

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – February 15, 2009  
The Rev. Eric O. Olsen

Why? Why flight 3407.... Why that night? Why in Clarence Center? Why that house? The technical reason will be revealed in the days ahead for sure, but why was it allowed to happen? Why did God allow it to happen? Where was God? Where is God? These questions may remain unspoken, but they are thought; and as people of faith we wrestle with them.

The Old Testament and Gospel lessons for today declare that God chooses to make us clean or whole. (Here I retold the stories found in both readings.) In both the cultures of The Northern Kingdom during the time of the prophet Elijah and during Jesus' ministry in first century Palestine, most people ascribed to a "theology of glory". (And the truth be told, many still ascribe to such theology!) If you were victorious in battle, as Naaman was against the Northern Kingdom, it was widely believed that God was with you. This is why the reading begins with the acknowledgement that, "God was with Naaman..." If you were rich, God blessed you and if you were ill, that illness was due to sin. Both stories may begin with Glory theology, yet they challenge this theology and what emerges is a theology of Grace. In the case of Naaman, it is a prisoner of war, a slave girl and her faith that leads to his wholeness. It is humility that overcomes hubris, and love that conquers disease. In the Gospel, the leper is bold and challenging. He challenges the assumption held by many of his contemporaries that God choose to afflict him with the disease. His words to Jesus, acknowledge Jesus' power and Lordship and pushes Jesus to clearly state God's intentions for that power. Jesus' words, "I do Choose" are words of Grace and love. Jesus' touch of an untouchable, his willingness to become intimately involved in the suffering of humanity is that grace-filled intention made visible.

The problem is that the world contains both intentional evil and random affliction. When intentional evil is loosed we question God's tolerance and when random affliction occurs we question God's presence.

But as we will see God's love is more powerful and uniting than any intentional evil or random affliction that seeks to fracture and separate us.

Every body knew of someone, was connected to the victims in some way...

As Lutherans we instantly are moved with pity for members of Zion in Clarence Center and their pastors who worship a little more than a stone throws away from the crash site. I went to bed early on Thursday after watching the 10:00 news and missed the news of the crash, or I probably would have made my way to the site that fiery night. But when I did arrive, that morning, after first calling and checking in with all of our members that lived in Clarence, and speaking with Daniel Culross who nearly took that flight, after leaving a message for Pastor's Bigner and Melville of Zion Clarence Center to tell them I was on my way, and leaving a message with the secretary for St. Paul's Williamsville for Pastor's Wendy Buckley and Tim Madsen who were caring for the Johnston family. Kevin Johnston was on the flight. I called Pat Ulrich, our prayer chain coordination and asked her to keep Kevin's wife Kathy and their three daughters, Melissa, Amanda and

Kelsey in prayer as well as all of the rescue workers and clergy. I have also since heard that a relative of one of the employees at Lord of Life in Depew was also a passenger on the plane.

My Personal connections vary. I have traveled as a passenger on that flight more than a couple of times. In fact, I believe I took that flight up to Buffalo during my discernment process leading up to my call as pastor to Holy Trinity. My father just took that flight when he came to visit during Luke's birthday at the end of October.

As I stood on the sacred ground of the crash site and breathed in the fumes of the remnants of jet fuel, I spoke with some of the first responders who acknowledged they remembered that smell from 9/11. I too remembered that smell and was glad that I was not the only one on the scene with that trigger being pulled. And so we were connected in our collective feeling of helplessness again brought on by the smell of tragedy and loss.

I also remember sitting around the conference table at Human Rights Watch located on the 34<sup>th</sup> floor of the Empire State Bldg. as the representative for the Lutheran World Federation with Allison Des Forges. Her work on genocide, her passion to bring healing to a broken world and her down to earth demeanor, made her a person that everyone would want to know. Allison was like so many of those precious children of God on the plane....

And you will read the names and watch the stories unfold and you will find your own personal connections and you will be sad. Don't turn away. Get to know them all not as a voyeur, but as a brother or sister to them. Pray for their families and rediscover the connectedness of the humanity we share. In a disposable world note the precious gift of life and the fragility of it as well. Now is a time for grieving- this is true, but it is not grief without hope.

After making it through a myriad of roadblocks thanks to my New York State Fire Chaplain's ID that I pulled from a dusty bag in my basement, I arrived at the Clarence Center Fire Department, only 8 houses from the crash site. I entered and soon met with Pastors Randy and Steve who were glad to have some additional support. We spoke with the volunteer firefighters, EMTs, FBI, NTSB, and members of the County Medical Examiner's Office asking them how they were doing, sometimes just getting an "Ok" other times getting an "I'll tell you tomorrow" or "Can we talk later?". What we did hear more and more was, "Thank you for being here."

On Friday afternoon I stood for several hours at the operational command at the front line with Father Joe Baine, the chief Chaplain for Erie County, we wanted to be there when they began removing the physical remains and bringing them to the temporary morgue, to say a blessing and to offer some hope to those who had the sacred task. Father Joe was called away and I stayed and prayed until they suspended removal for the day. Ours was a ministry of presence and you the people of Holy Trinity were there with me, each and every one of you.

During a time of chaos and pain in London during WWII, Leslie Dixon Weatherhead, the Methodist pastor of The City Temple in London that was firebombed into rubble and who was known as the symbolic head of the prestigious Oxford Group wrote, The Will of God.

This “Doctor of souls” as he is referred in a recent biography of his life, understood the will of God to have three expressions, intentional will, circumstantial will and ultimate will.

God’s Intentional will is that God intends good for us, who he creates in the divine image. God is not a killer and therefore when a person dies we are mistaken if we rattle off that throw away phrase- Its God’s will! That is not to say that God does not take his suffering children home.... But that underscoring God’s intentional will is pure goodness. God did not will down flight 3407. He did not will the pain and grief of loss to be felt by so many of His beloved children.

Circumstantial Will- Given the brokenness (or random affliction as the result of the freedom of the will according to theologian Simon Weil) and the evil in the world, God’s circumstantial will shows us what God can do with and through that evil and brokenness. Like the cross, the evil intention of the cross was death and shame and God transformed it into the ultimate sign of hope. This crash and the horror of it all, the gruesome reality of children of God and their divine image being literally shattered moves us to cry and wail- if not outside, well then most certainly inside.

In the midst of this nightmare into the Clarence firehouse enters a young mother and her two grade school daughters. They come to the accountability station where all of the firefighters must report before going up to the line and after coming off, and they tell the Ladies Auxiliary representative at the desk that they made cookies for the firemen. About six heart shaped cookies were in a clear container the littlest girl place upon the table and then she said in a small voice, “I wrote on them too.” On the cookies were the words “We Love you”.

So many people in the immediate and larger community have been saying that to each other and to the families of the victims during these last few days. God is indeed allowing his will for healing and wholeness to prevail in the midst of pain and loss.

Finally, God’s “ultimate will” is found in the resurrection of Jesus, which confirms that nothing can get in the way of our redemption. Those who perished and who were broken will be restored to a glorious state in Our Lord’s presence. Just like Naaman who was made whole again through God’s mercy and love. Just as Jesus displays God’s will by stating that He chooses to make the leper clean and whole. We know that God wants to touch us with His healing touch and that he will use the whole body of Christ to make it happen. Just as a servant girl told Naaman about the prophet who could bring healing and wholeness to a seemingly hopeless situation, we, servants of our Lord Jesus, have good news to share, even in the midst of this horror- especially in the midst of this horror.

There is life even after death. There is life for a community rattled and disoriented... there is life for those who are deep in the pit of profound grief, there is life for the 50 beloved children of God in God's presence. It is God's will that they live forever in his presence. It is a will underscored by the cross of Christ and the empty grave. It is a will that is full of goodness, healing, transformation and resurrection.

It is the "...Old, Old Story of Jesus and His Love..." This is the story of a God who loves beyond brokenness, beyond death, beyond hopelessness. This story of Jesus and his love we can proclaim - and yes even sing on a day such as this - Especially on a day such as this!

Amen.

(The hymn that followed was "I Love to Tell The Story")