

Comfort my people
Isaiah 40:1-11
September 10, 2006

Yesterday the twin towers of the World Trade Center stood tall, a monument to American ambition and economic leadership. Today they are reduced to a pile of smoking rubble.

Yesterday you and I traveled to offices, boarded airplanes, pursued the business and pleasures of our daily lives in this nation with a sense of security and possibility and well-being. Today our sense of security is shattered, our sense of possibility is suddenly shadowed, and our sense of well-being is threatened by creeping doubt.

Yesterday we awoke with any number of plans and tasks and dreams on our minds and hearts. Today we have one thing, one great horror, that we cannot shake from our minds and hearts.

Today we are filled with feelings, different feelings, many that we have not felt in the same way before -- fear and anger, grief and sense of helplessness. For me and perhaps for some of you, these feelings are mixed with other feelings, this grief with other griefs, and it is hard to know where one ends and the other begins. Probably for all of us, what we are experiencing is not a simple, momentary reaction to a traumatic event. We have been changed. The way we look at life as a whole has changed. We feel our own vulnerability, our own mortality, in ways that are entirely new to us. The risk for all of us is that these feelings will lead to despair ... that in despair we will run and hide, that in despair we will lash out in anger, that in despair we will bury our grand dreams and give up our hopes.

It is critical for us as people of faith to let our faith speak. We must hear the words of God again, to comfort us and renew our hope. We must speak the words of God again to a world that is in danger of giving in to despair.

I spoke those words five years ago at a prayer service held in this sanctuary on Wednesday evening, September 12, 2001, the day after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. Today, five years later, the words still ring true.

What we felt then, what we experienced then, was not a simple, momentary reaction to a traumatic event. We feel the same things still. We were changed that day. We are changed. The way we look at life as a whole has changed.

It is difficult now to remember what it was like before September 11, 2001. There was then a kind of innocence, a kind of unflappable confidence, that is now gone. It's not that we had not been threatened before, that we had not experienced tragedy close to home before -- think of the bombing of the federal office building in Oklahoma City or the takeover of the United States embassy in Tehran or the downing of Pan-Am Flight 103 by Libyan terrorists.

But this was different. This was no act of a single deranged individual or a breach of security in some faraway location. This was a carefully orchestrated invasion of our home turf, designed to shock and alarm and expose our vulnerabilities.

It worked. We do feel our own vulnerability, our own mortality, in ways that are entirely new to us, new to us as individual persons just trying to live out our lives in relative peace, and new to us as a nation of people with a shared destiny. We know we are not impregnable. We know we are not invincible. We know we can be reached.

And so we live under a dark cloud, a dark cloud of fear and doubt and uncertainty. The risk is that these new feelings, this new set of circumstances, this new way of looking at the world and our place in it, will lead to despair, and that in our despair we will run and hide, or lash out in anger, or bury our grand dreams, or give up hope.

Fear can change us. It can change our attitudes, our behaviors, our judgments, our relationships. My mother doesn't want to fly anymore. We invited her to Iowa for Christmas, but she is uncomfortable about flying, so we are thinking about the possibility of bringing her out by train.

I don't like to fly anymore! I used to love flying, love the exhilarating feeling of the takeoff, love the expansive views of the landscape, but now, when I have to fly, I just do it, get it over with, doing my best to put the doubt and uncertainty out of my mind, quite literally talking a leap of faith. Fear can change the way we think and act.

Fear and a new sense of vulnerability can change the way nations think and act, too. We invaded Iraq, an historically unprecedented war of aggression, a preemptive strike. Whether you agree or disagree with our reasons for going to war, whether you believe it was a war worth fighting or not, you must agree that this kind of war was something new, something that we as a nation had never done before.

And we are seemingly ready now to set aside previously inviolable standards of human rights and human freedoms -- the rights of our perceived enemies and our very own freedoms -- as never before. We are willing to consider new rules for interrogations, the use of torture, warrantless surveillance of our own citizens, secret prisons and special trials that set aside some of the customary defendant protections.

Fear takes us to new places. But are these places to which we want to go? And do we have a choice whether to go or not? The dark cloud is real, but can we live with it without letting it change who we are?

Fear can lead to despair. Fortunately, that has not happened to us yet. We may have to bend some of the rules along the way, but we still believe we can and will win the war on terror. And you and I do carry on with our lives in relative peace, working and playing, raising families and going to school and taking vacations. The dark cloud of fear and doubt and uncertainty has not brought us to despair.

Or has it? I am not talking about overt despair: weeping and moaning and gnashing of teeth, collapsing helplessly onto the ground, crawling into a hole to hide. I am talking about quiet and hidden despair, hidden perhaps even to ourselves.

We pull in, we pull back, we tune out. Because we feel so threatened, because we feel so overwhelmed, we stop thinking about things, we stop caring about things. We do our best to take care of ourselves, and turn our backs to the rest. We stop believing that we can make a difference, that the world can be changed, that justice and righteousness can prevail. If we can live out our own lives in relative peace, that's enough. What can we really do about all the rest of it anyway?

As individuals, we run away, and as a nation, we lash out. We put our trust in a bigger stick, in might, not right, which is also a form of despair. Self-preservation becomes our first priority, even if it means sacrificing our ideals, even if it means setting aside our own founding principles: *All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.* It's a different world, a different war, a different enemy. The old rules, the old ways, the old principles, just don't apply anymore.

Fear can change us. Fear can lead to despair. And despair can lead to hatred.

That almost happened to me. When I was a college student in New Haven, I was nearly mugged. I was walking down a dimly-lit street at the edge of town, making my way to the train station, carrying all my luggage in both hands, when four or five African-American males ran to me from across the street and fell into step behind me. I did my best to remain calm and kept walking. Suddenly I heard one of them say, "Let's get him." They jumped in front of me and one of the young men put his hand on my chest and asked me where I was going. Just then a police vehicle pulled up to the stoplight a half block behind me, and the young men scattered in all different directions.

Almost against my will, that experience that changed the way I felt about African-American males, not intellectually or consciously, but emotionally and unconsciously. In spite of my own convictions, in spite of my own strong beliefs, I had to work hard on my attitude toward a whole class of human beings.

Isn't the same true of us? What is our attitude toward ethnic Arabs? What is our attitude toward Muslims? Our attitude toward a whole class of human beings has been severely skewed. We are ready to believe things that are not borne out by the facts. We are ready to prejudge people simply by appearance or religion or nationality. Fear and despair can blind us. We see what we expect to see and not what is really there.

Fear can change us. Fear can lead to despair. And despair can lead to hatred. Fear, despair, hatred: these are the things that may grow in us as we live under that dark cloud. But the irony is that it is these very things, not the things that actually threaten us, that change us and blind us and rob us of life.

In the middle of the sixth century BC, the people of Israel lived under a dark cloud of fear and doubt and uncertainty. They lived in exile in Babylon, having been forcibly relocated by Nebuchadnezzar's conquering army. They were strangers living in the land of their enemies. Their own homes and places of worship had been taken from them or destroyed. Their whole way of life had been taken from them. They were overrun by pain and grief and despair.

Listen to this song written in that time and in that place, Psalm 137:

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat down;
there we wept when we remembered Zion.
On the willows near by
we hung up our harps.
Those who captured us told us to sing;
they told us to entertain them:
"Sing us a song about Zion."*

*How can we sing a song to the Lord
in a foreign land?
May I never be able to play a harp again
if I forget you, Jerusalem!
May I never be able to sing again
if I do not remember you,
if I do not think of you as my greatest joy!*

It is a beautiful and poignant song, a stirring lament, a song of loss and of longing.

This is the song as we usually hear it, but the song doesn't end there. There's more:

*Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did
the day Jerusalem was captured.
Remember how they kept saying,
"Tear it down to the ground!"*

*Babylon, you will be destroyed.
Happy are those who pay you back
for what you have done to us --
who take your babies
and smash them against a rock.*

Fear can lead to despair, and despair can lead to hatred.

It is to these people that the prophet Isaiah speaks. It is to these people -- and to us -- that Isaiah delivers the word of the Lord: *Comfort my people! Comfort my people Tell them that their God is coming!*

In sixteen chapters, Isaiah 40-55, the prophet confronts the fear and despair and hatred poisoning the souls and bodies of God's people. With exquisite poetry and powerful prose, he reminds the people of God's promises; he reminds the people of God's faithfulness; he reminds the people of God's dominion over all the earth and over all of history; he reminds the people of God's sure salvation.

*Go up on a high mountain
and proclaim the good news!
Speak out and do not be afraid.
Tell them that their God is coming!*

*The sovereign Lord is coming to rule with power ...
He will take care of his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs together
and carry them in his arms;
he will gently lead their mothers.*

Over the next fifteen weeks, we will listen once more to the message of the prophet Isaiah. May the Lord speak to us through the prophet's words, transforming our fear into faith, our despair into hope, our hatred into love. Because this is God's will: that fear and despair and hatred be supplanted by faith and hope and love. O Lord, thy will be done!