

**HOPE BEYOND OUR SORROW**  
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September 11, 2016  
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28**

*I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void. I looked to the heavens, and they had no light. The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy. Take joy! Fra Giovanni, 1513*

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It's true. More often than not we should "take joy." But sometimes we need to take the gloom and let it be for awhile.

Today is a sorrowful day. I saw it coming and so I allowed myself to steep in sorrow this week. It's one thing to wallow in grief; it's something else to steep, like a tea bag, in the sorrow of the world. It's good for the soul and just may open us to deep healing.

Today is the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deadliest single attack against the United States on its homeland. More than 3000 killed in New York City, Arlington, VA and Shanksville, PA. Today we grieve with those who will never get over the loss of loved one.

For many this is a day of unmitigated sorrow. Will they ever find hope beyond their sorrow?

And if that wasn't sorrow enough, this week I started reading biologist E. O. Wilson's book, *Half Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life* which includes a long litany of extinct species never to be replaced as well as a long list of endangered species such as the rhino, endangered due to poaching and habitat destruction. We could say that is a form of terrorism against our beloved Mother Earth.

And that brings us to the Old Testament lesson from the so-called weeping prophet Jeremiah who steeped himself in the suffering and sorrow of his people 600 years before the birth of Jesus.

*I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; I looked to the heavens, and saw no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking. The hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all. All the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins.*

For many this is a day of unmitigated sorrow. *All the birds have fled from their world. The fruitful earth nears death.* Will we ever find hope beyond our sorrow?

Today we not only mourn the lives lost on Sept. 11 but also the golden opportunity lost, an opportunity to respond to violence in a fresh and disarming way. For a brief moment we had a choice: *revenge or reconciliation*. For a moment a door opened.

Our national leaders chose revenge.

It's true: armed forces can win a brief respite from violence, a pause in combat; but in the end violence breeds more violence. It's the message of the cross. Let the violence stop here. Revenge kills; forgiveness heals. The cross stands like an open door.

Fifteen years ago, we lost a golden opportunity. But, then, we are a young species and a young nation with a lot yet to learn. Still, it's sad.

This week I've allowed myself to steep in sorrow—not just the sorrow of 9/11 and the planet's demise but even more sorrow close by and personal.

Some of us in and round this parish have an ocean of grief that will never go away. Many will go to their graves with a broken heart. Some of us are living with aggressive cancer, staring at an uncertain future. Some of us have adult children adrift, searching for something they can't find. Some are ensnared by pernicious addictions.

Some of us have lost jobs and are on the verge of losing our homes. Some have siblings a step away from jail or prison. Some have siblings tormented by mental illness. Some have aging parents, fragile and vulnerable, hanging by a thread.

Someone is transitioning from one gender to another, scared and nearly alone without family support. One of us lost a child after 22 weeks. Stillborn. And then there's Yvonne's grandson Bennett, battling for his life since March.

So much sorrow. Where is hope to be found?

And that brings us to the gospel lesson for today.

Why do you spend so much time with losers, ask the critics of Jesus? You know, they said, some people just don't belong in decent society. They're hopelessly lost. Jesus, being a good rabbi, answered the question with a story, actually three. (Luke 15)

The first was this.

Once upon a time a shepherd had a hundred sheep. One came up missing. So the shepherd left the 99 behind and searched all day and all night until he found the one, trapped, scared and wounded. The shepherd brought the one back to the fold in his arms and then invited everyone to come and celebrate with him. Big party. The missing one made the flock whole again.

The second was this.

Once upon a time a woman had 10 precious coins. One came up missing. She tore the whole house apart until she found it and then invited the whole neighborhood to celebrate with her. A big party for the found missing one now made her collection whole again.

Whole again. Get it?

The third was this.

Once upon a time a father had two sons. One went off and blew his entire inheritance and then came home begging for a job. The father said, welcome home my son and then invited the whole village to a big homecoming party. Unfortunately, the father had forgotten to invite the other son who had stayed at home with him and was now out working in the fields.

Suddenly, the father realized his mistake. He opened the door and begged his now resentful son to come in and make the broken family whole again. One inside; the other outside.

And that's where the story ends. With the door left open.

Just when we think that story is about one family, we see it's about the whole broken world, about ethnic, racial, gender and religious divisions and resentments.

Can we see the open door?

There are many reasons to give up and lose hope these days. But there's at least one reason not to give up. And that is this:

We are loved by an unending love, a love that does not quit when the day is long or the night is cold. We are loved by an unending love that will not quit when fear haunts our bodies. We are loved by an unending love that does not quit when the racial divide is ugly and wide. We are loved by an unending love that does not quit when war, hunger and poverty seem endless.

There are many reasons to give up and lose hope these days. But there's at least one reason not to give up. And that is this: Love stands forever holding open the door to the healing of our deepest ills.