

***The Time Draws Closer***  
**Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33**

A colleague in ministry shares the following in her blog:

*"On September 9, 2001, I boarded a plane from my home in Atlanta and headed for New York City. I was about to spend time with a group of close friends and colleagues at a gathering in Manhattan. The plane had mechanical trouble and, eventually, we turned around and headed back to Atlanta. The next day a fire in Newark, bad weather, and more mechanical problems meant two more planes that never made it. Finally, at 9 p.m. on Monday, the 10th, I gave up with deep disappointment, walked off the third plane, and went home.*

*The meeting I had been headed to was at Trinity Church, Wall Street, in lower Manhattan. We were to gather at 8:45 on Tuesday morning, Sept. 11th, immediately down the street from the World Trade Center. I woke that next morning, as we all did, to the horror of watching the landscape on our TV screens and the landscapes in our hearts change forever, praying desperately for the lives that included my friends and with the unfathomable recognition that I was supposed to have been there."*

Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit." If that seed, that grain of wheat, falls into the dank, dark, steaming, humus-y soil, into the darkness of death, into the destruction and decaying remains of former life, if it falls into the ground, it will burst open, find the light, become so much more of what it was created to be. It will swell from the tiny seed, a mere hint of what could follow, and explode into the life-bearing producer of food for the world.

Death precedes life, says Jesus. Not the other way around. Not life precedes death as we want to think. As we, in our human limitations, try to live; as our world is at pains to illusion us; we believe that fending off death will save us, but Jesus says that such an attempt will always destroy us. That if we give up our lives and fall into the ground, we will find the ground to be God. Find the ground to be the very place of new life.

It is hard to believe. It doesn't make sense. Embracing our finiteness does not seem likely to be the way we would find infinity. But it turns out to be just that way and Jesus knows it. Because Jesus led the way! The seekers who showed up to Philip and said, "We wish to see Jesus," were probably not expecting this, and neither, most likely, were we. But Jesus will teach this to us, if we let him.

Again, from the blog:

*Later that month, I boarded another plane, one which got there this time, to work as a volunteer at ground zero. Historic St. Paul's Chapel, which had stood dwarfed in the Trade Center's shadows, now stood in the bright open air with its back door opening directly onto that gaping wound of death and destruction, its historic graveyard now extended by 16 acres.*

*My daughter's godmother and several others had begun a respite ministry at the church for rescue workers, for those who worked out on "the pile" – as they called it – 24 hours a day, and who came within the quiet walls of the church for a hot meal, some sleep, fresh supplies, a place to pray, a chance to talk, or a chance not to talk, to read some of the thousands of crayoned cards that arrived from school children, meant to comfort and cheer and encourage and that soon festooned every pew.*

*The site outside those walls was filled with the most horrific destruction and death that most of us had ever seen. If you had the chance to be there, you know that it was an assault on every fiber of your being. The stories-high pile of debris; the acrid burning smell that hung in your throat and your clothes; the mind-numbing realization of the thousands of lives that were snuffed out in the ashes and debris. The recognition that the ash itself was sacred, that the very ground on which you walked was holy. The twisted steel I-beams that spoke of a power so enormous it defied grasping and the sense of evil so palpable that it was not only the landscape that seemed devoid of color and life. The whole world seemed gray and lifeless. Words failed immediately. It was death before your eyes and under your feet and in the air. It was hatred and evil in visible form, form that you could literally taste and touch and see and smell."*

In our baptisms, we have died with Christ. Our life is buried with him, already burrowed down into the dank, dark soil, already there where water and warmth and light will transform it. If we lived as if we believed it, it would not take a ground zero to show us. If we lived as if we believed it, the world's divisions could be healed and the kind of ground zeros they produce could be gone forever.

It is our calling as Christians to live as if every piece of ground were ground zero, as if every church, not just St. Paul's, stood alongside a place of death. Because, in truth, all ground IS ground zero. All ground is a place of death, where life is longing to be found. And every church stands alongside a place where human hatreds and evil create a world that desperately needs its salvation. If we truly know we have been buried with Christ, our lives, our churches, our communities, will become a place where the hatreds and needs of the world are absorbed and transformed. Where all those who gather in the shadow of death will fear it no more, where lives already dead in Christ explode into life for the world, where communities of oneness emerge, in the common recognition of our oneness in God and where death is swallowed up in life forever, because our ground zeros have become the ground of new life, where people of every nationality and every orientation, and every socio-economic status finds life anew, life of plenty and life in Jesus Christ.

It's what Jesus knows and wants you to know. So recognize now that your death is not the thing to fear. Recognize that your finiteness becomes the place to receive infinity, that if you stand at the place of death, you stand also at the gate to life. That falling into the ground is not the end but only the beginning. If you do, your life, like the grain of wheat, will become all that it was meant to be, all that it was created for, and the ground you walk on will become ground zero and be holy ground. For you see, God created all that is and saw that it was good.

It is in our times of vulnerability and finiteness that we see the emergence of love and grace for one another. That is when life emerges. That is when hope springs eternal.

From the blog:

*Somehow in the midst of the rubble and anxiety and religious discontents was the most palpable experience of community and love that we had ever known. That somehow in the recognition of our mortality we were given life. That the explosion outside had become the occasion for an explosion inside, an explosion not of steel and hatred and despair but of life and generosity and hope.*

*We had arrived with our sense of helplessness, arrived with our limits, arrived with a sense of dread and death. And what we found was each other. What we found was life. What we found were cops and firefighters working as one, iron workers and crane operators forgetting unions and creating teams. Chiropractors and restaurant owners and Holocaust survivors and Juilliard students ladling out soup and restoring tired backs and stringing violin music into the air. Priests handing out morsels of bread and sips of wine and cups of hot chocolate, speaking silence out on the pile where firefighters dug faithfully by hand. Priests and rabbis and pastors praying across the abyss and blessing charred remains, not knowing if the person we prayed over was someone of our own tradition or none, praying only that the one God who loves us all would provide rest and blessing and the final journey home.*

*We found that the hospitality of God gave birth to the hospitality in others. That death was no longer the enemy to be feared, but the commonality that brought us together. That in facing death, in dying to our fear of it, we emerged more alive. That the freedom to live, without the divisions we humans create, was an enormous life-giving gift. That we now wanted the rest of our lives to exhibit, somehow, the truths that we had discovered there. That standing humbly in the presence of those who quite literally gave their lives so that others could live was an experience that changed you forever."*

My brothers and sisters, it should not and it does not take a 9-11 experience to change us. Jesus has told us; therefore, we know it to be true. The old has died and new life is ours. A single grain dies but from that old life, much fruit is born. New life is ours, if we but allow the old to pass away. Amen.