9/11 Reflections — Ten Years Later
September 11, 2011

I suppose that every generation has one or two "defining moments." You can tell it's a defining moment if you can ask "Where were you when?" and most people can tell you.

- My first was on a Friday morning in 1963. I was on a playground during recess at Monroe Elementary School in San Jose, California when we heard that our president, President Kennedy, had been assassinated. You old guys, can you remember where you were?
- Any of you old guys old enough to remember where you were December 7, 1941, when you heard that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor?
- I'm told that a defining moment for some of our kids happened on January 28, 1986, at 11:39. Because so many of them were watching the space shuttle Challenger on TV at school when it exploded before their eyes.
- But I suspect that everyone in this room over the age of about 15 can remember where they were 10 years ago, on the morning of September 11. I was finishing up a round of golf at Duckers with Tommy Young when I got a phone call, from Julie I think, that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. They didn't know yet, the cause. I drove home, fast, and was fixated by the reports the rest of the day. Where were you when ... it happened?

We didn't know, then, how much our world would change that day. It touched us all one way or another.

- Our Stock Market shut down for a week — that was unprecedented. And then it crashed: it dropped 7% the day it reopened, 14% by the end of the week — the largest one week drop in history.
- We began to see those Homeland Security alerts on TV. They phased it out a few months ago, but it used to be on TV all the time. Do you remember the colors: red for a severe risk of a terror attack; orange for a high risk of attack; yellow for an elevated risk; blue for guarded; and green for low risk. It seemed like it was always red, or orange, or yellow.
• We began to pay attention to other terror attacks in the news: like the anthrax hysteria here in the US; or the Al-Qaeda bombings in Bali, and Madrid, and London.

• My son would be one of the thousands of our sons and daughters who would be mobilized and sent to war. That year he was in Iraq was probably the toughest year Julie and I have ever endured, emotionally.

• We still endure the after-effects. We go to the airport and take off our shoes, then go through a full-body scanner, then some of us are patted down. When we get on the plane, I suppose all of us take a moment to look around us to see if anyone kind of squirrely is sitting nearby, just in case.

Have you noticed that most defining moments are terrible moments? They are almost always tragedies, of the most horrific sort. Which is why, I suppose, whenever there is a defining moment, someone always asks the question: "Where was God when it happened? Where was God when 9/11 happened?" It's not just, "Where were you when the planes struck"; it's "Where was he? What was he doing? What was he thinking? How could he tolerate, how could he allow such evil?" 2,977 people were murdered that September 11, from 38 states, Washington DC, and 70 countries. 343 firefighters, 60 police officers, and 55 soldiers lost their lives that day too. 3,000 children under the age of 18 lost a parent that day. Dozens more were born to grieving widows, including one who went into labor during her husband's memorial service. Where was God that day? What was he doing? How could he let it happen? He could have stopped it, you know. He could have tweaked the navigation systems of those planes so they couldn't find their way. He could have nudged our police in the right direction in the days before the attack so they could catch the murderers before they could do their evil. Our God is not impotent, is he? ...

One of the most famous stories ever is Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. A father has a son who is a real jerk. The boy treats him with terrible disrespect. He says to his dad, "I don't care what happens to you, I want my inheritance now. For all I care, you can drop dead." I don't know why his father gave it to him; he had to know it would be wasted foolishly. Jesus says the boy wandered into a far country where he squandered the money on everything his father detested. My son
takes my money and throws it at everything I hate. Why didn't the father stop him? He could have, you know. He was a man of wealth, and power.

- When his son made his hateful request, he could have said no.
- When his son was leaving home, he could have sent his servants to restrain him, and lock him up. He could have prevented the damage his boy would do to himself and others.
- When his son was in the far country he could have sent his servants to track him down and drag him home, by force if necessary.
- His father was not impotent, was he?

But the prodigal's father didn't prevent the son from acting stupidly. He didn't intervene and force his son to behave. Because he loves his son, and he understands how precious freedom is, and he realizes that, at some point, a forced obedience is worse than reckless disobedience — a forced obedience is worse than reckless disobedience.

It's not just at those tragic defining moments, whenever we struggle we ask the question, "Where are you, God? Why don't you step in? Why don't you help out? Why can't you be a little more assertive?" ... You see, there are some things we believe about God, some big rocks, some foundation stones.

- We believe that God is omnipotent. There is nothing doable God cannot do. He has no inherent weakness. If he wanted, he could make us do anything he wants us to do. He could force himself on us. If he chose.
- And we believe that God is omniscient. He knows everything knowable. He knew what those terrorists were planning. He knew what, and when, and where, and how. He wasn't caught by surprise when those planes rammed the towers.
- And we believe that God is omnibenevolent. He is completely good. He will never choreograph evil. He will never give us anything less than what is very best for us.

Well ... if God is so powerful, and so smart, and so good — how could he stand by and watch as those jerks murdered 3000 people? ... Unless, preventing the evil would cause a greater one. Unless, intervening would do us more harm than good.
Part of what makes us human, part of what makes us different, part of the image of God in us is that God gave us the ability to choose. We can choose to love him, or not. We can choose to love each other, or not. And we treasure that freedom to choose. You have heard of men who rule their homes as dictators. He keeps his wife on a short leash, and will tolerate no disrespect, no misbehavior. His whims are her command. The words she speaks are not her own, what she does is really not her choice. We despise despots like that, don't we? We pity the wife who has to endure such tyranny. We wish she could stand up to him, even if her words or her actions were foolish. We treasure the freedom to choose, for ourselves. We have the idea of being slaves.

When our children are small we choose for them. We tell them when to go to bed, when to get up, what to wear, what to eat, what words they can use, what words they can't. We force them to school; we force them to church, I hope. But as they get older, we allow them to make more and more of their own decisions. I am so proud of my kids. I'm not proud of them because they call me every morning to ask what they should wear, what they should eat, what they should do that day. I'm proud of them because, as adults, they choose well. They exercise their freedom to choose, well. If I tried to force my will on my kids today, I could take no pleasure in how they live. I might be able to protect them from some bad decisions, but I would make them less than what they have become.

The freedom to choose is part of what makes us human. But when God gave us freedom, he gave us the ability to choose badly. He gave us the freedom to make foolish, or even evil choices too. He had to, or our freedom would be a sham. God could have intervened that day. He could have diverted the plane; he could have arranged to have the jerks captured before they did their evil. He could have protected your friend from that drunk driver; he could have prevented or healed that cancer that struck her down so young; he could have worked it out so those cruel or thoughtless people couldn't have gotten you fired; he could have prevented any of the tragedies of your life — big or little. But to do so he would have had to take away freedom — either yours or theirs. And to do that would have destroyed part of what makes us godlike, and part of what makes love possible. So he chooses to let us choose, and then he hurts when we choose badly.
Where was God that day? Philip Yancey is one of my heroes. Philip Yancey had the opportunity to go to Ground Zero shortly after the attacks. He was taken there by a young cab driver named Eddie. Yancey asked Eddie: "Where were you when it happened." Well, Eddie was parked across the street from the World Trade Center, waiting for a fare who had gone inside. He was reading the paper as he waited when he heard the roar of the plane. He said, the ground shook, the car shook, and then he heard the sound of the explosion above. He leaped out of the car and saw people running everywhere. He was still standing there, mesmerized, when the second plane rammed into the second tower. He said, "I have never seen a fireball like that." There was such noise: car horns everywhere, the sirens from the police cars, the fire trucks, the ambulances racing to the scene. At first he still had a cell signal, so he called his wife. He said, "I'm right in front of the towers, but I'm okay."

Then the people started streaming out of the towers, thousands of people. Some screaming, some holding handkerchiefs over their faces, some covered with blood. He said, "I stood by the car as they ran past. I looked in the air, and oh my God, I saw little specks — people jumping. A man in a white shirt. A woman with her skirt flying up. A couple holding hands. A man trying to use his sports coat as a parachute. People would look up, try to figure where the jumpers would land, and dodge the bodies as they hit the sidewalk." He said, "I'll never forget the sight as long as I live."

He was still there when the first tower collapsed. A woman had fallen down on the sidewalk, an elderly woman. He said, "Everybody was running past her, not stepping on her or anything, but running right past her. So I waited for a break in the people and went to her. Are you all right, ma'am?" I asked. "I have some water in my car. Can I get you some?" She said she'd made it down something like 58 floors. He says, "I told her she was safe now. I could tell she was upset, so I asked if I could say a prayer for her. I'm Catholic, you know, it just seemed the thing to do. She looked relieved, and while I was kneeling there on the sidewalk holding her hand, I heard a noise louder than I thought possible. The entire giant building just collapsed, all 110 stories." He said, "I swear to God, Mr. Yancey, while I'm kneeling there holding that
woman's hand, something falls from the sky – a piece of computer or something – and hits that woman and she slumps over dead. Imagine – escaping from 58 stories and then getting killed like that."

When Eddie got home, 4 hours after the attack, he found his wife hysterical, his two children huddled in a corner watching their mommy sob. You see, after his phone call she had stood at her window in Brooklyn and watched the WTC disintegrate, certain her husband had been killed in the explosion and fire. Their phone service was down now, so she hadn't heard from him in 4 hours...

Where was God that day? No matter how bad things are sometimes, if you look around you can see God's fingerprints – and they are amazing. I just got back from spending a few days in Yellowstone. Guys, if you can't see God's fingerprints in a place like that your eyes are broken or your brain is twisted. It's as if time stands still, and for a moment you get a sense of timeless beauty, and immense power, and dazzling intricacy. You are overwhelmed with a sense of his omnipotence, and his omniscience, and his omnibenevolence. God is always around us, dazzling us with grace and beauty. Despite the ugliness and the evil caused by our choices, he is always there.

But you don't have to leave Ground Zero to find God. Right there, in the midst of the chaos and ugliness ...

- Apparently whenever evidence of a fireman or a policeman was found – a badge, a patch of clothing, a piece of a boot – all the machinery was turned off, and Ground Zero would fall silent. All the firemen on the scene would form two lines and stand at attention. Rescuers would retrieve the clothing or the body part and walk in silence between the lines of saluting firemen to the morgue on site.

- The Salvation Army was there, as they always are in such places. One of their majors said, "I work side by side with heroes. And I tell you, they love God. They may be hard-nosed NY detectives, or FBI officers, but at the morgue the softness comes out."

- Outside the Salvation Army Center a tractor-trailer parked, packed with supplies – blankets, food, clothes – from state of
Washington. When they opened the truck they found a 40 ft banner, which they unfurled and tacked to side of truck. It was covered with thousands of messages — you're in our hearts, we love you, you're our heroes, you're our brothers and sisters. Some third graders sent bags of homemade cookies.

- In early days crowds ten deep lined the streets, cheering every rescue vehicle that came by. They were like the tunnel of cheerleaders football players run through. Do you think that brought strength, and courage, and dignity, and honor to those working the horrible scene?
- There were so many donations of food, and clothing, and equipment from all over the country that there was no room to put it all. Lines of people stretched around the block all day long, volunteers who wanted to help.
- One couple from out of town drove to their Home Depot, bought $700 of shovels, and hand delivered them to NY. A pastor who volunteered on the scene tells of firefighters from Chicago who jumped in a car; headed east and got picked up in Indiana going 108. When they explained what they were doing to the state trooper, he said, "Well let's try to keep it under 90," and then he gave them a flashing light escort to the border.
- Philip Yancey said, "I studied the faces of the workers, and there was not a single smile at ground zero. How could you smile in such a place, a monument to the worst that human beings can do to each other." But the courage, and the honor, and the camaraderie, and the love that he saw there ...

Where was God when it happened? Sometimes Christians, sometimes preachers say stupid things when tragedies happen.
- "It was God's will." Guys, I think that's almost blasphemy. God never choreographs evil.
- "It was God's judgment on a sinful city, a sinful nation." Even if it was, to bring guilt and judgment to a time that calls for comfort and grace — is unconscionable. At times like this, Jesus was tender, not cruel.

Maybe the more insightful question is this: Where was the church when it happened? Where was the church in the days that followed? Where
were we, Christians? Where were you? Across the street from Ground Zero, in a vacant building there were three booths: Police Officers for Christ, Firemen for Christ, Sanitation Workers for Christ. We were there, binding the wounds, comforting the grieving, offering water to the thirsty, and food to the hungry. We were there, even when far away, sending what help we could, and offering up our prayers, and redoubling our efforts to do what God has called us to do. Perhaps if the church is there, doing its job, people will not wonder so much where God is when we hurt. They'll know where God is: working through his people on earth.

Gordon McDonald is a great preacher who once pastored a church in New York City. When the planes struck, he freed his schedule and drove there to volunteer. He says, "More than once I asked myself — as everyone asks — is God here? And I decided that he is closer to this place than any other place I've ever visited. The strange irony is that, amidst this absolute catastrophe of unspeakable proportions, there is a beauty in the way human beings are acting that defies the imagination. Everyone — underscore, everyone — is everyone else's brother or sister. There are no strangers among the thousands at the work site. Everyone talks; everyone cooperates; everyone does the next thing that has to be done. No job is too small, too humble, or, on the other hand, too large. Tears ran freely, affection was exchanged openly, exhaustion was defied. We all stopped caring about ourselves. The words "it's not about me" were never more true." ... 

If we are smart, if we are perceptive, we allow our defining moments to put our life back into perspective. That cab driver, Eddie, said, "Everything's different now, Mr. Yancey. I go to my brother's house every night. We sit around, watch TV, play with the kids, play games. Stuff we never used to do. Family stuff. And I haven't missed mass yet. I'll never be the same." He said, "Two weeks later, in a full day in Manhattan, I heard one car horn. I don't know how to drive anymore. I'm used to people honking at me, cutting me off, flipping me the bird. Now they're so polite; I don't know how to act."

For a moment, for a while, we saw ourselves differently, we saw our world differently. Some of our professional sports teams canceled their games. They knew that what they were about was comparatively little,
and at that moment almost obscene. Comedies went off the air for a time. So many people became aware of our fragile mortality. More people started going to church. The crime rate in New York City fell, dramatically.

You see, a defining moment simply puts your life back into perspective. The problem is: we forget. We forget the lessons we learned and drift back into the same obsessions, the same trivialities that consumed us before the defining moment. We forget how mortal we are. We forget how important family is. We forget how important God is. We begin to live again, as if things are more important than people; we begin to live again, as if it's all about me; we begin to live again, as if God can be marginalized, or ignored altogether.

I suppose that's why memorials are so important — so we will remember, again. So they can correct our course again.

- Guys — your family is precious. More precious than your work, or your pleasure.
- Your friends are precious. More precious than your stuff.
- Most of all, your God is precious. If we are perceptive, we will realize that the real defining moment of all of our lives was on a hill, far away, on a cross. And every week we gather together so we won't lose perspective, so we won't forget. Every week we take this bread and juice so we keep that defining moment vivid in our lives. So we remember, a keep him first.