

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

September 12, 2021 – HOLY CROSS DAY (TRANSF.)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: *“The Cross: A Sign of New Life, not Death”*

Isaiah 45:21-25	(There is no savior besides God)
Psalms 98	(In righteousness will the Lord judge the world)
Philippians 2:5-11	(Christ humbled Himself even to death on a cross)
St. John 12:31-36a	(Jesus ‘lifted up’ will draw all people unto Himself)

Where was God, on September 11, 2001, in New York, Washington DC, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania? Where was God as the Twin Towers fell; the Pentagon was—for all intents and purposes—“bombed”; and United Flight 93 ended in a fiery crash killing everyone on board? Where was God as nearly 3,000 people lost their lives in one day, and many more would die in subsequent weeks of the injuries, burns, and trauma they sustained?

Where is God when your doctor uses the “cancer” word when rendering a diagnosis? Where is God when your spouse unexpectedly dies or files for divorce—another kind of death—? Where is God when you come face-to-face with your own sinfulness, feel you’ve lost your way, and can’t dig yourself out of the hole you’ve fallen into?

In Psalm 34, verses 15 & 17 to 19, we read (in The Message translation): “God keeps an eye on his friends, his ears pick up every moan and groan. . . . Is anyone crying for help? God is listening, ready to rescue you. If your heart is broken, you’ll find God right there; if you’re kicked in the gut, he’ll help you catch your breath. Disciples so often get into trouble; still, God is there every time.”

God was at the World Trade Center on 9/11: In the sooty faces and exhausted bodies of the First Responders helping panicked people down many, many flights of stairs before the buildings collapsed. God was with the passengers of Flight 93, who diverted the plane and at the cost of their own lives, stopped its trajectory. Although the terrorist hijackers’ intended target is still not known, theories include the White House, the U.S. Capitol, the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland, or one of several nuclear power plants along the eastern seaboard. If any of these had sustained an attack, the magnitude of 9/11’s tragedy surely would have been much worse.

God was at the Pentagon in the quick and courageous responses of both military and civilian employees who sought to escort their coworkers to safety and tried to find survivors in the flaming debris that had been ignited by exploding jet fuel.

In the E Ring of the 5-sided fortress, a rescue party found a severely injured man whose “skin was hanging off his fingers in shreds.” His name tag identified him as Lt. Col. Brian Birdwell. As they tried to irrigate his wounds with a bottle of drinking water, suddenly they encountered Col. John Baxter, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s top flight surgeon. Observing that Birdwell was very badly burned, had blast injuries, inhalation injuries, and what may have been toxic residue in his mouth, Baxter gave him an injection of morphine to ease the terrible pain. At the triage site where Col. Baxter was treating Birdwell, Navy financial manager Natalie Ogletree, ran past on her way out of the building, noticed the patient, and stopped. Her own experience of being burned as a child led her to understand that Birdwell needed a comforting presence. After glancing at his name tag, she took his good hand and said, “Brian, we’re going to pray.” The officer was able to respond, “OK, ma’am,” and together, the two recited the 23rd Psalm.

Producing a Bible, another Pentagon staffer read aloud Psalm 91,¹ of which verses 1-5 state: “Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’ Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the [weapon] that flies by day.”

When the ambulance that had been called for officer Birdwell failed to arrive after nearly half-an-hour, medical personnel hoisted Birdwell into an Army captain's sport utility vehicle for transport to Georgetown University Hospital, approximately 12 minutes away. Surely the Lord was in that place, and with all who caringly took part in the rescue of just *one person*. A Jewish proverb says, "He who saves a single soul, saves the world."

So *many* people responded to the dire needs of 9/11 with supernatural courage, fortitude, compassion, selflessness, dedication, camaraderie, and heroic efforts to heal and relieve pain, and to comfort individuals in their grief and fear. And it is in those attitudes and actions that we find the mission, ministry, and work of Jesus Christ. He, who is the presence of God among us.

At this point in our history, there are many iconic images of 9/11, but perhaps none as widely circulated as what is known as either "the Ground Zero Cross," or "the World Trade Center Cross." A 17-foot-tall intact steel cross beam ended upright in the debris of the Twin Towers, looking for all the world as though a divine power had planted a cross in the midst of the devastation. Many saw it as an icon of hope and comfort in the aftermath of such massive death and destruction. How can we account for the power of the image's enduring popularity and emotion the cross engenders?

We have only to think of the way bereaved families plant small crosses at roadside shrines near where their loved-one was killed in a car accident. Or the crosses that top some of the tombstones in St. John's Cemetery. And, of course, in tales of vampires and demons, these malevolent beings are repelled by the would-be victim brandishing a cross that sends them fleeing in terror.

Today we are observing Holy Cross Day, in order to, as St. Paul wrote, "never boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to [us], and [we] to the world" (Galatians 6:14). In Christ's self-sacrificing death on the Cross, the One who understands every agony and affliction, and Himself faced the ultimate evil, died that we might live forever. And because of this incomparable gift God has given us, the Cross does become a symbol of hope and renewal! That's one reason we Christian women wear pretty jeweled ones around our necks, and you gentlemen have lapel pins or simpler necklaces depicting the Cross.

In Jesus' time, when the Romans used crucifixion as a standard death penalty, custom required posting a sign called a *titulus cruce*s above the crucified person's head, listing his crimes. Pilate dictated the Lord's inscription be: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19). Disturbed by this identification, the chief priests confronted Pilate: "Don't call him 'King of the Jews'," they argued. "Say, he *claimed* to be king of the Jews." Pilate refused, and answered: "What I have written, I have written" (John 19:22).

The Early Christians also paid attention to the Savior's *titulus*. But in a twist of meaning, they *honored* its inscription. By the early Middle Ages believers easily recognized the initials INRI—the acronym for the Latin *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*—"Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews,"² and those four letters appeared in many medieval artworks depicting the crucifixion.

A second-century Bishop, Melito of Sardis, wrote: "He was raised on a cross, and a title was fixed, indicating who it was who was being executed. Painful it is to say, but more terrible not to say ... He who suspended the earth is suspended, He who fixed the heavens is fixed, He who fastened all things is fastened to the wood ..."³

Christ, of His own free will, submitted to being tortured and brutally crucified in order to save the world. Then, out of that darkest of days, the Lord of the Universe brought resurrection and the conquest of death forever, as well as new and eternal life for all who believe. And that is what gives us hope and courage when disasters such as 9/11 occur; when we hear a diagnosis that sends us into a tailspin of worry and fear; or when we face any kind of significant loss; are paralyzed by anxiety and despondency that borders on hopelessness; or simply lose our way, spiritually.

Since 2012, the “World Trade Center Cross” has stood at the 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York City. Prior to its installation, Father Brian Jordan blessed the cross in a ceremony near the World Trade Center site, where hundreds of recovery workers and their families gathered.

In 2001, Father Jordan, a Franciscan priest, had ministered to the workers, blessed human remains recovered at the site, and comforted rescue and recovery workers. Throughout the recovery period of that year, Sunday after Sunday the priest held Mass and offered Holy Communion at the base of the cross.⁴

What a perfect place to receive Jesus, at the foot of the Cross. And how meaningful—and uplifting—that ministry must have been, for those laboring to recover the victims of that tragedy. We, too, can find release and rest for our souls at the foot of the Cross, laying down our sins and our selves.

At the heart of the City of London is Charing Cross. All distances across the city are measured from its central point. Locals refer to it simply as “the cross.” One day a child became lost in the bustling metropolis. A city police officer (a “bobby,” as Londoners refer to them) came to the child’s aid to try and help return him to his family. The bobby asked the little boy a variety of questions in an attempt to discover where he lived, but to no avail. Finally, with tears streaming down the boy’s face, he cried, “*If you will take me to the cross I think I can find my way from there.*”⁵ What a great description of the Christian life! The Cross is both the starting place of our new life in Christ, but also the place we must return to, time and time again, to keep our bearings in life.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, we thank You for giving up Your life on the Cross for our salvation, and that Your Holy Cross has become a sign of hope and renewal for all the world. May we be bearers of that good news to all whom we encounter. In Your Name we pray. Amen.



¹ Adapt. “Defense Studies Series, Pentagon 9/11,” <<https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/pentagon/Pentagon9-11.pdf>> Used with permission.

² Adapt. Judith Couchman, *The Mystery of the Cross*, (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2009).

³ Adapt. “Sermon Illustrations: The Cross,” The Pastor’s Workshop, n.d. <<https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-on-the-cross/>> Used with permission.

⁴ “‘WTC Cross’ is Installed in 9/11 Memorial Museum (Updated),” 9/11 Memorial Museum <<https://www.911memorial.org/connect/blog/wtc-cross-installed-911-memorial-museum-updated>>

⁵ Adapt. Stuart Strachen, Jr., “The Cross at the Heart of the City,” The Pastor’s Workshop, n.d. <<https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-on-the-cross/>> Used with permission.