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Choices and Temptations: What Day Comes After 9/11?

(Psalm 25:4-10) "Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. 5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. 6 Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. 7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! 8 Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. 9 He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. 10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees."

(Mark 1:9-13) "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." 12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him."

In the early '90s, I preached a sermon whose opening included a description of a Thanksgiving trip I had made to New York City a decade earlier. That sermon had these lines:

... the weekend began with one of those moments that are almost beyond words, that cry out for poetry. For as I was riding there high in the air, all of a sudden the plane poked its nose down through the clouds and streaming into my window came the sight of Manhattan in all its beauty and all its glory. There, on the left, almost close enough to touch, it would seem, were the twin towers of the World Trade Center, their mirrored walls lit up by the sun like two golden torches.

Reading those lines today evokes a swirl of feelings. Sadness, anger, disbelief, grief, thanksgiving for so many who behaved so nobly, to name just a few. And this morning, I suspect there is no one in this room who is not aware of the resonance of this day, no adult who cannot tell you what he or she was doing that terrible morning ten years ago.

So what shall we say *this* morning when *that* day ten years ago, full of its memories

of those awful images, reminders for some of friends and colleagues lost, is our unavoidable companion this day? Several months ago the Elders and I had a discussion of what our worship this morning should be like. The topic of conversations was whether we should have a service that was self-consciously and unabashedly focused on 9/11. And the Elders wisely said that our job on this Sunday, as it is on every Sunday, is to preach and proclaim, through song and word and prayers, the good news of the Gospel, to tell and remind those who are searching for meaning and hope of the God who has promised them life abundant and life eternal, the God who wants them to fulfill their purpose, the God who loves them unconditionally and yet always calls them to be better than they are. The Elders were wise. For while the great theologian Karl Barth once said that the preacher must preach with the Bible in one hand the morning newspaper in the other, Barth also counseled that we could never ever let the newspaper dominate. That is, we come to church, to worship, not to see and hear what we could hear anywhere else in our world, but to see and hear and experience God's love and to be offered resources for how to think about any and every occasion that life brings us. The newspaper, the internet, the blogs are not our guide this morning; the talking heads, whether they be from Fox or MSNBC are not who we should be looking to guide us, the bloggers lighting up the web for weeks now are not the ones who we shall look to for wisdom and strength this or any day. No, the Elders were right: on this and ever day, we shall do what we always seek to do which is to seek after how Jesus wants us to live in light of God's love for each and all

In that regard, then, the story of the temptations of Jesus can have much to teach us on this or any day, I believe. Because in some ways, any anniversary – whether of something wonderful or something you wish had never happened – offers to us temptations for good or ill about how we might speak, think, and act. And so with that in mind, let us turn to this brief story from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry as it is portrayed in the Gospel of Mark. As is so often the case in Mark, the telling of the story is

lean, spare, utterly to the point: immediately after his baptism, Jesus went, the story says, “out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.” Now, the story of Jesus’ temptation has always made some Christians uncomfortable. Why? The story makes Jesus sound so, well, human. And there has been an urge since the first days of Christianity to say that Jesus wasn’t “really” human but only somehow appeared to be – so that he didn’t “really” suffer, he didn’t “really” feel pain, he never “really” had to decide for one possibility and so thereby cut off another. But the church, from day one, has over and over again declared that to be a wrong understanding. Why? Well, if Jesus was not fully and really and completely human, if he didn’t really share our human condition, then his life really isn’t relevant to your life and my life. If Jesus doesn’t really know what it is like to be human, then he cannot save us. If Jesus didn’t really know the reality of mixed feelings, the lure of temptation to behave both well and badly, then his life has nothing to do with yours or mine. No, the gospel writers and the church rejected the idea that Jesus somehow only “appeared” to be human, affirming instead that Jesus, like us, knew that to live is to decide, to make sometimes hard choices. Jesus knows of both the finitude of life and how choices are shaped by our circumstances. And because he knows, because he has lived it, he can be trusted as our guide and friend.

First, notice that juxtaposition of baptism and temptation: Jesus was baptized and immediately found himself in the wilderness struggling with the wild beasts of temptation. Hardly dry from that baptismal celebration, he doesn’t even catch his breath before he is shown as having to struggle. He goes from God’s announcement that He is God’s own beloved Son with whom God is pleased to being harassed by hell’s demons. But the good news in that portrayal is this: Jesus knows what it is like to have life go from the highest to the lowest, sometimes on the same day, sometimes in the very same hour. Jesus has

experienced what it is like to know great joy and great struggle all mixed up together. And when we are tempted to ask why God doesn't spare us somehow from struggle or hurt or pain, we are reminded by this story that God's own son, yet human like us, was not spared life's pain and hurt and struggle – because God is not a God of magic or one's personal trainer or life coach or buddy. God's grace and faithfulness to Jesus, to you and to me consists in something different than simply always making sure that nothing bad happens.

And what else do we find in this story? Well, secondly, the story reminds us of the fact that life is limited and that to choose one thing means that something else cannot be chosen. We learn in the other gospel accounts of this story, told more elaborately, that Jesus faced several particular temptations from Satan. Satan suggested he turn stones into bread. He suggested that Jesus throw himself off the mountain and dare God to catch him. He offered Jesus the possibility of being the earthly king of all the world. But all of those temptations really boil down to one thing, I think: Jesus too knew what it was like to be tempted between reality and what we might call “magical thinking.” He was tempted, just like we are sometimes, with the choice between thinking magically and facing reality, between fantasy and actuality, between what we wish were the case and what really is. Aren't those our temptations too? We too sometimes face that wild beast of being tempted to prefer to live in this or that illusion than in reality. And while no one lately has tempted us with becoming king of the world, who among us hasn't fantasized in the face of a family crisis or one of those months that has more month than money or a difficult time of waiting that it was all ok, that these things really weren't a problem, didn't really exist. In fact, the modern psychological word for this is “denial” but it's clear that it's a temptation that goes back to the dawn of humanity, and it's clear that Jesus knew and lived, just like us, the temptation to think that he was not in fact limited and that he could somehow choose to have it all.

But the fact that life is sometimes all mixed up together in joy and sorrow, struggle and suffering, happiness and lament, and the fact that despite the temptation to deny the fact that life is limited and choice required and limiting, that is not the end of the story. For the third thing the story says, again in Mark's terse fashion, is the most important thing that it says, for it conveys the gospel: *"And the angels ministered to him."* And that is true in your life and mine. Now, I don't mean this in the overly sentimental way in which folks sometimes talk about having a personal angel on their shoulders who keeps them from all harm. Because it doesn't work like that. I wish it did, but it doesn't. A world with many, many folks who are capable of choosing will lead sometimes to a lot of confusion, often to heights of great wonder and beauty and love, and yet too often also to sadness and tragedy and even evil. And it is in the face of that reality that the story says to us *"And the angels ministered to him."*

Because that's the good news: God ministers to us telling us in so many ways that even though we are limited, even though there is no magic, that there is nevertheless much reason for joy and hope. God's ministering to us through the grace of Jesus and the work of the Spirit is told in our psalm for this morning: "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness." It is simply not possible in this life to take all the paths that lie before us; choices must be made. Yet whatever paths we do choose, God is always present and never absent – leading, upholding, loving, prodding, teaching, and holding out always the possibility of renewal and hope even in the midst of life's limitations.

So, to answer this sermon's title question: What day comes after 9/11? Or put even more generally, what day comes after **any** day in which awfulness and awe are all mixed up together, in which both the humanity's highest nobleness can be seen along with the most odious of evil? What day comes after an anniversary – be it 9/11 or one that is yours alone to recall – that is so fraught with feeling, so full of the temptation to rage or revenge,

or to seek solace in over-simple answers?

Well, let me attempt an answer to that question by starting with what may seem an unlikely source. It has become a modern American film classic, and in the movie, "Groundhog Day," Bill Murray's character Phil faces the same sort of question: what day comes after Groundhog Day. If you remember the movie, Phil is one who is consumed by patterns of actions, habits of behavior, and attitudes that don't serve him or the world very well and which he keeps repeating even though they don't make him happy or fulfilled or much fun to be around. The movie's plot centers around February 2, Groundhog Day, in Puxatawney, Pennsylvania, where Phil, who is a television weatherman, has gone to do the obligatory story about whether the groundhog will see his shadow. Phil and his producer get snowed in by an unexpected blizzard and Phil wakes up the next day to find that he is in fact re-living the previous day. This goes on, the film implies, for years. Phil is trapped. And he besieged by temptations: he gets even meaner, he does nasty things, he says hurtful things, he even tries to take his own life. But each morning his alarm goes off and each morning it is the same Sonny and Cher song playing with the announcer saying that it's February 2, Groundhog Day.

But Phil changes. He gives into a different kind of temptation. Instead of the temptation to bitterness and anger, of hate and hurtfulness, he begins slowly to improve his talents that God has given him. He begins slowly to do things for other people. He begins to see those he shares these eternally repeating Groundhog Days with as not simply abstractions or objects, but as people. He learns about them. He doesn't like some of them, but he begins to empathize even with these ones. He even ends up saving the life of a young boy. He stops trying to seduce his producer, and instead of seeing her simply as one more sex object he comes to understand and appreciate her as a person who has her own needs, hopes, and fears and whom he has done a disservice to by giving in to the temptation to caricature and belittle her. And that is when, on the next morning, he wakes

up to the alarm and the announcer is saying that is a beautiful February 3.

The temptation on any hard and hurtful day, on any day that is full of a swirl of mixed feelings, is to be tempted to over-simple answers that do not really answer. It is to be tempted to hatefulness and hurtfulness. It is to be tempted to think the worst. It is to be tempted to objectify and even demonize. But giving in to such temptations will not move you forward, will not help you get to your own February 3. Hurt and pain done to you or to all of us together, recalled with such poignancy on this or any hard anniversary, will never indeed be forgotten but they need not forever trap us either. It has been commonplace for the last decade to say "9/11 changed everything." And it did change so much. But you and I as Christians must always testify to fact that, actually, not **everything** has changed. Because God did not change. God is the God who still loves and cares for all even when some of His children do odious and vile things. God still holds each of us up and calls us forward to new life. God still is there, as God was with Jesus in those "angels ministering to Him," ministering to us, to our country, to our world, calling us forward in each and every moment and never, ever abandoning us. On hard and hurtful days, the temptation to forget those things can be powerful. But giving in to that temptation will trap us in ways that did not need to be.

So, what day comes after 9/11? What day comes after any hard and hurtful day or hard and hurtful anniversary in your own life? God's new day, God's new day. May the power of that day pull you forward always in hope and in trust. Amen.