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**What God Sees**

Exodus 14:24

The observance of the tenth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001 takes us back to the raw emotions that we all felt in the aftermath of that event. It also brings back to us the terrible image of the fire and great cloud of smoke which poured out of the fallen towers and engulfed the island of Manhattan. The cloud of smoke silhouetted against the blue September sky remains a harrowing image of destruction.

A very similar image is offered by one of the lectionary texts for today. In Exodus 14 the Israelites are trying to make their way to freedom with the army of Pharaoh in pursuit. The situation of the people is growing desperate as Pharaoh's soldiers are closing in. At the critical moment God appears in a pillar of fire and cloud to keep the Egyptian army from overtaking the Israelites.

The God who is in that cloud is a mysterious presence. The Egyptians do not know what to make of this phenomenon. It throws them into panic. Their military discipline breaks down.

But the mysterious God in the cloud is also a disturbing presence to the Israelites. For the pillar of fire and cloud which keeps the Egyptians from overwhelming the Israelites also keeps the Egyptians from losing contact with them. By lighting up the darkness both sides know exactly where the other is. The God who separates these enemies also keeps them connected to one another. The Israelites want to believe that God is always on their side but the mystery of God's presence in the pillar of fire and cloud raises questions for them about God's agenda.

There is an old Hasidic tale which describes what God sees when the Israelites are delivered at the Red Sea. The angels are rejoicing over the Israelites miraculous escape. They are playing their harps. They are singing. They are dancing. But suddenly one of them calls for the music to stop. "Look, the Creator of the Universe is sitting there weeping." They approach God and ask, "Why are you weeping when Israel has been delivered by your power?" The Maker of the Universe says, "I am weeping for the dead Egyptians washed up on the shore – somebody's sons, somebody's husbands, somebody's fathers (quoted by Theodore Wardlaw, Christian Century, September 6, 2011, page 18).

The God who is present in the pillar of fire and cloud sees the pain of the Egyptians as well as the suffering of the Israelites. God's attention is always drawn to the horizon of grace. This is what Jesus was trying to explain to his disciples when they wanted to establish limits on their responsibility to forgive those who have wronged them. God's activity in human history is for the purpose of extending mercy. There is no limit to the compassion of God. Jesus invites us to live in that boundless compassion and learn to extend it to others.

As Americans we often overlook the fact that the carnage of September 11, 2001 is not unique. There are sadly many historical examples of the wholesale killing of innocent people to achieve political aims. I have recently been learning about one such event that took place in New England in 1704. The village of Deerfield Massachusetts was destroyed in a surprise attack by French troops and their Indian allies. The majority of the people of Deerfield were either killed or taken hostage to

Canada. Those who were captured and could not endure the 280 mile forced march to Canada were killed on the spot; the elderly, pregnant women, toddlers, and infants.

This tragedy sent shock waves through New England on a scale similar to that of September 11. It happened because Louis XIV of France wanted to plant fear in the hearts of Protestants everywhere. He had just destroyed all of the Protestant Churches of France and carried out a successful genocide against the followers of John Calvin in that nation. He wanted to demonstrate that he could do the same thing to the followers of John Calvin in New England.

The people who were taken to Canada as captives bore the greatest burden of this historical tragedy. While most of them eventually returned to New England their lives were reoriented by their experiences as captives. Most were forced to embrace Catholicism and many learned the culture and languages of Native Americans. Some of those who returned chose the way of vengeance. They took what they learned from the Indians about wilderness survival and warfare and used it against them. They organized scouting parties to travel deep into Indian country to ambush, take scalps, and destroy Native villages. Deerfield became the staging ground for many of these bloody raids.

But other former captives used what they learned about Native Americans in a very different way. They believed that God could take the evil they experienced and turn it into something good. Their experience as captives taught them that the mercy of God was for their enemies too. They organized mission outposts to serve Native Americans. They trained pastors in the language and culture of Natives so they could preach the gospel to them. Deerfield became the center of their activities as well. In August of 1735 they brought together the largest gathering of Natives and English colonists in that town since the attack 31 years earlier. 170 Native men, women, and children came as guests of the town. Among them were some of the warriors who had destroyed Deerfield and killed many of its citizens. Ministers and politicians from all over Massachusetts came to establish relationships with these new Native friends. This event ended with a service of worship in the Deerfield Meeting House where the colonists and the Natives praised God together.

One of the former captives who played a prominent role in this process of reconciliation was a woman named Rebecca Kellogg. The Iroquois called her Wausania, a name which probably derived from their word for "bridge." She had indeed become the bridge which connected them to the English colonial culture (Evan Haefeli and Kevin Sweeney, *Captors and Captives: The 1704 French and Indian Raid on Deerfield*, pages 264-271).

Rebecca's discovery that there is no limit to God's mercy transformed her life and changed the communities in which she lived. That is the truth which can sustain us in the wake of the tragedies of our time.