

I still vividly remember the morning of September 11, 2001. I happened to be watching one of the morning shows when they showed footage of a plane crashing into the World Trade Center. At first, it didn't dawn on me that it was an intentional act. I assumed it must've been pilot error or some mechanical problem.

Then, another plane hit the second tower and the situation became obvious. I recall sitting and watching the coverage all day long. We've all seen the images and sounds of that day so many times: the frantic phone calls from people trapped in their offices, the twin towers collapsing, the people running through the streets through a toxic dust cloud.

As some rightly pointed out, the 9/11 attacks were not the first and they would not be the last acts of terrorism on American soil, but I still recall the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness in 2001. I once heard a quote that captures the despair many of us felt: “We are standing helpless before the towering mystery of sin, evil, and chaos, feeling our helpless inadequacy as we face the grim fact of man's inhumanity to man.”

This week, a number of you have mentioned to me the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness after watching the coverage of the Hamas attack on Israel. As if we didn't already have enough to worry about, as if we weren't already anxious about the state of our world, the coverage is 24 hours. The images are repeated over and over again. Once again it seems “We are standing helpless before the towering mystery of sin, evil, and chaos, feeling our helpless inadequacy as we face the grim fact of man's inhumanity to man.”

I share that quote with you, because I think it describes how we might feel in the face of so much tragedy, but I don't actually believe we are helpless. I don't believe God makes human beings helpless or powerless. So, what is a Christian response “as we face the grim fact of man's inhumanity to man?” How do we maintain our own sanity? What resources does God make available to us in anxiety provoking times?

If there was anyone who had reason to feel helpless and hopeless, it was the Apostle Paul. In fact, his letter to the Philippians is purported to be composed from a jail cell. The

Christian community in Philippi was the first church established by Paul on European soil. From the church's founding, it faced opposition.

A main theme of his letter is persistence and faith in the face of opposition and even the threat of death. This passage that Phil read for us this morning comes toward the end of the letter. And I just want to call your attention to the fact that Paul instructs them regarding what they should think about.

He gave them instructions as to what to do. He exhorted the community to preach the gospel. They were to witness to Christ's message of love, to pray, to put aside their differences. But he concludes the letter by telling them what to think about.

"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." I think Paul was trying to get across that what we think about is just as important as what we do.

This past week, a couple people mentioned to me that they had to stop watching the news. In my opinion, that's a great idea. I once heard someone say that the news is to the mind what sugar is to the body. It's great to have a bowl of ice cream every once in a while. But eat ice cream all day, every day and it will have a negative effect on one's health. You can eat all the Twinkies you want, but no amount of Twinkies will give your body the nourishment it needs.

Don't get me wrong. I think it's very important to know what's going on in the world. We should be aware of all the suffering and violence that goes on. I don't think Paul was instructing the Philippians to live in denial or to avoid the awfulness in the world. But he wanted them to have something of a balanced diet.

For years now, I've had this commitment that every day I will have one green vegetable and one piece of fruit. I'm pretty good about it. There are very few days in which I don't have my green vegetable and my fruit. Everything else I eat, on a given day, might be junk food or sweets, but I know that my body needs nutritious foods also.

Our minds are the same. In our 24-hour news cycle, images of terrorism and warfare are running constantly. We don't need the news as much as we think we do. It only gives us the illusion of understanding. Seeing those images over and over again, inflates our sense

of how bad things really are. Think about it. How much does the news really help you with your life?

I'm not saying, "Don't watch the news." I'm saying make sure you get your green vegetable and your piece of fruit every day. Make sure you also expose yourself to things that will nurture and nourish your spirit.

God created a world in which there is truth, honor, justice, and things that are pleasing to the eyes and ears. There are people doing commendable and excellent things. There are people and situations that ought to make us rejoice and give God praise. Pay some attention to those kinds of things. Make them part of your daily diet.

Someone gave me a gift subscription to Yes! Magazine. They claim to be a nonprofit, independent publisher of "solutions journalism." They decided the news is so bad and so distressing, people need to hear positive stories. It reports good things people are doing all over the world. The editors say, "Through rigorous reporting on the positive ways communities are responding to social problems and insightful commentary that sparks constructive discourse, YES! Media inspires people to build a more just, sustainable, and compassionate world."

Reading that magazine is one way I focus on the good. It helps me to think about the things Paul talked about. What are the ways you can take time in your life to set your mind on things that are beautiful, insightful, inspiring, and worthy of praise?

Maybe limit your news intake and read an inspiring book. Don't just think about terrorists. Think about first responders, firefighters, and medical personnel that risk their own lives to save others. We're hearing a lot about a loneliness epidemic. Make someone's day with a phone call or a visit. Let the joy such a connection would bring occupy your mind for a while. What we think about is just as important as what we do.

Paul instructs the church at Philippi to rejoice in the Lord always. Rejoice not just in the good times. Rejoice always. Maybe you're a dancer. In his book titled *Full Catastrophe Living*, Jon Kabat-Zinn describes a scene in the movie *Zorba the Greek*. Zorba's young companion asks him, "Zorba, have you ever been married?" Zorba replies, "Am I not a man? Of course, I've been married. Wife, house, kids, everything...the full catastrophe!"

Kabat-Zinn writes: "Zorba's response embodies a supreme appreciation for the richness of life and the inevitability of all its dilemmas, sorrows, tragedies, and ironies. His

way is to 'dance' in the gale of the full catastrophe...In doing so, he is never weighed down for long, never ultimately defeated either by the world or by his own considerable folly."

Another thing Paul said is to pray and let your requests be made known to God. I don't know if you've ever noticed this. When Paul said let your requests be made known to God, the promise wasn't that we would get what we want. The promise was "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

You may remember that in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, there was a sudden interest among Christians to learn about Islam. When terrorism hit so close to home, many decided it was time to learn what it actually says in the Koran and what Muslim leaders teach. But I remember hearing it suggested, as helpful as it might be to learn about another religion, there was something possibly more important to do in that moment.

The Rev. James Forbes was interviewed on television. He was then the pastor at the Riverside Church in New York. Someone asked him about this new interest in Islam. Rather than learning about someone else's religion, Rev. Forbes recommended each person to go deeper into their own religion. What does your religion tell you about loving the other? What does your tradition teach about peace? The deeper one goes in one's own religion, the more one sees what it has in common with others.

I believe that's a relevant word for each of us today, because we all desire peace. We desire world peace. We desire peace in our own nation and in our own communities. We all need to find peace within. In the final words of our text, Paul did not tell the church to do anything extraordinary. He said, "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

God made an amazing world! Life is so miraculous! So, as you go through your week, consume a steady diet of whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable. Think about these things. And may the God of peace be with you.