

# A Reflection in Memorial of 9/11/2001

From one chaplain's perspective



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There is a piece of marble on my bookshelf; it is a trapezoidal shape, perhaps three to four inches from end to end. Broken and scratched, with rough edges; insignificant really, made special only in that it was a gift from a distraught fireman one cold night in January 2002. Special in that it came from the World Trade Center disaster site.

As I handle the cool, no longer polished and pristine stone I am transported to my first trip to the disaster site, to serve as one of what would become hundreds of chaplains in the relief effort out of St. Paul's Chapel in lower Manhattan. From the moment we stepped off the #5 train at Fulton Street that late September morning, we were assailed by the pungent smell of death in the air. As we came out of the station and above ground the grit, soot and ash accosted our senses, stinging our eyes, our noses, our throats; how were those working on the pile withstanding this onslaught I wondered? We were still blocks away from the site and several of the volunteers I was shepherding were already overcome. This is the first of many trips that would frequently include volunteers from both Christ Episcopal Church in Poughkeepsie, NY and Trinity Episcopal Church in Fishkill, NY.

We press on toward St. Paul's, ash is everywhere, debris, glass, the contents of shops, shoes, handbags, all litter the streets and sidewalks. At the barrier we show our passports and licenses, a master list is consulted for our names; finally we are allowed through and the Chapel is just ahead, the outer gates lined with port-a-potties, strewn with flowers and pictures of loved ones desperately sought. We are checked again at the gate of the Chapel itself and finally enter this sacred space. I look around the Chapel in astonishment, a beehive of activity, still not fully organized and yet meeting a desperate need with grace; as though the very structure of the Chapel itself was yearning to embrace and protect people ravaged by the onslaught of evil. There are tables filled with small refreshments; gum, lozenges, Chap Stick, eye drops, batteries. Others with larger offerings; socks, jackets,

sweatshirts and especially fresh boots, food from some of the finest restaurants in Manhattan fill the back tables 24 hours per day. My gaze lingers on a podiatrist caring for the war torn feet of the rescue workers from his station in the pew where once our first President, George Washington, worshiped during Sunday Services in this space. I imaging he would be most proud of its present use, prouder still of those who had been continuously present since the dreadful terrorist attacks took place; the firefighters and police offices of New York.

As we worked our way to the back of the Chapel, I wandered over to the open rear door, in front of me was the cemetery and beyond the still burning WTC Building #7. It was barely possible to discern the paths through the cemetery, the ash was nearly to my knee and as I walked to the rear fence – a walk not possible in the weeks to follow – I thought of the Burial Office; “We are but dust and to dust we shall return. All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.” I stood on the hallowed ground of graves of those who had gone before me and gazed into the frightening darkness of evil’s face and prayed that God’s Promise to Abraham of abundant life for the faithful had not been lost. I now knew how the women at the foot of the Cross at Golgotha felt, their desperation that all hope had been lost, swept away in death and destruction was my own despairing. Knee deep in ash, I prayed that God would make God’s presence known in the midst of this tragedy, this senseless loss of human life, that God might console the inconsolable and strengthen the heroic workers out on that pile.

The organizers are calling for my attention, would I please get the volunteers settled so they could be oriented to their task of the next 24 hours, as soon as they are in their places a different organizer calls out to me, “chaplain, you need to come with me.” After being fitted with a mask and a hard hat and filling my pockets with chap stick, band-aides and eye drops I was told my place would be out on the pile. As I worked my way down the

side streets and around to the west side of the disaster area to the entrance the tears in my eyes were caused by more than the smoke and soot, how I wondered, would I be able to enter into this place? What could I possibly offer to assuage the torment these rescue workers were experiencing. They were searching through a four story pile of burning rubble for their friends, colleagues and family. I admit to having never felt so inadequate, so small, so ill equipped for the task before me, I prayed God would fill this extraordinarily leaky vessel with the love and caring necessary to offer a moment of God's peace and hope in the face of despairing.

From the entrance I see a road of sorts and flattened areas to support trucks and cranes, I pause, to get my bearings, looking around the smoldering site at various groups of workers trying to determine where to begin. But, there is no time for such loitering, a young policeman comes rushing up, "This way chaplain, they've just recovered someone's remains, you need to accompany them to the morgue!" In the weeks and months to come the Red Cross would assign specific chaplains to this task, but in these early hours, whichever chaplain was available would minister to this need. I go, speaking words inscribed on my heart from our Book of Common Prayer; "Gracious God, here is one of your servants, a child of your own making, a sheep of your own fold, we pray you welcome them into the household of God and that they rest now in your embrace with all your saints. Torn from this earthly life in tragedy and terror let them now through your mercy rest in peace. Amen." As I walk I realize all work has stopped, the workers are turned toward the procession of a fellow human beings remains in silent, respectful admiration; firefighters, police, iron workers, crane operators, Verizon workers, sanitation workers, all, everyone is transfixed, mournful, heartbroken. Shaken, I made my way around the north end of the WTC site and back to St. Paul's.

On another visit to St. Paul's, the volunteer's had begun serving dinner on the large front porch, one man waiting in line was visibly upset, "how are you," I asked. "Fine" he began to answer, then changed his mind, "Not so good really" as his knees began to give out and he stifled a sob. I took hold of his elbow and asked if he'd like to sit for a moment, "yes" he said. I grabbed a bottle of water for him and found a place to sit just a little removed from the crowd. He was an iron worker he told me, from the mid-west, as a veteran of the first Gulf War he'd felt compelled to pick up and set off for NY before the sun had even set on the day of the attacks. But, he said, nothing had prepared him for what he would experience here. He calmed as we talked, gaining a tentative hold on the emotion that threatened to overwhelm him, he'd feel better he said, if he could just talk to his wife. "Here," said my husband from somewhere behind us and handing him my cell phone, "talk all you want," I moved away to give him some privacy. In time the cell phone was returned and he returned to the task to which he had been called.

The weeks pressed on, the mission of the workers transitioned sadly from one of rescue to one of recovery, gradually the vast smoldering pile became a cold damp pit and still the dreadful task wore on. I arrived on the site one afternoon to an extraordinary amount of excited murmuring; "have you seen it?" asked one of the volunteers. "Seen what," I asked. "The cross!" "The cross? No." That morning as the front of Building #5 was pulled away the workers were amazed to find two steel I-beams, in the shape of a cross extending from the top of a pile of debris. To complete the phenomenal picture a piece of insulation had dropped across the horizontal beam. This imagery was instantly recognizable to every Christian on the site; the empty cross, a familiar symbol of the Resurrection of Jesus; of the triumph of life over death. I was struck by the change of energy on the site, by the clear lifting of a cloud of darkness and a breaking through of light. The cross was moved to a prominent place on the site and I hope that those who do not seek the Holy through Christ were not offended, but rather

recognized that particular cross as the renewal of hope in a world too long shrouded in fear.

But still, I have not told you how I happen to have this piece of marble that prompted these memories. As I said, it was a cold night in January; the work was less frantic now, the workers deeply fatigued. St. Paul's was a quieter place, still vital, still a place of respite and relief, food, sleep, a massage, a smile, an ear, a prayer to be sure, but the Chapel reflected the needs of the workers, particularly the firefighters and the police; their need to reconnect with their humanity, their heart, their hope for the world to see a new day beyond this torturous task. The Chapel was filled with gifts of hope, expressions of support and signs of solidarity from all over the world. St. Paul's Chapel stood out as place of hope, of faith and of compassion.

Into this atmosphere walked a firefighter, "Hey chaplain," he said "can I talk to you for a minute?" "Of course" I said and after we grabbed coffee we found a place to sit and he leveled a steady, angry gaze at me. "Where," he demanded "was God when the planes hit the Towers?" It seemed to him that God could not have been anywhere in the vicinity or God would have stopped this tragedy from happening. I looked into that mans eyes and saw all the fear, anger, rage, betrayal, disappointment, horror and grief that had been building for months. I suspected his devotion to the work at hand had kept him too pre-occupied to ask this question earlier and now the emotions were erupting from the depths of his soul with all the force of a major volcano. As I studied him I really wished I had some easy answer for him, some pat response that would make him just feel better, be reassured and restored. But, I had no such answers and his disillusionment with his perception of the Divine was so seriously shattered that no simple response would suffice.

"Good question," I finally say, "Where do you think God was?"

“Well, He wasn’t here, that’s for sure! I thought God was supposed to be everywhere!”

His comments hang in the air as I try to figure out what to say next, I think it best to find out what he believes about God, so I ask, “Where do you see God in the world?”

He thinks for a long time, in the silence his posture changes, I watched as he wrestles to make sense of the truth he had grown up believing, in the face of the evil right in front of us. I was witness to his powerful internal struggle and I see his bravado lessen, his eyes soften, his anger dissipate a bit and finally he quietly answers, “In my daughters smile and laughter.”

Gently I ask when he was home last to hear his daughter laugh and to see her smile; about six weeks he said, six long weeks. He’d refused his furlough out of the pit to let someone else go, who needed it more, he said.

“Go home,” I whisper. “Go home and remind yourself what life looks like again.”

We leave together to go back over to the disaster site, as we round the corner to the entrance on the west side we watch as the next shift of firefighters has line up in parade formation to enter the site. My companion nudges me and with a weak, but determined smile says, “The saints go marching in.”

“Yes,” I say “yes they do and may God Bless you and the work you all do here.”

Later that night he came by the Chapel again, with a piece of marble in his hand. “Thanks chaplain,” he said as he placed the marble in my hand, “I’m going home for a week in the morning.”

We all had moments of rage and doubt, when the evil that confronted us from that pit threatened to wrest away our faith in God's redeeming grace. In the end the empty Cross won, life was victorious over death. We brought to the foot of that steel I-beam Cross our broken hearts, our bruised spirits and God reconciled us to Godself in healing and hatred was transformed by the outpouring of love.

"O death where is your sting. O grave, where is your victory."  
"You are dust and to dust you shall return. All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. Give rest, O Christ, to your servants with your saints, where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting."