

Preface

This book has grown from sermons written and preached in response to the tragic and outrageous events of September 11, 2001. That day's terrorist attacks on America opened the nation's eyes in horror, but to what have our eyes been opened? What do we now see in the world around us? What are we looking for?

One of the questions people began asking after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon is, "Where was God?" How could a loving God let those attacks be carried out with such gruesome success? If life has meaning—and people of faith have always insisted it does—where is the meaning in such ruthless destruction? Were the attacks part of God's plan for human history? Did we, as some religionists have suggested, deserve what was done to us? Is there any meaning at all in such events, or are they senseless horrors that can only raise doubts about the whole enterprise of faith? More personally and humanly speaking, what is left to say to the people who mourn the loss of their loved ones? All these questions boil down to one: Why? As people of faith, however, we do not address that question to the four walls around us or to a silent sky. We speak it to the one who is supposed to care, and so we ask, "Why, God?"

What happened on September 11 shocked us and left us with a grief through which we are still trying to work our way toward healing and hope. We want answers, but this book distinguishes two kinds of answers, rejecting one kind while seeking the other. Answers as well-stated solutions which would make perfect sense of September 11 are rejected. Indeed, the whole idea of making perfect sense of that day is rejected as, not only impossible and pretentious, but wrong. No attempt will be made to rationalize or justify what happened that day. There will be no defense of any supposed rightness in the tragedy, nor will there be any defense of God. We will seek answers as we understand them to be responses, not rationalizations. It is my contention from the outset that there is no justification for what was done to us that day, and none should be offered. That said, we still need answers. People of faith are compelled by the claims we have made for God to respond to the questions raised by September 11.

Sermons are not weekly entertainments for religious people, nor are they pious affirmations of beliefs and opinions already held. To preach is to wrestle with life and God at the same time. This book has grown from sermons, beginning with the one preached the Sunday immediately following the attacks. The sermons are dated because September 11, 2001 is a very real date in our life and history, and our responses to its terrible events have come over time, beginning with the shock, disbelief, rage, and grief we felt at first and developing as we had more time to think and as world and national events continued to unfold. Sermons are preached within the context of a congregation's life in its society and in the world. So, the thinking in this book developed within what we now call *real time*, as people's own reactions to September 11 developed. That day hit all of us hard, and in many ways we are still reeling from the blow. The sermons are included because they are the source of the book and because they fix responses to September 11 in real time, as those responses were made publically from the pulpit.

With the title of each sermon, the reader will find the date it was preached and the scripture lessons upon which it was based. Reading those lessons before or after the sermon itself should prove helpful. Each sermon is followed by comments elaborating certain themes developed in the sermon or suggested by it. Several of the sermons were preached for holidays or special occasions in the church's life, including World Communion when the Presbyterian Church (USA) shares the Lord's Supper, at least symbolically, with other Christian churches around the globe and, also, receives the special Presbyterian Peacemaking Offering. One sermon is unique in the collection because I preached it for an interfaith service held Thanksgiving morning in our Old Broad Street Church (1792) for the community. That service, a cooperative effort among Jews and both Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians, presented a particular challenge for responding to a community's desire to give thanks to God while remembering and pondering the events of 9-11 in an interfaith context.

Preaching does not merely answer questions but often raises them for people to answer in real life. Some of those ongoing questions are identified in the comments following the sermons.

As readers will see (and already know from their own experiences), the question, "Why, God?" goes beyond the tragedies of September 11. Life raises that question in many ways. The sermons acknowledge that September 11 has become for Americans a symbol, which does not detract from its reality but extends that reality into other areas of life. A symbol always represents both itself (in this case, the realities of 9-11) and other somehow associated experiences the symbol helps us understand. One of the questions in this book is, "What kind of symbol will 9-11 be for us?" What associations will it bring to mind, and how will it help us understand life—our life internally as a nation and externally as one in a world of nations? As we have more time to think and as more events evolve from that day, how will we see September 11, and how will we apply its symbolism to life?

To whom can such a book be dedicated? I have chosen to dedicate it to the memory of a young woman I never knew. Why? One of the horrors of September 11 was the anonymity of its victims. At first, we did not even know their names, but already we were grieving for them because, even though they had been strangers to us and remained anonymous, we could not see them as strangers any longer. They were gone, and we didn't even know who or how many they were.

On September 11, 2001, our younger son was just beginning his freshman year at Montclair State University. From the lounge on his floor in Bohn Hall, he watched the smoke rise from what had been the World Trade Center. Several alumni of Montclair State died in the terrorist attacks on the Trade Center, but just before Holy Week, 2002, we received an issue of the university's magazine, *Alumni Life*, with another "In Memoriam" naming and picturing an alumna whose death had been recently verified. We never knew her, but we had lost her, and there I sat at my computer writing a Maundy Thursday sermon entitled, "Why, God?" and staring at her picture. She looked so young, alive, and filled with promise, and her life story as told in the article was the American dream cut short. I did not know her, but now I will not forget her, which seems to be the story of September 11. After that day, we ached for families we did not know, and people cried for strangers.

As I wrote about her in that sermon, her picture served as a reminder not to dare say anything that would lessen or cheapen the tragedy of her death, not to rationalize the outrage in any way or make any attempt at justifying what cannot and should not be justified. So, I dedicate this book to the memory of Dorota Kopiczko because she and the others who perished should not be forgotten.

I wish to thank the people of the First Presbyterian Church of Bridgeton, New Jersey, without whose support, encouragement, and friendship these sermons would never have been preached. Most of all, I am grateful to my wife, Debbie, for listening to my sermons, twice over, for the past thirty years, commenting when needed, encouraging me and urging me to write, someday soon, for publication.