

## FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 5, 2021

ISAIAH 35:4-7A | PSALM 146 | JAMES 2:1-10, 14-17 | MARK 7:24-37

Everyone had a story to share. The people who were in Manhattan, of course. But all the rest of us, too. The people with a relative in suburban Washington or rural Pennsylvania. Even the people who saw it unfold on TV. When we exchanged stories about where we were that day, what was remarkable wasn't how similar they were. It's how different they all were. That even as we endured a common event, we all experienced it in particular ways. In a recent essay on his experience of 9/11, the novelist Hari Kunzru puts it this way, "Each of us has only our single window onto it, through which we peer and try to understand."<sup>1</sup> Even though the images are the same, the memories are different. And so even as anniversaries bring us together, grief has a way of pulling us back apart.

Even more so now that fewer people have stories to share. One-third of all Americans alive today were born after 9/11.<sup>2</sup> People who weren't alive on 9/11 can certainly understand its significance and the way it's shaped the world they live in. What I'm less sure they'll be able to grasp was the sense of fear that permeated life in the years following. Fear of flying. Fear of the mail. Fear of subways. Fear of mosques. Fear of anthrax.

And underneath all those fears was a deeper kind of dread. How do you make meaning out of an event where the line between life and death seems random? There's a reason why those stories of changed plane tickets and canceled meetings dug into our psyche. The line between life and death, meaning and the void, seems so thin. And while fears of opening the mail and riding the subway subsided, the fear of meaninglessness never did.

On the first anniversary of 9/11, President Bush visited the Pentagon and said of the victims, "Though they died in tragedy, they did not die in vain."<sup>3</sup> And as our nation has withdrawn from Afghanistan, the fear remains. After nearly two hundred people, including thirteen American servicemembers, were killed in Kabul last weekend, the recriminations stretched beyond the deaths themselves to whether those individuals had died "in vain."<sup>4</sup> Two decades gone and the enemy remains not simply death itself but meaninglessness.

One way that we try to instill a sense of meaning after an experience of loss is by vengeance. Asserting our control by getting back at people and attempting to find relief in the pain of others. The past two decades have been filled with noble appeals to gender equality and democracy, but those ideals were often invoked alongside a desire to just destroy people. As Toby Keith's 2002 hit single put it, "And you'll be sorry that you messed with the U.S. of A. / 'Cause we'll put in a boot in your ... / It's the American way." That song is grotesque, but it reveals a common delusion. That our suffering is not meaningless if we can make others suffer, too.

That desire to find meaning in suffering is exactly what today's reading from Isaiah is about. This text was written to a group of Israelites who were in exile in Babylon. Away from their homes. Away from their families. Away from their religious traditions. And it's to these people languishing in fear that the

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<sup>1</sup> "[Easy Chair] Death Valley, By Hari Kunzru | Harper's Magazine," accessed August 31, 2021, <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/09/death-valley-september-11-2001/>.

<sup>2</sup> George Packer, "9/11 Was a Warning of What Was to Come," The Atlantic, August 10, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/09/the-911-century/619487/>.

<sup>3</sup> "CNN.Com - The 'Great Struggle': Consoling the Living - September 12, 2002," accessed August 30, 2021, <http://www.cnn.com/2002/US/09/11/ar911.memorial.main/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Senator Sullivan Responds to President Biden's Speech on Afghanistan Debacle | U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan of Alaska," accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.sullivan.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/senator-sullivan-responds-to-president-bidens-speech-on-afghanistan-debacle>.

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prophet Isaiah writes, “Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.’”

It is easy to imagine this as a kind of divine shock and awe, an Iron Age version of Toby Keith’s big hit. Not only will God lead you out of exile and allow you to live in peace, but God is going to destroy your enemies while he’s at it.

But there’s something a little more complicated going on here. The word “vengeance” comes from the Hebrew *naqab*, which emphasizes the past repair of past harms. The image here is less of God out to smite people than it is God making amends and reparations for the Israelites’ suffering. If you’re familiar with the practices of restorative justice, that’s sort of the idea here. *Naqab* isn’t about punishing people. It’s not about getting back at the Babylonians for what they did in the past. It’s about healing the wounds that the Israelites have experienced and creating a new way for them to live.

And “terrible recompense” comes from the Hebrew *gemûl elohim*. *Elohim*, you may have guessed, is “God.” *Gemûl* is “dealings” or “act.” The emphasis here is that God’s act is ultimately redemptive, salvific, and, to use an awkward phrase, “meaning making.”

Put that altogether and you get a rather different vision. “Here is your God. He will come to liberate you and bring justice. Yes, trust that God will act. God will come and save you.”

The vision that Isaiah gives us is not of a reversal that puts the Israelites back on top and sends the Babylonians into exile for a change. It’s a transformation of all God’s creation. “The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.”

See, this is a short reading. But it does a lot. It acknowledges evil and the powers of death. It gives us a promise that God has and will act for us. It gives us a vision of what God’s promised future looks like. And it also gives us answer to our fear about meaninglessness. Isaiah suggests that we imbue life with meaning not when we try to make others feel the pain we feel, but when we trust God’s promise of renewal and work for God’s justice to be present on earth as it is in heaven. We find meaning not simply by reacting to the past actions of others but by trusting in God’s promised future.

That’s a critically important thing for us to remember. One of the ways that we redeem our pain and suffering, one of the ways that we give it meaning, is by allowing it to open us to the pain and suffering, the loss and grief of others. This is true for public life, of course. One of the great failures of civic imagination after 9/11 was that so many sought meaning in exceptionalism and nationalism, ways of taking power over other people, rather than solidarity and accompaniment, ways of entering into relationship alongside others.

And the same is true for our private losses as well. We give our grief meaning by connecting it with the losses of others. Not by trying to make others feel the pain we feel, but by helping us come to some greater knowledge of the suffering of others. To use Kunzru’s image, the way we redeem our grief is by joining others at their windows. To hear the stories. To accompany others along the way. To be the broken body of Christ for a broken world.

This is probably less reassuring than we would have it be. No promise of life without suffering. No assurance that our best intentions guarantee successful outcomes. No cathartic comeuppance for our enemies. No promise that death doesn’t exist. We are still dust, and to dust we shall return.

But it gives us a way to live with integrity. It reminds us that life and death are never without meaning. We never live and die in vain because we always live and die in Christ.

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