

On 9/11, preachers find no easy words

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

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(RNS) Standing in the pulpit on the 10th anniversary of 9/11, what do you say?

For clergy called upon to preach that day, which falls on a Sunday, the challenge can be connecting with a congregation that might have already moved beyond the tragedy.

But in many congregations other realities will dominate: people in the pews who lost family on 9/11; Muslims who have suffered a backlash since the attacks; soldiers who are still fighting wars set off by the events of that crisp September day.

At the Islamic Society of Orange County (Calif.), the traditional Friday services two days before the anniversary will include a family that lost a son at Ground Zero. Imam Muzammil Siddiqi said he plans to acknowledge that family's suffering, and then all who grieve a relative or friend who died in the attacks.

"And of course I will acknowledge terrorism as a crime, a sin," he said, "something that has no place in Islam."

The Rev. Joy Moore, a United Methodist minister who teaches the art of preaching at Duke University Divinity School, will focus on forgiveness when she delivers her sermon at the divinity school's chapel.

Moore said she was struck that in some churches, the scriptures assigned to Sept. 11 address forgiveness, including the story of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers.

"I find that amazing. It's a powerful story of forgiveness," said Moore, especially when contrasted against the varied reactions -- some thoughtful, some raucous -- to the death of Osama Bin Laden earlier this year.

"The church is a place that encourages us to say, 'I will not celebrate in the death of my enemy.' It seeks to be a community that practices such radical forgiveness that we have no enemies," said Moore.

Then there are pastors who want to recapture the raw emotions of the day 10 years before, and harness them for a spiritual purpose.

"I was here on the Sunday after 9/11 and the building was packed with people who were emotionally shocked. I saw people who hadn't been to church in years," said Rev. Darrell Worley, pastor of the Christian Life Assembly of God in Picayune, Miss.

At the time, President George W. Bush advised everyone to "get back to normal." Spiritually, Worley said, the call from the pulpits should have been something different: to "get back to God."

But "we are still unhealed," Worley said. "We need to pray for God's forgiveness of our sins, for God to fill us with spiritual renewal."

Worley hopes that his 9/11 sermon will also inspire prayers for the nation, and for those "unconverted to come to Christ."

The Very Rev. Samuel Lloyd, the dean at Washington National Cathedral, also hopes to awaken the feelings of the Sept. 11, 2001, but to invoke a theme that embraces all faiths.

"I want to begin by refreshing in people's minds the shock of what happened, and how our way of seeing the world shifted," Lloyd said. "On 9/11, we began to see how profoundly interconnected the whole human race is, and that religion is a powerful influence in all corners of the globe."

This Sept. 11, Lloyd will preach on the need to love people who are very different from ourselves. He quoted the poet, W.H. Auden. "We must

love one another or die."

"This is a moment," he said, "when people have to go deeper into their own traditions and learn with all the other traditions as well."

At the National Cathedral, where presidents pray and are eulogized, clergy from several faiths will together mark the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. On Sunday, before Lloyd's sermon, the cathedral's bells will toll to mark the times each of the four hijacked planes hit New York, the Pentagon and Pennsylvania.

Rabbi Joshua Katzan is also called to sermonize that weekend, at Shabbat services on Saturday, Sept. 10, at Congregation Habonim, a Conservative synagogue in Manhattan.

A native California who was thousands of miles away at the time of the attacks, Katzan will invoke those who died on 9/11 just before he recites the traditional Hebrew prayers for the dead.

Though the anniversary of the tragedy will account for a significant portion of his sermon, he is also wary of saying too much to the New Yorkers in his congregation, most of whom live a quick subway ride away from Ground Zero.

"Sometimes something is so tragic, that there aren't words," Katzan said, paraphrasing Rabbi Akiva, who lived in the first century: "Silence is a fence protecting wisdom."