Naming the terror: The human heart and the Spirit of God

by Jon Gunnemann in the September 26, 2001 issue

Our response to human horror and tragedy moves inexorably outward as if through concentric circles, beginning in the gut and the heart, moving to the head, and finally taking shape in the form of shared social responses. Planes exploding into buildings, bodies falling from the top floors, people running and screaming before an avalanche of debris, dust and smoke: There is first a symbiosis of suspended belief and identifying empathy, a “this isn’t happening” reaction combined with a sense of the terror and chaos experienced by the victims, an unreflective knowledge that this could be me, it could be you. Onlookers turning away, covering their eyes: That’s the gut response of tears and churning nausea, of too much to bear.

Then there is a movement of sympathy and imagination, a bit of distance, that’s no less terrifying: What if one of the victims is someone you know and love? A friend or a member of your family? That’s the heart, aided by the head, aching with pain and anxiety, driving us to telephones, to a desperate search for reassurance. And then the head tries to take control in an attempt to understand what is actually happening: Where, when, who, how? we ask. But finally the heart and the head come together in the question Why? And when we try to answer this question, we move toward the outer ring of the social imagination that orders our common lives.

We want to name the horror, give it meaning, domesticate it in the narrative of our lives. The search for meaning has been under way for days now, by the media, by government officials, by people on the street, all groping to recast a horror that rained from the skies into something we can understand. There are the adjectives and adverbs: outrage, infamy, cowardly terrorism; the metaphors: an attack on freedom, an attack on democracy, an act of war, an apocalyptic event. We search for historical allusions: Pearl Harbor has topped the list, the only other attack on American soil, but one New Yorker with a larger heart added Hiroshima. And finally, there is blame and the promise of retribution, the naming of the cause as evil with the solemn promise to punish it.

The president of the United States has now given official sanction to some of these interpretive framings: the attack was an “act of war”—that’s necessary official

language, connecting his responsibilities to the social meanings of the U.S. Constitution and the NATO treaty. We have seen a new kind of enemy who is dangerous and works from the shadows—that is a metaphorical and reasonably accurate interpretation of new forms of threat to national security both in the U.S. and elsewhere, inviting perhaps a rethinking of what security means in the modern world. We are engaged in a “monumental struggle between good and evil” and make no mistake about it, “good will win.” That is cosmology, and comes close to a neat reversal and mimicry of the demonizing mentality that flew those planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Blame and the desire for retribution are natural first responses to the pain and suffering of innocent people caused by a willful act, apparently plotted over months and carried out with no evidence of sorrow or feelings of common humanity. And offering a narrative promising a courageous struggle against an evil act arises understandably from the sworn duty of elected officials to defend innocent people; it rallies a nation suddenly proven vulnerable; and it helps do justice to the courage of those who have worked heroically to save lives in the midst of the horror. But the language of the battle between good and evil can give rise to inappropriate or disproportionate military response; and, even if unintentionally, it feeds the all-too-widespread social imagination in this country that sees Muslims as fanatics and enemies of Christianity. It shapes the impulses of the heart toward hatred.

As Christians and as those called to be theologians for the church, we have other language and texts to command our loyalty, to shape our interpretations, to resist demonization, and to form the impulses of our hearts. Some of these we know well enough to recite from memory: Love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, obey the ruling authorities, for they are ordained by God. But some are less well known and less comforting to the heart in pain.

Such is the lectionary text for September 16 from Jeremiah (4:11-12, 22-28), with unsettling historical parallels to our circumstances and a deeply disturbing interpretation of them. Judah has been conquered, Jeremiah is in exile, and the aggressor is Babylon, pagans from the east, hostile to Jewish religion and practice, threatening Judah’s religious and civic culture. Prescient foreshadowings of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden? But does Jeremiah blame Babylon, calling it evil? On the contrary, he blames Judah’s lack of faithfulness to the covenant with Moses, its turn toward a religion based on royalty, its foolishness and stupidity! And he calls for Judah’s repentance.

He does more: Babylon's aggression is portrayed as a hot wind that will blow across Judah, rendering fruitful land barren and laying waste to cities. And then Jeremiah employs his interpretive art, drawing unmistakably on the language of Genesis where the creative spirit gives form and life to the void and the chaos that existed prior to Creation. But this same creative spirit is now a destructive wind. Babylon's aggression is the wind of God, original creative Spirit now in judgment, reducing Judah to rubble and the chaos of pre-Creation because of its unfaithfulness.

Do we dare use this text for our circumstances? The roar of the wind of jets putting cities to ruin, laying waste fields in Pennsylvania—dare we call this the angry spirit of God? It's bad exegesis, isn't it, the way televangelists use biblical texts? Isn't it distressingly close to Saddam Hussein's interpretation of the events ("America is reaping the thorns it has sown")? Doesn't it imply a callous disregard for the deaths and suffering of innocents? And surely it is sacrilegious to suggest that God in some way willed this as punishment, a haunting echo of Nietzsche's not entirely mocking aphorism that the same power that can create can also destroy.

No, we cannot use the text this way, but we also cannot put it aside. Let us concede that Jeremiah was more confident in his reading of God's acts in history than we are, or at least than I am. Let us keep clearly in front of our eyes that to call the tragic events in New York and Washington the judgment or will of God commits us to similar judgments about all human misfortune, personal and collective, trivializing human suffering and rendering God capricious. But while keeping these points in clear focus, let us not miss the prophetic point of Jeremiah: that in the entanglements of human history and conflict, God's creative spirit and will transcend immediate human purposes and perceptions; that almost all human conflict is born out of a history of interactions which on close inspection calls for repentance on all sides; and that in every conflict our hearts and imaginations become ironically connected to the hearts of the real and perceived enemy.

If we listen to Jeremiah this way, we may at least find our hearts reformed through meditation on some disturbing and sobering questions:

Here is one line of questioning for meditation: The attack on two major cities, destroying the twin-spired symbol of American financial power and striking at the center of our military power, laid bare our vulnerability. That a score of men, armed only with knives, could do this tells us that it can be done again. There is an array of alternative weapons, many far more devastating and just as easy to wield. Is it

possible that we have placed too much confidence in our technological, economic and military power, imagining that they could render us invulnerable? Has our proud way of life, with its affluence and waste, given us the illusion of having conquered nature and the vicissitudes of life? Is it possible that we can discover through this event our common lot with the whole of humanity, for the vast majority of whom everyday life is precarious? Might we be led to question American exceptionalism? Might we be willing to cast our lot with the whole of humanity and the whole of God's creation? Might our hearts be shaped in such a way that, whatever we do, we come to understand that our destiny is intimately bound up with the destiny of the whole of creation, and with the limits placed on that creation by the wind of God, God's breath of life?

Another line of questions for our further meditation: How is it that groups of people, created in the image of God, hate the U.S. so much that they could carry out these horrendous acts of violence? Yes, we can give psychological answers, interpretations of the hearts and heads of others. Maybe some insights can be found, but psychologizing is always tricky stuff. Or we might look for religious answers, pointing to passages in the scriptures of others, but there we will find at best ambiguities equally present in our own scriptures. But what if we trace the conflicts and divisions of the Middle East through their historical entanglements?

On one side we would have to trace the almost endless conflicts between Arabs and Jews in the last half century; and behind that the founding of the state of Israel with British and European support, with Zionism revived; and behind that the Holocaust in the first half of the last century, with Jews fleeing Christian Europe; and before that we would find the Christian pogroms against the Jews, and the Crusades against the Muslims in the Middle Ages; and earlier the persecution by Imperial Rome of Christians; and still earlier the wars recorded in the Old Testament—Joshua laying waste to Jericho. And through the debris and horror of these historical mutual entanglements, we might come to see, first dimly in the dust, the power of religion, and then perhaps more clearly understand with a sober balance of horror and humility the capacity of humans beings to do great evil under banners of good.

And on another side we would have to ask whether the Fifth Fleet would be in the Persian Gulf if our civilization were not bent on extracting the last barrel of oil from under the desert floor to feed our voracious appetites. And if the Sixth Fleet were not there, how might we and the nations in that region understand national security differently? If warships and oil did not support a globalizing pressure to adopt

Western individualism and materialism, would many peoples feel the threat they really do feel to their own cultures and ways of life? Might there be less anger?

Hard questions, these, with no easy answers. But the very asking of them might at least save us from becoming like those who have injured us, and might lead us to genuine acts of repentance. Asking them might create a proper humility in the interpretation of September 11, even while we genuinely grieve, and it might help in discovering proportionate ways to respond in achieving the genuine security we need. The impulses of the heart are shaped by the interpretations we give and find, and the narrative for which we are willing to settle reveals where the heart finally is, and how we will act. Might we come back from the imaginative circle of Jeremiah's interpretation with cleansed and renewed hearts?

The events of September 11 will always resist our attempts at interpretation because their magnitude represents an intersecting of innumerable histories unique to each person involved—victim, mourner, defender, fireman, nurse, onlooker, government official, and yes, even perpetrator—a complexity of intersecting histories that no single interpretation can comprehend. And beyond these unique histories and perspectives lie the commonality of our historical entanglements. Interpret we must, but any interpretation can yield at most a partial truth—never a complete truth. And great human tragedy cuts too deeply into our personal and collective consciousness, well below the articulating capacities of our conscious minds, no matter how creative we may be.

Billy Collins, our national poet laureate, spoke of the helplessness of poetry in the face of these events: "At a time like this, it is best to read a Psalm." Perhaps we should at this time do only that, standing in solidarity with more than two millennia of Jews and Christians who have turned to the Psalms at times of personal and communal agony, when the question Why? defies answer, and we find ourselves able only to express the pain and suffering in our hearts while at the same time singing praise to the maker of heaven and earth, the wind of life, the author of our being. That too shapes the impulses of the heart.

Jon Gunnemann preached this sermon on September 13, 2001.