

Scripture

Ecclesiastes 11: 7-11

*Oh, how sweet the light of day,
And how wonderful to live in the sunshine!
Even if you live a long time, don't take a single day for granted.
Take delight in each light-filled hour,
Remembering that there will also be many dark days
And that most of what comes your way is smoke.*

*You who are young, make the most of your youth.
Relish your youthful vigor.
Follow the impulses of your heart.
If something looks good to you, pursue it.
But know also that not just anything goes;
You have to answer to God for every last bit of it.*

*Live footloose and fancy-free—
You won't be young forever.
Youth lasts about as long as smoke.*

(The Message)

Message

Pastor Dennis

So Much Smoke

Big Idea: This is a sermon about memory and how it can affect us in all that we do: positively and negatively. September 11, 2001 can shape us, either positively or negatively. This is an unpacking of the 9/11 event and what it may say to us seven years later ... it owes a debt to Joseph Bottum in *First Things* for ideas that are part of the core structure of what is said here.

There are clearly events that have happened in our lives where the moment is seared into our consciousness.

One of my strongest memories of my father was his ability to tell the story of what he was doing when he heard of Pearl Harbor being bombed.

He was driving a bus for Tampa Transit and a person got on board with an early battery powered radio and said "Have you heard, Pearl Harbor has been bombed." Spellbound all on the bus listened to the early accounts of how our country was pulled into war ...

While assassination of President Kennedy are of course, seared into my consciousness, another August day less than a year also brings with it strong memories. I can recall sitting in that University of Georgia stairwell, listening to President Lyndon Johnson talking to us one evening about events in a faraway place called the Gulf of Tonkin and remember how it would pull us into war ...

For many my guess is that those thoughts about Twin Towers have swamped out possible remembered thoughts of Japanese Zeros or Destroyers attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin with what we were doing when we heard about the events that we call “nine-eleven”.

And ... we sometimes look back on those “go to war” moments and given our choices of putting on one of two sets of lenses in order to better understand the moment – one set smoke colored, providing a darker image and the other a lighter, more hopeful color, that allows us to perhaps see a more optimistic situation or context – we seem to instinctively put on the set that darkens our views ...¹

Going to war does seem to etch a moment into our minds ...such moments are for many of us a loss of youth and moments where smoke and confusion begins to fill our lives ... an end to our youth and the start of our lives as adults ... confused and seeking clarity ... looking for a divine wind to blow the clutter out of our lives and give us an illumination of the truth of the moment.

And because these go to war moments bring with them such intense memories ... we often focus on what it is we lost at that moment, rather than trying to ‘get it right’ – it being our memory. We too often ask: what did the moment do to me, how was I altered and changed ... we often make the event about ourselves ... sometimes to our detriment or shame.² We introduce smoke into our analysis and it too often darkens the moment ... and of course ... our memory.

¹ Bottum in March, 2008 *First Things* “The Judgment of Memory”, p. 30: “as if black-tinted lenses will see more clearly than rose-tinted ones”. An excellent article but I chose to focus on smoke-colored and away from rose-tinted as I didn’t want to even tangentially create an impression of a cheery optimism that is flawed in its base or approach.

² Bottum, p. 29. Bottum calls this “second innocence” and this is my read on what Bottum has to say here ... as to detriment or shame, it is in essence, a central theme of the overall essay. Second Innocence – what we lost is not what we should seek ... we often seek to “get it right”. Shaw – getting it right HERE might be an understanding of how we see the beauty in the horror ... and there clearly was and is and should be beauty for us to see in that horror ...

We look at the events of nine-eleven and the legitimate darkness of planes smashing into the towers, and stockbrokers jumping from windows, and stewardess suddenly curtailed conversations, and ... we focus on the smoke ... and we often let that smoke blur our memory of the moment ...

(Long Pause)

Today's scripture comes to us from what is called the Wisdom literature of the Bible ... it suggests that if you follow these maxims, good things will happen to you ... (First service only) today's call to worship was drawn from the book of Proverbs and these Proverbs might be said to be the wisdom of the sages coming to us across time in order to clear the smoke out of our lives and talk to us about what is really important.³

But there is so much smoke in our lives ... and we often look for it to the detriment of our willingness to see hope and joy in a moment that is also one of pain and anguish.

It is almost like our lives are constructed in such a way that on September 10, 2001 we can see everything clearly, and then, the events happen in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania and our ability to understand the past becomes distorted and blurred ... and we can no longer truly see clearly ... there are two pairs of glasses for us to pick up ... and our hands reach for those that are smoke tinted ... and leave those on the table the table that allow us to remember the event by seeing the heroic.

A famous Danish philosopher and theologian – Soren Kierkegaard -- once said that: “It is quite true what philosophy says: that life must be understood backward ... but then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forward.”⁴

It is almost like at times, we retreat crab-like facing the demonic smoke allowing it to chase us out of the room ... we skitter across the floor moving backwards ... backing into an uncertain future ... only looking at what is behind us, and not focusing on what is before us ...

³ My own view is that Wisdom and Job talk to each other. Wisdom suggests that you suffer because you deserve it, and Job suggests that we suffer because that is part of living a life. Elements of both are of course true, but clearly, a passenger on an airliner over Pennsylvania did nothing other than buy a ticket and their presence is not tragic in any classical sense.

⁴ Bottum, page 33.

I would offer that the collective moments of nine-eleven scream for insight that is not filled with memories of smoke and pain and fear ... but are rather focused on ideas about hope, joy, optimism ...

Being able to reject that backwards, crab-like movement and substitute for it instead a clear vision of the future drawn from that courage we saw on that nine-eleven day gives us a sparkling opportunity for insight ... And at just such a moment of insight – that one song writer has flushed the clouds (or smoke or fog) out of his life – gives us the lyrics to at least one popular song

I can see clearly now, the rain is gone,
I can see all obstacles in my way
Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind
It's gonna be a bright (bright), bright (bright)
Sun-Shiny day.⁵

Johnny Nash says “when we see the obstacles – the smoke – you get it all wrong ... I can indeed understand what the future is saying to me, because that smoke that was blinding me is past and I only see a bright, bright future”.

To heck with smoke ... that is all it is ... smoke ... and it can shape me only if I let it ...

(Repeat) To heck with smoke ... that is all it is ... smoke ... and it can shape me only if I let it ...

Nash is saying the world is one of beauty ...

And our teacher here in Ecclesiastes is telling us the same thing ... the world is a beautiful one ... seek every chance you get to live in the now ...retain that youthful enthusiasm for life and joy and hope and seeing what is good in the world ... you will get plenty of chances to fill your vision with smoke if you let it ...

One writer suggests that “[Dickens provides us] a world in which beauty is illuminated by morality, morality by rationality, and rationality by beauty.”⁶

Beauty ... There is to me a tremendous beauty in seeing and hearing how ordinary people rose to the occasion on that nine-eleven moment. Simple stock brokers who made sure the doors stayed open. Security

⁵ Johnny Nash: I Can See Clearly Now.

⁶ Bottum: p. 34.

personnel who remembered where their bull-horns were and rallied frightened people to the safety of a down staircase. Firemen who looked up at fire 80 stories up and quietly went about putting on their gear to go about their duties. We could all name more moments of beauty.

There is truly a beauty to people helping other people at a moment of pain, fear, and anxiety ... and we can see and name those acts of beauty by taking off the smoke-tinted glasses in our lives ...

Morality ... And this was beauty to us because it was motivated by the good in human beings rather than the anger, bitterness, and brutality that caused the moment to exist in the first place ... We saw people operating for the common good ... people operating off of a set of moral principles that says we are indeed all in this together ... One may have said, “sure I am as scared as hell ... but maybe if we all collectively and calmly and quietly start moving to safety ... just maybe we can get out of this ...” We see and name that morality that contributes – that makes the beauty possible -- by taking off the smoke-tinted glasses in our lives ...

Rationality ... We keep our brains turned on ... we use our reason, informed by a morality framed by a solid understanding of what it is to be moral, in what seems to be an absolutely immoral situation ... Job-like knowing in our heart that we did nothing to deserve this pain and agony and absolute chaos that is being brought to us ... but because we see acts of beauty, informed by a moral ethos that says we are not alone here ... the rational part of our mind starts to act and the smoke is dispelled ... it is pumped out of our very memories ...

And we realize ... that our memory of the past is just so much smoke

We put on our other glasses and the entire situation returns to allowing us to see moment of beauty ...

We can look at that vacant NY skyline, that memorial at the Pentagon, that temporary place of memory in Pennsylvania and see only pain and suffering and chaos ... and smoke ...

Just as we could look at that cross behind us and see in it ... pain and suffering and chaos ... and allow smoke to affect our view ... but as Johnny Nash suggests to us ... it is rather for us a symbol of how it is that we might blow all that smoke out of lives and instead ... see clearly now ...

I think I can make it now, the pain is gone
All of the bad feelings have disappeared
Here is the rainbow I've been prayin for
It's gonna be a bright (bright), bright (bright)
Sun-Shiny day.

Johnny provides for us an echo of the words from Ecclesiastes

Oh, how sweet the light of day,
And how wonderful to live in the sunshine!
Even if you live a long time, don't take a single day for granted.
Take delight in each light-filled hour,
Remembering that there will also be many dark days
And that most of what comes your way is smoke.

We are given by God's Grace, a choice ... we can put on one of two lenses
... one which brings wisdom and insight, and one which brings pain and
anger ...

If we want the world to be filled with smoke ... we can chose to put on
the smoke tinted ones ... and most of what will come our way will be
smoke ...

But we also have the option of picking up the set which colors our
memories and thus shapes our very lives ... Remember those bad
memories are only smoke. **To heck with them ... they are only ...
smoke ... and they can shape me only if I let them ...**

...

Let us pray ...

This Sermon was delivered at Stratmoor Hills UMC in Colorado Springs on September 14, 2008. This sermon was strongly influenced and shaped by an article by Joseph Bottum in *First Things* of March, 2008 called "The Judgment of Memory." Pastor Dennis has foot-noted where that material is quoted or adapted. The copyright for material that is not foot-noted belongs to C. Dennis Shaw and dates from September 14, 2008.