

The Road Less Traveled – September 7, 2018

I remember it like it was yesterday. I was sitting in my office in a Central Texas newspaper's newsroom sipping coffee when one of my reporters called in. "Turn on the TV," he said. "A plane hit the World Trade Center." So I turned on the television out in the newsroom and watched as the speculation grew. It was a small plane that had strayed off course. No, it was an airliner that had accidentally gone into the building. But how could that be? Ten minutes later, as we watched live as the second plane crashed into the south tower, the reality became all too clear. Less than an hour later, as the south tower collapsed, I knew I was staring into the face of evil.

Seventeen years later, that feeling largely remains. What happened on Sept. 11, 2001, in New York and Virginia and in a field in Pennsylvania was pure evil. Nearly 3,000 people were killed. Families were destroyed. Children were orphaned. And a sense of innocence in this country was forever lost. That's the nature of evil. The Sunday after the attacks, Americans flocked to churches in unprecedented numbers. They came not necessarily to worship, but in a search for answers. Where was God in all of this? How could God stand by and watch this happen? How could God allow this to happen? The more cynical and creative among us even suggested that the events of 9/11 were our punishment for any number of transgressions against God.

They are the same questions we often ask in the face of evil. The questions following 9/11 were massive because we had witnessed evil on a massive scale. We witnessed events that were driven by pure hatred and a staggering ambivalence to human life. Worse yet, they were driven by a warped understanding of religion and what it means to serve God. And in the midst of such evil, God's presence can be awfully elusive.

But perception often gives way to reality, and September 11, 2001, was no exception. Before the end of the day – while we were still reeling from the shock and horror of the day's events – the stories began to emerge. Stories of heroism. Stories of sacrifice. Stories of faith. Stories of selfless actions that saved lives, even when it cost the heroes their own. Stories of a nation that clung to itself, first out of desperation and fear, and later out of pride at the sacrifice and survival of its best and bravest.

In fact, by the end of the day, it was hard not to see God's hand at work.

That's the thing about redemption. It's not just about God touching something bad and making it better. It's about God touching something terrible and evil and creating in it something holy. We see the evidence each time we step into a church. Many of us wear the evidence around our necks every day. It's the symbol of the most horrible, brutal form of execution ever visited upon the face of the earth. It is the symbol of the greatest tragedy

ever perpetuated by the hand of man – the day that the God who dwelt among us was told that He wasn't fit to live. And yet today we see it not as a symbol of horror. Because as Jesus hung on the cross, the hand of God moved over its rough surface – and redeemed it. At that moment, despite the evil with which it was created, the cross became altogether holy.

I often wonder if that wasn't part of the plan. Because while it is sometimes hard for me to relate to the events of Golgatha, I have seen evil and felt the despair that surrounds it. But the way I see it, if God could redeem the cross, then God can bring redemption to any evil that I might witness. Seeing that redemption ... well that's a matter of faith.

See you Sunday.