

Accountable to God  
Genesis 3:8-13; 4:9; 6:9b-12; 7:1  
Romans 14:1-12

“So then, each of us will be accountable to God.”

We wake today remembering another day. We remember where we were when we first heard news of a plane hitting the north tower of the World Trade Center; remember seeing the second tower being hit; remember saying instinctually in silent unison “everything has changed”. Perhaps you remember, as I do, agonizing hours of waiting to hear whether a loved one, last heard from at the towers before they collapsed, was alive or dead; others may remember days of waiting and hoping as workers sifted through the ruins for a bone, a wallet, a wedding ring.

But we remember more. We remember stories of people lifted out of wheel chairs and carried down 20 flights of stairs by New York City’s finest; of Todd Beamer’s cry “Let’s roll” as passengers flew flight 93 into the ground for the sake of a greater good; of the stranger who appeared like an angel with a wrench to save an elevator full of lives and then disappeared forever into the deathly dark. Moreover, in the words of the Acting Secretary of the Navy, words set to music by Donald Nally that will be the choir’s benediction response this morning, “We shall never forget the image of a boy leaving flowers outside of the American embassy in Moscow. We shall never forget the candlelight vigils held in India and Bangladesh. Thousands of Germans marched at Brandenburg Gate. One hundred thousand Canadians gathered in Ottawa. Jordanian women gathered to pray—all sharing our sorrow.”

Would that we could linger in the sentiment conjured by countless interviews of survivors and orphaned offspring, of first responders whose matter-of-fact recounting of their courage has countered, for one brief moment, a world gone terribly awry. But mere sentiment will not do for those who each will be accountable to God. “Climb the ladder of years,” wrote

Jim Dwyer in a special edition of today's New York Times, "and the view from a decade up is startling. On the near ground, you can see the rubble and loss of war in a place where we had no quarrels that could not have been managed otherwise. In the distance, you can take in the earliest response to 9/11, by men and women who helped one another that morning, who used their last calls to speak of gratitude and love. With a single glance across time, you behold the profane and the sacred in all their contrapuntal power."

Climb the ladder of years and remember, as we must, what has become of us after ten years. On one hand, the arena for heroism shifted almost immediately to foreign soil and to soldiers whose sacrifice for ten years has required nothing, in fact *less* than nothing, from us. I know numbers are difficult to take in with the ear, but allow me a few this morning: 6,204 American military personnel killed in Iraq and Afghanistan; 2,300 American contractors; 18,678 Iraq and Afghan security forces and a minimum of 102,339 Iraqi civilians killed. So, on the other hand of heroism, we remember the carnage that has come of the revenge we would not leave to God; we remember the havoc fear has wrecked upon our common life, anthrax and duct tape, torture and the Constitution notwithstanding; remember the dime on which Wall Street traders turned from being the victims of terrorism to being the perpetrators of a rapacious greed that has taken down so much more than two towers; remember the war, minus the shooting, in the halls of Congress, (reminiscent of the Weimar Republic 80 year ago notes retired Republican staffer Mike Lofgren), that now threatens to undermine democracy itself. "How to resist falling in love with death was the question," wondered Anne Mulderry, long after she howled at heaven after hearing of her son's death in the south tower. "Depression and despair is one way of falling in love with death. Violence and aggression is another way."

Because we are not the first nation to have fallen in love with the death that is violence

and aggression; because we are not the first Christians who have had to give account to God after ten years, I turned to a familiar voice from the last century for help, for chastening, for courage, for consolation. On the cusp of the New Year and a few short months before his arrest in April of 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer presented his friends and co-conspirators with an epistle that some theologians consider his finest work. Entitled “After Ten Years”, the essay seeks, in Bonhoeffer’s words, “to give some account of what we have experienced and learnt in common during these years,” during ten years of resistance to National Socialism. I commend the entire essay to you, but this morning I am haunted by Bonhoeffer’s last paragraph in relation to the account we must give this morning of what we have experienced and learnt in the years since the towers fell. He concludes:

We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the art of equivocation and pretence; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use?

We too have been silent witnesses of evil deeds, including our own, have been drenched by many storms, have learnt the art of equivocation and pretense. Experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open. Intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Bonhoeffer’s words name what has become of us during this time, not because, with a resistance borne of our faith, we have attempted to put a stick in the relentlessly turning wheel of a nation’s violence, hatred, fear, blame and suspicion. Rather we are diminished disciples because, as Methodist Bishop Will Willimon noted, in our vulnerability and fear with the rest of the nation, “we reached for the flag, not the Cross.” Are we still of any use, we who each will be accountable to God?

Taking Bonhoeffer’s lead, I know only enough this morning to account for our sin. Bonhoeffer begins by confessing the moral bankruptcy of his nation’s resort to reason,

principles, conscience, freedom and virtue in order to excuse German Christians from responsible action in faith. In these latter days, we have rather resorted to the politics of blame, denial and self-righteous judgment, thereby refusing responsible action in faith. Our behavior brings to mind the first three stories of Scripture wherein Adam and Eve, Cain, and Noah lay bare these original aspects of our human nature in the presence of the God to whom each of us will be accountable.

The story in the garden, says Jonathon Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, is the story of the birth of the ethical life. From the beginning, human beings are given freedom within limits because, without limits, “freedom for the strong means slavery for the weak; freedom for the rich means misery for the poor.” Apparently this is the part of freedom we no longer “get” in the land of the free and home of the brave. God forbid limits be placed on our greed and our grasp! “These limits,” notes Sacks, have nothing to do with the nature of things but with the command of God—with ethics, with what we *may* do. When God says *Thou shalt not*, at that moment we are capable of understanding the responsibility that comes with freedom.”

After the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is eaten and the limit of human freedom transgressed, we read that both the man and the woman refuse responsibility for what each has done. Adam blames Eve; Eve blames the serpent. This is the first human instinct. Their default setting is to deny that they were free to choose otherwise, to refuse *personal* responsibility for their exile from the garden. In this reading of the second creation story, the original sin is to blame. Surely we have become, after ten years, a culture of blame.

The second behavior that has characterized our being before God after ten years is denial. Enter Cain and Abel. You will recall that Cain’s offering to God is rejected and Abel’s is

received. Sin, says God to the angry brother, “is crouching at your door. Its desire is to have you, but you must master it.” It is almost as if God preempts the possibility of blame, so that when Cain is confronted with his brother’s murder, he cannot claim his brother was at fault. Rather, Cain famously asks if he is his brother’s keeper. Cain, says Sacks, denies *moral* responsibility. “He acted and acted freely, but he sees no reason why he should be held to account for what he did.” After ten years, with most every prophetic voice silenced, we see no reason why we should be held to account for the righteous rage, every ounce of which we could justify, says Andrew Sullivan, but which kept us from mastering the fear of the moment. With the Arab spring upon us, we might even venture the hope that Bin Laden failed. But, says Sullivan, “our own fear won. Fear stopped us, overwhelmed us, as our rationality deserted us. Yes, it was understandable, given what we endured that September morning. But we need to admit that our response was close to fatal. A bankrupted America that tortured innocents and disregarded its own Constitution is barely recognizable as America.”

So, then, we come to the third tack taken as we have taken to account for ourselves before God. It is the subject of Paul’s last words to Christians in Rome: we judge the other whom God alone may judge and, in these latter days, have turned that judgment on one another, each side claiming God’s imprimatur for its singular righteousness. Enter Noah. Though praised for his righteousness, English translations miss the irony. The root of Noah’s name means rest: not doing right, but doing nothing. Moreover, the two letters of his name are a reversal of the word for grace and favor. Noah means relief, but it also means regret. Nevertheless, Noah accedes to his own press and sets to work on the ark. Unlike Abraham, he does not question God’s decision to destroy the rest of humankind. In Jewish folklore, says Sacks, Noah became known as “a righteous man in a fur coat”. “There are two ways of keeping warm on a cold night: buying a fur

coat or lighting a fire. Buy a fur coat and you keep yourself warm. Light a fire and you keep others warm also. Noah...fails to exercise *collective responsibility*. You cannot survive while the rest of the world drowns, and still survive....The moral enterprise is essentially social [!]....One who saves himself, even himself he does not save.”

Before God, we have accounted for ourselves by blaming the other, refusing moral responsibility, judging the other as less worthy of life than ourselves. After ten years, are we still of any use? Bonhoeffer answers his own question by saying that “we shall not need geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but plain, honest, straightforward men [and women].” Yet this cannot be the final word, for such a world depends on our better selves that, even now, can only cry, “Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” So appended to Bonhoeffer’s epistle is a paragraph found by Eberhard Bethge, an unfinished paragraph whose words account for what is experienced and learnt by one destined to reach for the cross: “There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short from the perspective of those who suffer.”

Is this not how God in Christ has looked upon each of us who will be accountable to God: accountable to the God whose Son has borne our blame, our denial, our self-righteous judgment, our suffering, our sin, all the way to the cross....so that finally the death we love more than we love God shall have no dominion. This is the gospel. This is the hope that overcomes fear. Thanks be to God. Amen.