compassion and respect, honoring difference and unity. We will see God in each other.

We reflect this day on the trauma of 9/11. The events of that day ripped a hole in the American psyche that shattered our collective illusions of safety and grandiose invincibility. These illusions have long been mainstays of the white American historical identity. For a brief period of time following the attack, its very incomprehensibility suspended narrative formation. There was a vast outpouring of anger, confusion, horror, fear, and grief that enveloped our collective experience. Our allies mourned with us, as did many considered neutral and even some considered foes. We had a sense that much of the world was grieving with us. In their empathy, there was a sense ever so briefly, of commonality in the recognition of the fragility and vulnerability of all human life.

As narratives began to surface, there occurred moments of openness and flux, when our nation might have taken a different path less fueled by blind patriotism, retribution, and fear. Some voices called for an understanding of the attacks and attackers placing their motivations in a broader context, like the radicalization of those hopeless and powerless to end the violence of extreme poverty; the legacy of violence and dehumanization expressed towards Muslim peoples across the centuries; the struggle for power within Islam.

Those voices hoped that the end of the myth of American invulnerability, could lead us to a stronger sense of compassion, of empathy, for what disasters, massacres, occupations, wars,

famines, dictatorships here and abroad—feel like to others, that perhaps consciousness could create a sense of citizenship across borders. Or a recognition of our own culpability in perpetuating the unending cycle of dehumanization, apathy, and violence that gives rise to more of the same. To reckon with our alignments with empire and brutality. Unfortunately, we are not there yet.

Nothing excuses or reduces the horror of violence and obliteration of life; nothing ever does. Yet there were some who called us in those moments to the difficult task of recognizing the humanity of even those who do us harm; to use our empathic imagination. In that recognition of our common human vulnerability and dependence, might we exercise power to interrupt the cycle of violence, injustice, and despair? We are called by the God of love to stand against all that stands against love within us and all around us. You know this truth, beloved ones. When we connect to the source and each other, we find strength and joy in this journey.

In the forum today, we heard the story of one of our long-term members who found the inspiration and strength for her humanitarian work in this community of All Saints. Jane Olson credits this community with orienting her to that, which matters most, to that which is healing in this world of fracture and polarization. She reminded me that we live in a non-linear universe my friends, one in which we never know what individual or collective act at the local level, will bend that arc of the universe towards justice and healing. But aligned with God's love and passion for the well-being of all of God's creation, we connect to each other and to the power that will effect change.

And if you ever suspect that you are lost, know that the Spirit of God at the center of your being is always there to shepherd you home.

You can bet your life on it.

Amen.