

Preaching from ground zero

reviewed by [Mark Horst](#) in the [September 11, 2002](#) issue

Sermons are like fresh vegetables: best consumed close to the garden. They tend to lose their taste when packaged for the mass market. These sermons collected from the days after September 11 were harvested and brought to the table quickly, so nobody had time to pretty them up. They have not fallen far from the vine. We can sense the press of the moment in the quivering voices and the stammering eloquence.

For me, the sermons that work best here are the ones that are rough and incomplete; that have jagged edges; that fail to summarize; that fail to comfort; that don't bring closure. The most helpful to my soul are those that give the heart a place to throw itself in the dust and mourn; that give the soul a place to stand and shout praises anyhow; that give our knees a chance to kneel; that give the tongue a chance to proclaim and to complain; that give tears a chance to fall.

On the Sunday after September 11 our sanctuary was groaning with an Easter-sized congregation. I was moved to see that when the foundations shake, people still turn to the church for sanctuary. Whether they were seeking the face of God or not, they were seeking. Whether they came with understanding or not, they were seeking. And what an encouragement and a real delight to know that when people get hungry, they think of the food they might find in the church.

Some came that Sunday looking for something extraordinary. I know I infuriated at least one of my parishioners by confessing at the outset of the service that I wasn't sure what to say about all that had happened and that I was filled with every imaginable emotion. I said that our congregation, which is racially diverse and which talks a lot about racial reconciliation, was called to witness to the gospel of reconciliation in a time like this and to stand against all forms of hatred and intolerance. But of course that was only one of many things I might have said. That parishioner had been looking for a service focused on national unity in a time of crisis. I could have imagined that too. But it's not the emphasis I chose.

As I prayed that day I chose Paul's word to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3) about foundations and the fires that will disclose how we've built on them. "The work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done." I asked the church to look within: "When we look over our life, what will last? Of all the things we do, what are the important ones? Of all the things we say, of all the plans we make, the dreams we dream, what is it that will last? What about what I do today will be an eternal testimony in heaven?"

There is a great deal of theological and stylistic diversity in the sermons collected in these volumes. Some of them I would have liked to preach myself. Some of them I wouldn't. Some of them are too personal. Some are too argumentative. Some of them I take issue with. But for the most part they're doing their best to point to the living Lord who sits high but looks low.

9.11.01 presents the responses of a wide range of African-American leaders, from Michael Eric Dyson to T. D. Jakes. Dyson challenges his listeners with a personal experience: "I was in Boston Monday night, could've been on that plane Tuesday morning. Some of my friends and family said, 'God blessed you.' And I said, 'Yeah, hold on, I am blessed by God, but not because I was spared.' What kind of theology is that? So the people who went down to their deaths were not blessed? Blessing is not determined by possession of material wealth or even by your life. Blessing is determined by your relationship with God. . . . Blessing is determined by your intimate contact with the Almighty. Whether you're dead or alive, you are blessed, if you have that."

Delores Carpenter comes at the gospel out of her own struggle with cancer and then suggests that all preaching should look over Jordan's chilly stream: "You know we ought to preach every sermon as though it is our last sermon, and we ought to listen to every sermon as though it is our last sermon, because Jesus said, 'Get ready.' . . . And somebody this morning needs to respond. Drag your emptiness. Drag your tiredness. Drag your powerlessness. Drag it on to Jesus so that he can sit you down and he can serve you."

Gardner Taylor makes a case for the African-American voice at such a moment: "Minority people are now peculiarly and, I believe, providentially endowed by God to speak to the nation and say that pride brings ruin and that this country must look to

reconciliation. Retaliation, very well, but reconciliation must be our ultimate aim unless we want to risk utter ruin. We will never bomb hatred out of the world."

Shaken Foundations begins close to ground zero with a sermon from Trinity Episcopal in the financial district, and it includes remarks by President Bush and Billy Graham at the National Cathedral. "Yes," says Graham, "our nation has been attacked, buildings destroyed, lives lost. But now we have a choice: whether to implode and disintegrate emotionally and spiritually as a people and a nation, or whether we choose to become stronger through all of this struggle, to rebuild on a solid foundation. . . . And that foundation is our trust in God."

The collection moves from the cathedral into mainline pulpits. Barbara Lundblad offers a powerful confession from the chapel at Union Seminary: "I have not been able to gather the fragments into any meaningful whole. I've turned to the Psalms to cry and rage, and I've stood with Jesus weeping as he looks out over the city. But it was the fragments that led me to John's Gospel, to the story of broken bread and fish. . . . Fragments-that's all I have today, but I have been assured that fragments are something rather than nothing."

Restoring Faith includes Islamic and Jewish responses along with those of Unitarians and Trinitarians. Unitarian pastor Forrest Church eloquently counsels his congregation: "Though the future as we knew it is no longer, we now know that the very worst of which human beings are capable can bring out the very best. From this day forward, it becomes our common mission to be mindful of both aspects of our nature: to counter the former while aspiring to the latter; to face the darkness and yet redeem the day."

John Shelby Spong, a true believer in doctrinal revisionism, pleads his thesis: "The theistic God, that supernatural parent figure who lives beyond the sky, and who has the power to intervene in order to protect us, may well be our own creation, designed to speak to [our] anxiety. When tragedies occur and divine protection is not forthcoming, the heart faces the hysteria of our self-conscious humanity and we struggle to restore our supernatural theistic God to believability." This may seem a bit argumentative for a time of tragedy. (I'm not inviting Spong to preach my funeral.)

But listen to Father Daniel W. Murphy, whose brother was killed in the World Trade Center and who speaks of peace out of his personal pain: "Life is too precious to be consumed by anger and hatred. My brother's life is too precious for me to be ruled by anger, hatred, and feelings of deep revenge."

Where Was God on September 11? represents a theologically more cohesive and largely peace-church perspective. Christy J. Waltersdorff calls us to "seek a new path, a different path. A path of justice grounded in our faith in Jesus Christ, grounded in our hope in a faithful God." Quoting Gandhi, she reminds us that "an eye for an eye just makes everybody blind."

More a collection of brief essays and letters than sermons, the book also includes a diverse international response under the heading "voices from our global family." From South Africa, Peter Storey denounces the Washington Cathedral for inviting the president into its pulpit. "In the service at the National Cathedral . . . the church did not help President Bush, nor did it further the gospel. It was sad to see the church (and other religious traditions) laid so supinely at the disposal of Caesar and his chaplains. . . . When uniforms and flags crowd God's house, it is hard for God's word to be heard."

You may want to eat carefully here. Some of the product may have been ripe yesterday and may be a bit over the edge today. Some may have been plucked a bit early. But I prefer some unevenness if it means I can get closer to what's real.

Preaching isn't ever done once and for all. Sermons, like preachers, are mostly forgotten. This is as it should be. Because what God is doing with these words--these gestures of faithfulness and searching, these sighs formed in words, these groanings, these broken pieces of wisdom and testimony, these little lights--is watering some seed, wearing away some sharp stone, pruning some vine. Ultimately this is the work of the triune God who saves and who sanctifies and who reigns for evermore.