A Homily by the Rev. Steven P. Sabin

The Scripture readings that form the basis for this homily appear at the end of this text.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Three years ago we were a stunned people. We were one day after that tragic September 11. The images that have since been burned into our mind, at that point were there but not there. The disbelief, the inability to fit the disaster into our reality, our worldview, our knowledge of what things were like, was fresh. We were also hearing many people say, “We will never be the same.” Now three years have passed, and in some ways, things are different, but in many, many ways, things are the same. We still go about our daily routines of life. We still worry more about the latest fad in television shows and the cost of gasoline and all of the things that confront us in our daily lives. Life goes on. The real tragedy is that tragedy also goes on.

I remember three years ago the unbelievable, almost incomprehensible images of people running through the streets with debris falling and seeing firefighters, police, and rescue workers dragging wounded people and bodies out of the rubble. I had the startling realization that we were not looking at the international portion of the evening news. We were looking at what was transpiring in our own country. Since that time, I have recognized those same looks of numbed shock and horror, those same looks of fear, those same looks of determination, those same looks of courage, those same looks of compassion, in many other events and many other places. I recognized that same shocked, determined, and heroic humanity in the faces of people in Bali and Madrid, who have also experienced explosions and careless acts. I have seen it in the faces of people in Iraq and Afghanistan, people in the Palestinian West Bank. I have seen it in the faces of people who have experienced natural disasters as well as man made ones. I have come painfully and sadly to the awareness that suffering, inexplicable tragedy, and grief are endemic to the human condition. It is everywhere. How do we deal with that? How do we visualize it? How do we confront it?

Simply asking the question is important. There are those momentous times in our lives, events like 9/11, which are burned into our memories and which are indeed points of change. Although never total transformations,
they are the points at which we are called to think about our lives and our actions as a people. Sometimes there are good decision points and sometimes there are bad decision points. At the end of a war, you often have the same types of questions as at the start of a war in terms the opportunity for life changing decisions. It is as if we have come through a terrible time, we have won a great victory, now what do we do? These days you hear about winning the peace as well as winning the war. I am not so sure that tragedies and triumphs are intrinsically different from each other; they are simply new decision points, new benchmarks in this continuum of our lives.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel in today’s first reading were at a decision point, a triumphant decision point in that they have been led out of bondage in Egypt, they have passed through the Red Sea. They had everything taken care of, they were getting manna from heaven, they were getting quail, and they were getting water from the rock. They were free. Israel was living in the hand of God, a God who was quite close by the way. You could look up and see the fire in the cloud. I am sure that there were Israelite pundits who were walking around saying, “We’ll never be the same again,” and they wouldn’t, it was true. Then Moses went onto the mountain. While Moses was gone, the people made some bad choices. God was angry. I can understand that. The triumph was still fresh in their minds and yet there were not the changes of habit and perspective required by that triumph. I can sympathize with the Israelites because we acquire our habits, our trains of thoughts, and our modes of thinking slowly. If you have lived four hundred years in slavery and oppression, you have learned to be a slave and oppressed. Freedom would come as a surprise and a shock. You would not know the ways of responsibility yet, but God was angry. God said to Moses, “Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you [Moses] I will make a great nation.” Now at that point in time, some of us might say, “Way to go, Moses, you’re set! Good for you, Moses! You’ve won the blue ribbon! You have won the prize! You’ve got God’s favor!” Fortunately, Moses had love and compassion. Usually we ascribe these traits to God. However, for some reason, in this story, at this point in time, God is a little lacking in these traits. Then Moses said, “Wait a minute. Please, God, remember who these people are. They have sinned. They have made bad choices. They have not learned their lesson, but remember that they are your people. You brought them out of Egypt. I know that. You rescued them. You saved them. It’s all your doing. Please don’t turn your back on them so fast.”
Americans, maybe everyone, like hearing a story and then figuring out who they are in the story, which character they are. Most of us jump immediately to the hero. We always want to be the good guy in the story. We want to be Moses at this point. We want to be filled with compassion and wisdom. We want to be the single lost sheep. We want to be the lost coin. We want to know that God is expending all of her energy to find us. Yes! I want to be the center of the story. You know it gets a little disconcerting if we ever think about the fact that maybe we here sitting in this room are part of the ninety-nine. Maybe we are the nine coins still in God’s purse. Worse yet, maybe we are down there dancing around the golden calf. It becomes tough to be smug when you are not of the “hero center of attention.” I wrestle with that. In the world in which we live, a dangerous and confusing world, it is easy sometimes to be a little self-righteous. I figure I am the good guy.

I have seen a certain movie of famous, or infamous repute, Fahrenheit 9/11. It is a good movie and a bad movie. It has its ups and downs. One of the things that struck me though was the perplexity of the American soldiers in Baghdad. These days soldiers are very young: eighteen, nineteen, twenty year olds. Some of these kids, and they really are kids, have almost assuredly not been away from home before or not too far from home. Now they are riding around Baghdad on their Abrams fighting vehicles and in their half-tracks and they believe in what they are doing. To some degree, they are doing an important job. They are trying to keep the peace. They are trying to rebuild a country and they are being shot at. Each of these kids in the film eventually talked about the reality that they are not very popular in Baghdad and that comes as a surprise to them. “Why are they shooting at us?”

One could go into all kinds of political and economic discussions about that. We could discuss whether we should be in Iraq or not. I am not going to deal with that right now, because it is too complex. However, I have come to the conclusion that one of the reasons that the world does not like Americans very much right now is that we don’t know why they don’t like us. What I mean by that is that we are so insular in our outlook. We are so removed from an understanding of other cultures, and somewhat self absorbed, that we are cut off not only from each other in the world, but also from this basic drive in God to reach out to the lost, to the stranger, to the needy. It becomes hard for us to understand what God is doing in the world because it strikes us as alien.
I was doing research this week on terrorism throughout the world. I came across some stories about the Al Qaeda bombing of the train in Madrid and that nightclub in Bali. There was a truly frightening, but completely American, report in a Miami newspaper about the explosion in Bali. Many Australians died there, by the way. In fact a lot of people in Australia look at October 12 in the same way we do September 11. The online *Miami Herald* reported that there were numerous people killed: two Americans, the rest foreigners. There seems to be something insensitive in referring to the victims of terrorism in other countries as “foreigners.” The other thing I remember about September 11 is that in the first days and weeks afterwards, the world grieved with us. If I had been in Europe at that point, according to people who were, if people heard an American accent or identified an American on the street, they would come up to them and express their sympathy, sorrow, and support. When I was in Berlin in February of this year, I had a very different experience. When people heard my American accent or deduced from my dress that I was American, I heard a lot of anger and frustration about the way Americans were acting in the world. There are all kinds of reasons for that too, but I think that at the heart of the problem is a basic human difficulty with extending the boundaries of our vision, our compassion, and our awareness out to God’s dimensions. We look too close to home. We assume that we are the one sheep, the one coin that is lost. We become blind to the fact that sometimes God reaches out to others.

I wish that God’s beam was always focused on me. Sometimes it is hard to remember that God is encompassing Kitty and Jane and Irene. It is tough not to be center stage. Knowing that God searches out other people teaches humility. It teaches a sense of perspective. God’s regard for all persons is meant also to bind us, one to another, to create that understanding that we are all part of God’s family. It is a reminder that together we are the body of Christ; that when one of us rejoices, we all rejoice. When one suffers, we all suffer. We might even be able to manage to do that in the parish context. However, what about when we look to the body of Christ throughout the city, the body of Christ throughout the country, the body of Christ throughout the world?

Lastly, it is annoying sometimes that God can forgive those who danced around the calf, that he could forgive all who stoned the Christians and arrested them. It is really annoying that God does not harbor the grudges that I do. It is really annoying that God sees good in people that I am so angry at. It is annoying and painful that God has some secret insight into someone else’s heart and yet harbors hope of their repentance and love.
for them and justice in them when I would just as soon see them squashed. I am asked frequently, “Pastor, why doesn’t Christ just come quickly?” and I am often times tempted to say that we would be in deep trouble if he did. We are not ready, but ready or not God seeks us. Ready or not, God chases after us. Ready or not, God forgives us. Ready or not God, provides for us.

I pray for myself and for us as a people that in addition to our wealth, our freedom, our determination, and our courage that God will also provide for us humility, the willingness to give and to forgive, and an awareness that even those who seem so strange are not really so alien in the family of humanity. Why, Lord, do you eat with outcasts and sinners? Because the Lord proclaims that, it is in repentance, transformation and forgiveness that the kingdom of God rejoices. Amen.

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Exodus 32:7-14 (NRSV)

7 The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 8 they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ ” 9 The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 10 Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

11 But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ” 14 And the
LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.¹

1 Timothy 1:12-17 (NRSV)

¹ I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, ¹³ even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.² Amen.

Luke 15:1-10 (NRSV)

¹⁵ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ “Or what woman having ten silver coins,⁹ if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?¹⁰

² Gk to the ages of the ages
⁹ Gk drachmas, each worth about a day’s wage for a laborer
When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

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