

## *Death Has Climbed in Through Our Windows*

Jeremiah 9:17-24

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“Death has climbed in through our windows,” the prophet says.

You can lock and double lock the door. You can push the dresser up against it. You can be loaded for bear. But death comes in through the window.

That is how we felt on 9-11. I grew up in the valley of the shadow of death, but it was the shadow of the mushroom cloud. The death we expected was nuclear. But then in the 90’s the cold war ended and the threat subsided, and we felt almost safe.

As the young adults of Block Island felt invincible last week and then a surfer ran his moped into a stone wall, we felt invincible as Americans in 2001. No one had attacked the mainland since 1812. We felt far away from all the wars of the world. But death climbed in through our window.

I spent the biggest chunk of my adult life in the New Jersey-New York area. Like most people who lived there, I had a history with the World Trade Center. The twin towers were a part of my life from my college days, when they were still being built. From the first time I made it up to the observation deck on top, I loved that place. Over the years I took countless numbers of traveling Baptists up there for the best view of the city, and as a campus minister at Columbia University I took many groups of international students from around the world up to the top of the World Trade Center to see their new home. When I lived in Manhattan, the towers were the way you oriented yourself. You could always look to them to figure out which way was north or south, east or west. When I lived in New Jersey, I traveled through the towers because they were the end of the line for the train from Hoboken. In my church, about a third of the breadwinners worked in the Wall Street area, and all of them passed through the World Trade Center every day. I led a lunch Bible study within a few blocks of the towers for my members who worked in the financial district.

We were trying to have a staff meeting at the church that Tuesday morning when the reports began to come in. Like you, we were in shock. We kept CNN on during the meeting. We knew people who were supposed to be in that building. We spent most of the day trying to get reports on our members who worked in downtown Manhattan. Rick, a young man from Florida who traded orange juice futures on the floor of the mercantile exchange which was destroyed, called to say that he had missed his train and stood at the Hoboken station watching as the second plane hit the towers. Two other people who had been working near the waterfront in Hoboken and Newark stopped by the church office to talk that afternoon, shaken by what they had seen. By the end of the day we had determined that none of our own had been killed or injured, although there were people in our town who died and the sense of grief simply overwhelmed the region. That evening we held a prayer service and of course the church was packed.

We heard from Gary, a New Jersey native who was looking out his office window at AIG, several blocks away, when the first plane hit. He knew it was time to get out. He went to find Arthur, an older Texan at AIG who was also a member of our church, and told him “We’re going home. Now.” As they got outside they saw one of the towers collapse. People were already streaming into the streets from all over lower Manhattan. All they knew to do was to head north.

They didn't know what was happening. They didn't know what would happen next. The streets were full of people walking blindly away from the smoke, hoping to get to safety. It took a couple of hours for Gary and Arthur to get to the Chelsea Piers in midtown. There they ran into A.J., a church member who worked at Merrill Lynch next door to the towers in the World Financial Center. They finally managed to push their way into a crowded ferry to Hoboken full of refugees, and after a wait in Hoboken they were able to crowd into a single taxi to take them to the three different towns they lived in—no matter the cost. And they had all made it to church that night to give thanks that they had survived, but also to grieve the loss not only of thousands of lives but of the sense that they would ever feel safe again.

We heard from Gert, a paralegal who worked in the same office as my high-school age daughter and had recently been transferred to their law offices in the World Trade Center. She had made it down the stairway and out through the chaotic plaza at the base and got home safely. We heard from Lisa, a young single software developer working for a financial firm next door to the towers. She ran out into the street just in time to see the second tower crash and a huge wave of ash and debris come rolling down the street. It picked her up out of her shoes and pushed her down onto her face on the asphalt. A stranger came by and helped her up, walking arm in arm with her in her bare feet. As suddenly as he showed up, he disappeared, and she thought perhaps it was an angel.

My seminary friend Taylor Field, who for 25 years has directed a ministry among the poor and homeless of the far East Village, had a son in Stuyvesant High School a block from the World Trade Center. Freeman, a junior, saw the first tower falling. The intercom at the school told the students to stay in place. He said to his friends, "We're going!" and they ran out of the building into the streets just as the second tower fell and ash filled the street. A mile away, his dad Taylor started out across lower Manhattan looking for his son. He'd heard that the school was not releasing students unless a parent came. As he got near the school he had to wrap the sleeve of his jacket across his face as a mask to keep out all the ash in the air. It looked like there had been a snowfall, the ground was so white. It was quiet around Ground Zero. No one was at the school. Freeman made his way home, and brought 14 other football players with him to stay in the Fields' tiny apartment. That was the beginning for Freeman of living out his Christian faith, a turning point in his life, and just last month he returned to New York to work for the Baptist association as the host to mission teams from all over the country who come there to work. Taylor says now that "God has used even that terrible, terrible thing for good for our family."

But on that Tuesday night when we gathered in the church to share our stories and our prayers, we could not see anything good coming from that terrible thing. Death had crawled in through our windows. Death, which we thought was for someone else or for another time, was everywhere around us. One Catholic church a few miles away lost thirty members in one morning. As we gathered we read the words of Psalm 46:

*God is our refuge and strength,  
an ever-present help in trouble.*

*Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way  
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.*

We will not fear though the towers fall, though everything we thought was solid turns to vapor.

*The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

And we sang Martin Luther's mighty hymn as we did today.

But we did not continue to read that psalm to the 8<sup>th</sup> verse:

*Come and see what the Lord has done,  
the desolation he has brought on the earth.  
He makes wars to cease  
to the ends of the earth.  
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.  
“Be still and know that I am God.”*

In that psalm it is the Lord who brings desolation to all the war-makers of the earth. He destroys all weapons. He brings peace by utter destruction. It is by means of desolation that he gets the attention of the nations and he says “Be still”—stop fighting—and know that I am God, not you. I alone will be exalted, not any nation. I alone will be exalted in the earth.

God is still our refuge, but he is also still the God who speaks to us in visions of towers falling. We do not have to say that God caused the towers to fall to say that God speaks to us of his ultimate judgment in that vision. He speaks to us about the hubris with which we lifted ourselves up, the pride that calls itself the center of the world, the pride that goes before the fall.

The passage we read from Jeremiah is typical of his message as a prophet. Jeremiah was surrounded by preachers who said “Peace, peace” when there was no peace—who said “everything’s going to be all right, because we are God’s people, God is on our side, God will never let us be destroyed.” Jeremiah announced that God was no longer on Judah’s side, that Jerusalem was going to fall. The superpower of their day was going to attack and Jerusalem was going to be destroyed. Jeremiah did not say that this evil would happen in spite of God, as if God were helpless against it. He said that this real evil being done by evil people was still the judgment of God on his own people.

I am not saying like Pat Robertson or Fred Phelps that 9-11 was God’s judgment on America. What I am saying is that when we got attacked it presented an opportunity to get over our overweening pride as a people who thought we were chosen and invincible. I’m not sure we took advantage of that opportunity for more than a week or so before we picked ourselves up, brushed off our pride, and focused on revenge. But it is never too late to reflect on our vulnerability, and the incredible fragility of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Everything we build, everything we plan, can be gone with a puff of God’s breath—or with the puff of some unnamed evil from the other side of the globe.

Jeremiah hears the Lord instructing his people to call the professional wailers into service. Have you heard them—even today—in Israeli or Palestinian funerals, women crying out in wrenching banshee wails eliciting grief from the coldest hearts? You need to weep over what has happened as Jerusalem fell, as the temple of God was laid waste. Water should pour from your eyes like the Susquehanna roaring through Wilkes-Barre. Teach your daughters how to wail, and teach one another this song called “Death has climbed in through our windows.”

We learned how to wail on 9-11 and for a little while our common grief brought us together. For a little while, we felt scared and needy and turned to God. But very soon we began to tell ourselves that no, we were actually strong, and we were going to prove it.

Matty dies in a moped accident and for a brief moment young adults feel their mortality, and they might ask themselves “Is life about more than partying all night?” They gather for a paddle-out to honor a fellow surfer and the silence says that they are aware of the loss and the reality that we are swimming on the surface of a great void. But before the day is out it is back to partying, back to numbing the fear, back to denial, back to being proud of ourselves.

It's not just the kids. It's all of us. Death comes into our lives and reminds us: "Ashes, ashes, we all fall down." Everything we build is no more solid than the twin towers. Then we forget, or deny.

Jeremiah lays a principle down after giving a terrible description of the coming end of all things, when "dead bodies will lie like dung on the open field," when the air will be full only of wailing and the children will be gone from the streets. Here is the moral we are to draw from all this destruction.

*Let not the wise boast of their wisdom  
or the strong boast of their strength  
or the rich boast of their riches,  
but let those who boast boast about this:  
that they understand and know me,  
that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,  
justice and righteousness on earth,  
for in these I delight.*

The message here is that there is only one real basis of security. The end of all boasting is a pile of ash and the piling of bodies. All the towers we build will one day fall. Some think that life is all about being smart, and knowledge gives security. Some think that life is all about being powerful, and strength gives security. Some think that life is all about money, and wealth gives security. But the message of the leveled Jerusalem and the message of Ground Zero are the same: "Not so! Not so!"

Life is not about intellect, power, or money. The only thing that matters, the only thing that will last is this: knowing God—and understanding that God does not get his greatness by being all-knowing, or all-powerful, or all-wealthy. God is defined by kindness, justice, and doing right. Life is not about the money or power or intelligence that built the World Trade Center. Life is not about exercising the power of empire in the Middle East or about attacking it by ruthless guerilla tactics. Life is about coming to know the God who is the long-term basis of reality, the ground of being who will not fall away, the One who is left when everything else is gone, the Eternal One who is known for compassion and justice.

The pile of ash at Ground Zero raises the question: "Is this all there is?" We should not move away from that question too soon.