

## Under Attack; Under God

### Psalm 46:1-7

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### Real Audio (3 MB)

On Monday I planned to preach about something else today. On Tuesday I knew that for the first time in twenty years, I would have to change the sermon. A lot of things changed on Tuesday...probably more than we know. Whether or not the nation changes for the better in the days ahead will depend on our ability to see ourselves not only as a nation under attack but also under God.

Lord God, we gather this morning in churches all over the world, all of us more open than ever before to a holy word from you. Do now what only your Spirit can do. Speak into our souls. Amen.

As a pastor who has spent a lot of time in the emergency rooms of life, I am accustomed to the profoundly sad, numb feelings that arise from the soul in a crisis. All week it felt like the whole nation is in an emergency room. There is only one thing that we have been thinking about. Everything else, all other business, seems unimportant and even profane.

Like an anxious family stuck in the waiting room, we have had an insatiable thirst for news about what happened. "Have you heard?" we asked. "How did it happen? How bad is it?" Then, like a family that learns things are very bad, we know that we will never be the same again. We will recover, but the nation will never be the same again.

Sooner or later every individual ends up in the emergency room. Something happens that you were not planning on, something that permanently alters the plans you had. Maybe a loved one dies, a deadly disease is discovered, or a cherished relationship unravels. When that happens, you realize you will not leave the emergency room the same person you were when you entered. That is exactly where our nation is today. Wounded with a broken heart and certain only that things have changed.

As we leave the emergency room and make decisions about how we get on with life, let us remember that the nation is strong. It is strong enough to survive this atrocity. Actually, it is strong enough to do more than survive. It can become a different, better nation than we were on Monday. But that all depends on the choices we make in the days ahead.

The French Philosopher Paul Ricoeur has written about the creative possibility of "limit experiences." A limit experience is an experience that is beyond the limits of normal life. It's the one you spent most of life avoiding, dreading, defending yourself against, like death and separation. Beyond the limits of those things, we think there's nothing but emptiness, loss, and anomie. But as Dr. Ricoeur reminds us, there is more. There is also God whose creative love knows no limits.

Watching enormous skyscrapers crumble into dust is beyond the limits of comprehension. It doesn't matter how many times we watch the video, it's still beyond comprehension. As is seeing a gaping wound in the side of the Pentagon. And imagining how men can be so evil as to crash full airplanes into these buildings. And understanding how thousands could so easily die on our own well-protected soil. It's all beyond our limits.

Be clear. None of that was the will of God. It was not a judgment against us, retribution for our sins, or God teaching us a lesson. Rather the will of God is always that evil be redeemed and not given the last word. That is why God can always be found at work beyond the limits of evil's destructive powers, waiting to bring us back to new life.

The greatest catastrophe of history happened not on Tuesday, but two thousand years ago when we crucified the Son of God. That was the ultimate experience beyond humanity's limit. But it was then that history was given the possibility of resurrection. When Jesus Christ defeated death, he did so that we may experience something beyond our limits -- to rise with him into a new life. After every cross, the resurrection remains a possibility. The stone that covers the tomb is rolled back, but it is up to us to emerge as a new nation. It all depends on the choices we make.

If our choices arise out of a new vision of service and justice, if we now commit ourselves to something greater than collecting more and more personal wealth, and if we unite around our leaders and stop whining about how small a piece of the American pie they are giving us, then we'll emerge from this tragedy as a nation ready to fulfill its calling in the earth. But if our future choices arise out of fear, we might as well stay in the tomb.

Near the end of the week, I took a break from reading newspapers to look again at Tom Brokaw's popular book, *The Greatest Generation*. As I reviewed all of those wonderful stories of the World War II generation, I was struck by the ordinariness of the lives he was describing. No one in that war was born a hero. But as they were pushed beyond the limits they found something heroic in their souls they did not know was there. It wasn't that the hard times made the hero. Hard times are just hard. Heroes are ordinary people who refuse to be governed by fear when times are hard.

Is this not also what inspired us this week as we heard about ordinary men and women rising above their fear to overtake the hijackers, firemen sacrificing their lives in the line of duty, and rescue workers tirelessly digging through the rubble searching for survivors while buildings fell down around them? When you heard those stories, you couldn't help but ask yourself, "What about me? Could I do that?" It all depends on how you handle fear.

You don't have to wait until you're in a hijacked plane to find out if you can rise above fear. That was their moment. This is ours -- the moment that follows the crises. The moment we leave the emergency room to form a new spirit in this nation. If we are afraid,

we will spend all our energy arguing over blame. We will waste this moment by retreating into a national fortress, and we will allow the terrorists to win by terrorizing us. But if we refuse to be afraid, we will unite this great country into a new creation that looks a lot more like the New Kingdom Jesus talked about. The soul of the nation can go either way, depending on how we respond to this moment.

This is not the first great hour of decision our nation has faced about its soul, and we are not the first nation to face it. But historically each generation receives only one opportunity. This is ours, and we dare not miss it.

The Bible reminds us that Jerusalem faced such an hour whenever it was attacked and threatened. Generation after generation struggled to rise above their fear and act like a holy, just people. Some generations succeeded. Some did not. This is what the Psalmist was addressing when he wrote, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change...." Well, the earth has changed. For us, it changed last Tuesday. Whether or not the earth changes for good depends on where we go for refuge and strength.

If we believe as the Psalmist says, "God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved," then we shall not be moved. "Though the earth change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam," we shall not be moved! Not because we are so strong or invincible, but because we take refuge in the God who is in our midst. When we can see that God is with us, then we know that even when we are pushed beyond the limits, God will be waiting there to lead us into a new risen life together.

"God is in the midst of the city." He is not sitting indifferently above and beyond the horrific destruction we witnessed this week. Perhaps you saw the television interview of the distressed woman who lamented, "Where was God when the planes crashed into those buildings?" I can answer that: in the midst of the city. He was in the offices that collapsed down upon each other as the towers crumbled. He was under the rubble where the dead and wounded lay buried. He was in the planes filled with terrified passengers that called to warn us of what was happening or to say goodbye to their families. God was in the midst of all that pathos. As the cross of Jesus Christ proclaims, God can always be found in the places of suffering. He is there not simply to comfort, but to lead us to resurrected life.

At the end of the fourth century when the city of Rome was being attacked by barbaric tribes from the north, St. Augustine was called upon to provide a theological interpretation of those days. In response he wrote a classic philosophy of history called, *The City of God*. Augustine claimed that from the beginning there have always been only two cities in history. The city of self-love, and the city of God's love. One of these cities may be more visible, but they exist in the same place at the same time, and you have to choose to which city you really belong. Since the city of self-love is motivated by greed, it always eventually decays from the inside out. Every empire, every city of earth that prides itself on itself has not survived. But the city of God will always persevere, like the love of God in our midst.

What our society is deciding in the weeks and months ahead is which city we will be. Maybe for too long we have flirted with self-love. Maybe we have deluded ourselves thinking that we could each live for ourselves, or that the nation existed only to serve our individual needs. If this country is to survive, we will have to start looking like the other city. We have to start living for a holy purpose greater than ourselves and demonstrating the love of God to each other.

I can tell you we are off to a good start. Our leaders are weighing carefully the options for how we must proceed. Volunteers have come out of the woodwork, and people are waiting five hours to donate blood. Flags are everywhere, as if we have discovered we belong to a nation. Now it falls to the houses of worship to teach people how to pray again and live out of God's Word. And it falls to each of you to make a critical decision about the sacred purposes of your life. A nation is nothing more than the collective souls of its people, and this nation is counting on you to know how to live all your life under God.

I am not only calling you to nationalism or patriotism. I'm calling you to something even greater. I'm echoing the Bible's call to come out from the tombs, embrace the gift of life, and follow Jesus as he leads us into a future filled with hope.

O God when we face an evil day that pushes us way beyond the limits of our experience, may we find refuge in your perfect love that casts out all fear, making room for heroes. Amen.