

WHERE IS OUR HOPE?

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28, Luke 15:1-10

Today marks 15 years since the attacks upon America in what has become known simply by the date - 9-11! I am sure that most of you know exactly where you were and what you were doing at 9:00 on Tuesday, September 11, 2001 when the first plane hit the tower. In the hours and days that followed, fear was the dominant emotion as first responders and family members sought those lost – injured and maimed, dead and alive in the rubble. For days and weeks I remember people seeking to find their lost loved ones. I also remember people asking, "Where was God?"

The Lectionary passages for today reflect upon the lost...A lamb, a coin, and in the verses that follow, a son. On 9-11 there were many lost - innocent victims of the attack, family members and co-workers who sought answers, even the masterminds of the attacks – lost, gone astray from the teachings of God, needing to be found by the loving Father. Sheep in need of a shepherd. Coins of great value – flung into the crevasses of the downed buildings – the plane in Pennsylvania, as well as the Pentagon in Washington, DC. I remember hearing the question being uttered over and over, "What's next?"

I was a student at Wake Forest University Divinity School. We always had chapel on Tuesday morning at 11:00. I had decided to cut chapel in order to be present at a committee meeting at the office of Salem Presbytery. I had an 8:00 am class. Got out at 9:30 and headed to Clemmons. By the time I arrived at Presbytery office, three of the planes had crashed, though I did not know it until I walked into the office and witnessed the faces of the entire staff, gathered around a TV with very poor reception. The committee meeting was canceled and I got back in my car, needing to be at Wake and in Chapel with my friends and teachers. By the time I got back to Davis Chapel, there were several undergraduates entering the small chapel seeking to be comforted. First there were two or three, then more and more, filling every pew and the floor, standing in the aisles, spreading into the halls and spilling onto the lawn. Lost...

Forty-one years ago Roger and Sally got married. They did all the normal things that married couples do, and, eventually, they had two daughters of their own. But still there was something missing; there was a part that just wasn't there. Roger had a daughter from a previous, short-lived marriage many years prior, a daughter he had never been able to see, never been able to contact. He and Sally told their two daughters about their half-sister, and the whole family longed to meet, see, touch, know that little girl. And all they knew was her name: Valorie.

Roger carried in his wallet the only photo he had of Valorie, a picture of her as a baby in the bathtub. Over the years, Roger, Sally, and their family moved 38 times in 41 years. Thirty-eight moves, job transfers, new opportunities, new possibilities. In each town with each new neighbor, each new home, and all the new people being met, Roger always wondered in his soul, "Might I see Valorie here today?"

When you're a loving father, every one of your children has immense value. There is no such thing as one child that doesn't matter. You treasure each one. Roger could have played the percentages game. I mean, he was caring for two out of his three daughters. I mean, two out of three ain't bad. But loving fathers don't play percentages.

God's love is like that. So Jesus told them this parable:

"...suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (NIV)

Now the coin in that story that Jesus tells was a drachma, and drachmas didn't have a whole lot of value in that day. You couldn't buy much with a single drachma. It was nearly valueless. But that drachma was not valueless to that woman. She treasured each one of her coins, and one of her possessions, one of her coins, was missing. So she lit the lamp, got the broom, searched high and low because something that she treasured was lost, and it had to be found.

God's love is like that – God's love treasures. God's love treasures each one because there's no such thing as a life that is valueless. No such thing as a life without worth. No life, no person, who is without value to our Lord, the Giver of Life. He treasures every one of his possessions, and that includes you, and that includes me, and that includes each one of the terrorists in the planes on 9-11, and each one of the students at WFU on 9-11, sitting in the floor, wanting answers, wanting to feel the hand of our Lord, reaching out with assurance and grace.

Through 38 moves over 41 years, Roger searched for Valorie. He didn't really know how to search - it's a lot easier to find a son than a daughter because girls have names changed, ex-wives remarry, names change, pictures change. There were very, very few tracks left to trace. But still Rodger carried that photo in his wallet.

Every time he was near Jacksonville, where Valorie had been born, he physically searched the city for traces or clues to a Valorie that was lost and needed to be found. There was a part of him that was unsettled and restless. He and Sally bought phone books and scoured them for clues. His two daughters talked about saving their funds to hire an investigator someday to help find Valorie, as a special Christmas gift for their father. Roger used the Internet – throwing out feelers in any direction possible – until the day he came across myfamily.com. He went to that website, and he shared his story, this story of 41 years, of a search that just wouldn't end.

A loving father will search for that which is lost. There's no giving up – no quitting point. Any father who has ever lost a child for even just a moment can tell you that.

God's love is like that. God's love seeks and persists. God's love never quits. Roger kept searching, and he engaged myfamily.com. And the myfamily.com staff asked him a few questions, and a few months later they called back with a few more questions – Roger getting his hopes up when the phone rang, and the caller ID said "myfamily.com." But they just had more questions about Valorie and about his former marriage and about Jacksonville. A few months later the phone rang again, still more questions. Then, finally, a few months later, the phone rang again, and Roger, this time, didn't have his hopes up. A woman at the other end of the line asked, "Mr. Scott?" "Yes?" Roger said. "We found her!" Roger says those were the three simplest, most beautiful words he had ever heard: "We found her!"

Contact was made – at first from a distance and without much detail – until Valorie agreed that she was willing to take the step to meet her father, the man she had very few details or very few memories of. They made the plans to meet face-to-face in Atlanta, and as soon as she gave the word, Roger wrote from Seattle to Atlanta, as he prepared to make the cross-country trek to meet his daughter after 41 years. In his e-mail, he said, "I'm completely packed and ready to go. My trip starts at 8 o'clock tonight with a ferry ride, a shuttle ride, an airplane ride, a three-hour layover, another airplane ride, another shuttle ride, a car ride, and a hotel check-in. And finally we will be together!"

And meet they did. They met, they hugged, they cried, they touched, they marveled. Roger was so excited he told everyone he met, "I found my daughter! I found my daughter! I found my daughter!" Looking for anybody to tell. He didn't care who they were, whether he knew them or not. It was a joy that couldn't be contained, a joy that had to be shared, a joy so great that one person could not possibly hold onto it. That's how a loving father is – when he finds the one that is lost, he rejoices and invites everyone else to do so.

That's why I always tear up at a baptism, and I never mind hand-clapping, and think there should be a feast afterward to celebrate. You see each of these parables end with celebration, party, rejoicing.

God's love is that way: God's love rejoices! In fact, that may be the best part of God's love for us is like that. It's extravagant – 4th of July fireworks! A raucous celebration – angels and saints, all of heaven rejoicing.

God loves. That's a promise. And it is in that promise that we find our hope. God loves. That promise fulfilled in the actions of people around the world in the aftermath of 9-11 gave us hope in the midst of our lost-ness. On this 15-year anniversary, I invite you to embrace that promise. I invite you to live in the immensity of that promise.

God loves and will seek us, no matter how far astray we may wonder. God loves us and seeks the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost Son...Amen.