

**LIFE IN THE COMMUNITY: FROM OPPRESSION TO FREEDOM**  
**EXODUS 12:1-8; ROMANS 13:8-14**  
**SEPTEMBER 8, 2002**  
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There are some gloriously high moments in the worshipping life of this congregation and today is one of them. Being back here after the summer months. Filling the sanctuary again. Though our summer attendance this year was better, I think, than ever before.

There is a palpable energy and excitement in the air on this day. It is always thrilling to me when we process into this soaring, beautiful sanctuary, choir leading the way, singing one of the great hymns of the church.

We have much this morning to rally about: the wonderful program planned for this fall. Opportunities to serve and to witness to justice and to explore the interior life as God's people.

Yet, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that we gather this Rally Day also aware this is not the best of times. A *New Yorker* cartoon pictured two stock traders at a bar, one with a look of pouting despair on his face says to the other, "I want my bubble back."

No kidding and so do all of us! Or maybe not. Maybe we don't want what Alan Greenspan calls the irrational exuberance of a highflying economy. Maybe all we really want is a chance to pursue our calling, provide for our families and build strong, healthy, and safe neighborhoods. Not so far fetched.

But when we are flying high those things do not seem to satisfy. Irrational exuberance if that's the word, or greed, distorts life – like it did for those corporate executives we've been hearing about.

These are challenging times. This week is also the first anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>. It will be a difficult moment for the entire nation. Such anniversaries have a way of turning the psychological clock backward. Recalling the tragedy in searing, vivid detail.

Mental health experts say, for some of us, the best way to cope this Wednesday will be to plan exactly what you will do. Especially those who experienced direct loss. Even to plan to do nothing will be to assert control over a day that a year ago left all of us feeling out of control.<sup>1</sup>

I say the focus and emotional content this Rally Day is different. There is much we no longer take for granted. Ordinary things like marriages and family life, friendships, how we spend our time, where we place our energies, whether we reach outward to others and inward to ourselves. These are things that matter in a way perhaps they didn't a year ago.

My contention, therefore, is that we are well poised to consider over the next few weeks some of the things – some of the core values – that make us a community.

Not just a gathering of individuals. Things like freedom and belonging and hope.

The Old Testament lessons are well chosen for such a conversation. We begin today with the institution of Passover...the annual remembrance of how Yahweh led the people out of oppression under Pharaoh and into freedom. The biblical stories for the weeks ahead depict the high moments of Israel's journey through the wilderness to a new land.

Let me suggest a contemporary parable for the next three weeks to consider alongside our biblical stories. It was one piece of good news, late this summer, emanating from the same Pennsylvania farm fields in which that airliner under terrorist attack went down last September. Coming from that same place was the rescue of nine, trapped coal miners.

The rescue is a parable or metaphor I say for all of us – not to ignore the profound torment of the experience for those men and their families. But their ordeal also speaks deeply to what the rest of our country and many individual communities like Buffalo and this congregation are going through right now.

President Bush was quick to see this. He said at a White House meeting with those miners, “it was their determination to stick together and to comfort each other that really defines the kind of new spirit that’s prevalent in our country – that when one of us suffers, all of us suffer; that in order to succeed, we’ve got to be united; that by working together, we can achieve big objectives and big goals.”<sup>ii</sup>

Frankly, whether you agree with some of his other policies and proposals, I think the President hit the mark with that observation. We have become a nation of individuals. Patches of color and ethnicity and religion and age scattered across the land that before September 11<sup>th</sup> were barely, if at all, stitched together or connected.

Good friend and Princeton Seminary preaching professor – someone I would love to invite to this pulpit – Sally Brown worries about how this manifests itself in the life of the church. She says the old hymn, “I Come to the Garden Alone,” may be the anthem of 21<sup>st</sup> century spirituality. Coming to the garden alone, she says, can seem like an attractive alternative compared with going to church and having to deal with the annoying range of personalities, opinions, habits, and tastes that God has seen fit to call together.

But what the title and text of that old hymn omit is that when Mary comes to the garden alone on the morning of his resurrection Jesus immediately sends her back into the community of disciples to preach good news.<sup>iii</sup>

You see if we just meet Jesus one on one it has to lead back to others, to the community or it will never amount to anything.

What I took the President to be saying about those miners, rescued from the oppression of their underground graves and given the precious freedom of walking around hugging loved ones in the bright sun of God’s green earth – what the President was saying and what the strong witness of the bible says from Genesis to Revelation is that we break the bonds of our oppression when we join arm in arm in the fellowship of community.

You see, God created us each one to be in community. Never are we so clear about this as when we face a crisis when independence and autonomy melt away. When we face some dire straight the foam and froth of irrational exuberance disappear and we naturally turn to each other to help, to comfort, to heal.

You can see where as-you-like-it spirituality of the 90s leads. It leads to the attitude in the wider community that there is no larger goal or common good. What is good benefits me and mine. Period. In a congregation such thinking leads to the attitude that worship and serious stewardship and brave witness to justice are voluntary, perhaps optional individual acts.

But commitment and sacrifice and community were not optional one year ago this Wednesday in New York City. Maybe you have seen the *Atlantic Monthly*. The last three issues have featured a stunning, non-sensational, well-reported account entitled, “American Ground: The Unbuilding of the World Trade Center.”

Author William Langewiesche who was given unlimited access to Ground Zero says soon after the attacks people started moving *toward* the disaster rather than away from it. The reaction was spontaneous. It cut across the city’s class lines. New Yorkers of all backgrounds tried to respond. Stockbrokers, shopkeepers, artists, everyone got involved. Despite the apocalyptic nature of the scene, the response was unhesitating and resilient.

It was simply understood that you would find survivors and then you would find the dead, and this would help their families get on with their lives, and the resources you needed would somehow be there and you would work day and night to clean up the mess, rebuild the city and begin the process of grieving and healing.<sup>iv</sup>

There is deliverance! There is freedom from oppression! There is the liberating power of human community. I heard a proposal yesterday on National Public Radio. The survivor of an office with 66 employees who died a year ago in New York proposed that Ground Zero be the new location of the United Nations.

Then, he said, the leaders of the world could come together on that holy ground. Holy ground where not only thousands died but millions came together, arm in arm to reject the paralysis of despair. Holy ground where they came together to contribute what little they had as individuals to the great repository of energy and resources of a community, a nation, indeed many nations.

Those future U.N. leaders could come together on that sacred ground, said this survivor, and remember how a city and state and nation and world rallied at that very place. Leaders of future generations could remember what happens when people pull together and fight darkness as happened on that holy ground one proud and painful day in the fall of 2001.

While this may seem or sound like a new story...it is, in fact, a very old one. The story of moving from oppression to freedom by coming together is one of the archetypal stories of the human family.

It is one of the meta-narratives that explains the Hebrew people. The exodus is the defining moment in the life of God’s people. Remembering that story at Passover each year provides the power and guidance the community needs in whatever age it faces oppression and seeks freedom.

The story of the journey from oppression to freedom is not just the story of the Hebrew people in 2000 BC. It is the story of every tribe and ethnic tradition throughout human existence. It is the story of Jesus of Nazareth who ushers people from bondage to sin into God’s dream of freedom for each one of us. At the risk of over-simplification let me say that our God is an exodus God and that the tradition of Jews and Christians and Muslims, the Abrahamic faiths is a tradition of bringing people out of oppression into freedom.

The message this day is that we are the sons and daughters you and I, each one of us, of a 4,000 year old tradition against oppression. So that when those airliners slammed into those Trade Towers last year we had four millennia of human experience on our side. Four millennia breaking the bonds of oppression. Four millennia joining arm in arm against darkness.

But the message today is not just remembering our call to community and freedom one year ago it is also the call to community and freedom we face as a city and congregation today.

I am referring to two matters: the first is at the core of our life as a city and region, the second is at the core of our life as a congregation. The current debate about downsizing the Common Council is a debate that carries with it much of the hope for the future of our city. It is a debate hampered by traditional lines of race and class that divide us. More than the future of the Sabres, more than negotiating dividing the spoils of impending casino gambling the Common Council debate will shape Buffalo's future.

But I am also referring to the challenge we face as a congregation. I hope you read my letter in the September newsletter concerning the financial state of Westminster.

Let me put it bluntly. If business continues as usual...if we continue to give at our present levels which fall well into the bottom 25% of our Presbytery's per capita giving...if the vast majority of us continue to allow the small minority of us to foot the bill for the mission and ministry of this church then we will face a serious deficit that could threaten or even prevent the ministry we say we want.

We'll talk more about these issues. For now as we launch a new year of ministry and remember, salute and say a prayer this Wednesday let me close with the words of St. Paul. The tiny congregation in Rome to which he wrote had within it the potential for greatness but also the potential to buckle under the weight of Roman oppression, self-destruct and disappear from history. His words speak as forcefully to you and me as they did to the church in Rome all those centuries ago.

"You know what time it is," Paul says, "now is the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, let us put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

Fitting words for an historic Rally Day. Fitting words for a new crop of teachers and tutors and youth advisors setting out to teach and nurture our children.

Fitting words friends for you and me in whose hands lay the destiny of this church. Amen.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> Erica Goode, "The Best Way To Cope? Even Experts Aren't Sure," The New York Times, Wednesday September 4, 2002, A11

<sup>ii</sup> Hendrik Hertzberg, "Talk of the Town: Mine Shaft," The New Yorker, August 19 & 26, 2002, p. 58.

<sup>iii</sup> Sally A. Brown, "The Preaching That Fosters 'Ecclesial' Identity," inSpire, summer/fall 2002, 14.

<sup>iv</sup> William Langewiesche, "American Ground: The Unbuilding of the World Trade Center," The Atlantic Monthly, July/August 2002, pp.46ff.