

**THE PLANE AND THE PEOPLE**  
Parkside Lutheran Church – February 15, 2009  
The Reverend John A. Buerk

The night of the plane crash I was not watching television. So I was surprised when I put the radio on the next morning and heard WBFO reporting a serious fire, but it wasn't until I took the dog out and opened the paper that I knew what had happened. I started to cry.

It wasn't because I knew who had died and recognized familiar names - although Jill pointed out that whenever we have been on that flight we have met two or three people we knew. No, people we know weren't among the dead – but the people who died were coming to my city and most were neighbors in a way – and I cried.

Saturday, I was bothered by the New York Times reporter who wrote about the crash – he said: **It was perhaps not the most glamorous of destinations, or the most luxurious of flights: a turboprop plane pushing through wind and snow and fog to an ailing Rust Belt city.**

I guess he was thinking that this wasn't the kind of place that people of importance would be flying to, and so as bad as the 50 deaths were, those who died could have been much more important people going to a much more important destination. The reporter could have perhaps not tried so hard to sound flippant and I suppose - in his own mind important.

I doubt that Tim Russert would have phrased the scenario the same way. I doubt that the doctors at Millard Fillmore who developed the technique for neutralizing brain aneurisms without cutting a hole in your head, or the 10,000 patients who have had the procedure done here, would think of their coming into Buffalo as coming to a “dying city”.

I doubt that Lukas Foss or Joanne Filletta considered a flight coming into Buffalo as a decidedly unglamorous destination.

I know that the musicians who have performed at Holy Trinity in the Ramsi Tick series – people like Gil Schaham, or Pincus Zuckerman, or Joshua Bell, or Emmanuel Axe didn't think that they were performing here because their careers had faded – in fact I talked to them, and they all lauded the sound of their music in Holy Trinity's venue.

I doubt that the doctor at Roswell who developed the test for prostate cancer, or Thomas Dougherty - a world class scientist – lauded by the New York Times – would like to live somewhere else - with the possible exception of this past January.

And I doubt that the crash victim who led the team of those who lost relatives in 9/11, or the woman victim from U/B who chronicled the Rwanda genocide thought that this flight was the flight to no-where'sville.

No, this was a significant group of people who died because they were husbands and wives and parents and children and brothers and sisters and friends and lovers – and when I read what happened, I cried.

I haven't heard anyone saying that this was God's will – thank God! You do wonder, however, about the fact that this plane that was consumed in a fireball landed in a neighborhood with houses only feet away from each other, and only one house was destroyed. A house with three people in it and one ran out the door when she saw the plane coming at her, and her daughter who was in the attic slid off the roof as the house came down – and they both had only minor injuries. But the man in the house – the husband and the father died – and the wife and the daughter cried.

I have heard the word miracle mentioned in conjunction with the limited loss of property and life on the ground. And, there are people who think in terms of miracles. My own take on miracles is that there are a lot of close calls in life, and the ones that come close to taking a life but don't are the ones that are called miracles. Which is why only one house being destroyed and one person being killed in a plane crash that killed forty-nine people cries out for miracle status.

Of course, that implies that a force greater than ourselves intervened. But you can't really allow for intervention because only one person on the ground died. If you want divine intervention I suppose you could say the plane crash was destined to happen, but as is the case when civilians are killed during an air strike on a military target – the one on the ground who was killed was collateral damage. And that thought can make you cry.

The point is, every life has value, and every death should have its sorrow- maybe not its explanation, but certainly its sorrow.

So here we are in little Buffalo at the center of the world's news, and it was only some freezing rain that did it – not three feet of snow.

Another instance of death is in the news - the 38-year-old Italian woman who had been in a coma for 17 years was removed from life support. The Prime Minister of Italia calls her death murder. Remember when Terry Schivo was allowed to die after years in a vegetative state, and even the Pope tried to intervene because he said there was hope. And then the autopsy was performed, and the results showed that Terry had been dead a long time – only machines kept the air pumping in and out of her lungs. Her heart wanted to stop – but sentiment wouldn't let it.

And of course there are those who are old and tired and, sometimes, in pain and they want to go to sleep and so they stop eating as my great grandmother did when she was 98.

There are a number of things worse than death. Still when it happens we cry.

There is a wonderful Jewish story from the Talmud about the exodus. The waters have been parted and Israelites have gotten to the other shore, and as the Egyptians are crossing, the water engulfs them and they drown. God was looking down on the scene surrounded by his heavenly hosts. As the Egyptians were dying there was much cheering in heaven, but in the midst of the cheers one of the angels looked up at God and saw a tear in his eye.

When he asked God, "Why?" God said, "Remember, even the Egyptians are my children!"