

The Bill Comes Due

Exodus 14:21-31

Matthew 18:21-35

I plan my sermons by the quarter. I choose the Bible passages on which they will be based, read them, decide on my five or fewer word theme statement and then write a title for each one. When I created my summary and title for today's sermon, I completely missed the mark. My cursory reading of the Matthew passage led me to focus on the "bill coming due", on the way the unforgiving servant got what was coming to him. I think I meant to preach about how we need to avoid God's just repayment for our sins. As I did my homework this week, however, I quickly saw that the Matthew and Exodus passages, when taken together, are really about God's deliverance of us despite our sin. God forgives. We must too.

We observed the twenty-second anniversary of the 911 attacks last Monday. The night before, CBS 60 Minutes re-aired a Norah O'Donnell interview with Air Force fighter pilots Mark Sasseville and Heather Penney. These two were scrambled to intercept any more hijacked airplanes that might still be in the air. The F-16s they flew were not armed with missiles or machine gun bullets; as now General Sasseville explained, "In pre-911 days the risk of keeping live ammunition loaded on board was considered too great. Since then, of course, we keep fighters and bombers prepared 24/7 and 365." (The 365 means in every direction surrounding our entire country.) As

they ran out to their aircraft they agreed that if necessary, they would ram any planes that were flying in the wrong direction and refused to communicate over the radio. A kamikaze mission. Intentionally sacrificing their own lives in order to protect others.

Air traffic control alerted them to United Airlines flight 93, which had taken off from Newark airport and flown toward Chicago. But over central Ohio, as we now know, hijackers killed the flight crew and took control of the 757, the second-largest passenger plane then in operation. They turned it around and began flying toward Washington D.C. Although unproven, the assumption most have made is that they intended to crash it into the U.S. Capitol building there. Sasseville and Penney turned northwest to meet it. But the passengers on flight 93, having learned of the attacks on the World Trade Center, figured out their plane was part of the same plot. They overpowered the hijackers and aircraft hit the ground at about 500 miles per hour. Sasseville and Penney never saw the it.

In the 60 Minutes interview, Major Penney said the reality of what she and Sasseville planned to do “is with me every day. But I never hesitated for a moment on 9/11. It was the only thing we could do and we had to do it.” When O'Donnell asked how that made her feel, Penney said, “I am actually overwhelmed with hope. Those people in that airplane are the real heroes. They show the world what America is really about.” Then General Sasseville added, “Hope, yes, and forgiveness. If we lose those two things we are no longer who we say we are.”

Hope and forgiveness. On a mission trip our previous church took in 2013, to help clean up after Super Storm Sandy in New Jersey, we stopped by the Flight 93 memorial in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Located at the site the airplane hit the earth, it creates the same reaction in virtually every visitor: silence. We drove up in our rented vans to the sound of our typically chatty youth. But when the long gash into the field came into view, all talk stopped. The crash investigators and the National Park Service had cleaned out all fragments of the destroyed airplane, but what it did to the ground remained. And the enormity of what the hijackers did hit us in the gut. Their hatred for us, our way of life, probably our religion. Their callous disregard for human life. As we stood on the observation deck overlooking the site, the youth started talking quietly. Most of them were too young to remember 9/11/2001, though nearly all of them had been born by then. What I recall them saying often was, "Why?!?"