

Advent 1, Year B
Isaiah 64: 1-9
Mark 13: 24-37

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, CA
November 30, 2008

In Times Like These:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Have you been to the Visitors Center at Ground Zero? It's not a very impressive edifice—no grand building or imposing entrance, nothing really to set it apart from the other store fronts on the street. Not even a very good sign. You have to know what you're looking for.

Inside are a series of galleries—each focusing on a different aspect of what has come to be known as 9/11: the community of the World Trade Center, the attacks, the aftermath, a tribute to people who lost their lives that day, and lastly a gallery called “Voices of Promise”.

As I walked through those galleries and gazed at pictures of promise lost—a young woman holding her little white bichon, a young man in his graduation robes, a father holding his children—I felt a deep sadness. So much loss. So much death. So much heartache.

All of this in Manhattan—the ground zero of our current economic woes. So many storefronts closed. So many people out of work. So many lives upended.

Then, this week, another city, another attack. People going about their business—studying meditation, having lunch with a friend, switching trains, packing to leave Mumbai—suddenly caught in the grip of a terrorist attack. The awful vulnerability of it all.

Half way across the world—folks waiting to catch a plane home are held up by protestors closing a Bangkok airport.

Closer to home—lay-offs, IRA's shrinking, dreams deferred or even lost.

Here, in our community—loved ones dying, relationships tested, deep losses triggered.

A world of desolating sacrilege. A world of suffering. A world of darkness.

We live in hard times, you and I—times of great suffering—times of a darkened sun and of a moon withholding its light.

How, then, do we live in times such as these? Where do we hang our hat? On what do we pin our hopes.

It's tempting to hunker down. To withdraw. To hold tight to what we have. To crawl into bed and pull the covers over our head.

It's tempting to hoard our resources—both spiritual and financial. But that's not where Jesus leads us.

Jesus tells us, "Keep alert." "Stay awake."

To what end?

There are those that would have us believe that we should be alert to some great moment of judgment when Jesus will return and gather up the most pious amongst us and sweep them away.

There are those who would have us waiting and watching for the heavens to part and the mountains to shake.

But I wonder. Is that what Jesus means?

I remember a story Ed Bacon, the Rector of All Saints, Pasadena, tells. Perhaps you have heard it.

It's a story about a flood. It rained for days and days, the water rose so high that a stubborn old man was forced to climb up to the top of the roof and sit in the rain. As the waters came up higher another man in a rowboat came up to the house and asked the man to get in. "No, thank you. The Lord will save me." So the man in the rowboat rowed away. The waters rose to the edge of the roof and still the man was sitting there when a second rowboat came by. "Get in," said the man in the boat." The man on the roof refused, saying "The Lord will save me." So the man in the boat rowed away. It was not long before the waters covered the house and the man was forced to climb up on top of his chimney and sit there as the rain poured down. A helicopter came by and the helicopter pilot urged him to get in or he would drown, "No, thank you" the man said, "the Lord will save me." After much begging and pleading the helicopter pilot gave up and flew away. The waters rose even further above the chimney, the man drowned and went to heaven where he met God. "Lord, I don't understand—the waters rose higher and higher and I waited hours for you to save me but you didn't. Why Lord?" God sighed and said, "What in the world are you talking about? I sent two boats and a helicopter."ⁱ

That man on the roof was waiting for the heavens to part and the mountains to shake. And he missed God in the midst.

Jesus says, "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that the summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates." He goes on to say to his disciples, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come."

Every time I hear this passage, I find myself remembering another passage—the one we heard last week. Jesus is telling the story of the king who says, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

How are we to live in times like these? We are to live alert to the need before us—in our community and in our world—for it is there that we meet God.

This is not a time for us to hunker down. This is not a time for us to hole up. This is not a time for us to watch out for number one. We’ve done more than enough of that.

This is a time for us to reach out to one another. A time to share what we have. A time to be awake to the presence of God in our midst and in our lives. A time respond to God’s invitation to live generously.

And we can do that. We can live generously. It will make a world of difference. For all of us.

In one of the exhibits at the Ground Zero Visitor Center, I saw a pamphlet that was handed out to the volunteers who flooded in to help. Suggestions about how they might be of help to people in deep need. Among them—“Be kind” and “Listen”. Not bad advice for times such as these.

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ⁱ The Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr. “THE SPIRITUALITY OF VIGILANCE,” Pasadena, CA, November 27, 2005.