

I wonder what text you're carrying with you this morning. I'm not talking about the one on your iPhone. I'm referring to the texts you have in your mind and in your heart this morning as you face God and one another. What's the text for today?

Surely some of us have brought the text of the tenth anniversary of September 11th 2001. Except for the very young among us, or those who were not yet born, we know exactly where where we were, with whom we spoke, and I can imagine that even today, a decade later, you can access the text, if you will, of what you felt in those first moments. All of those are some of the texts we have this morning.

Then there's the texts from radio, TV, the internet and the newspapers which might even spell weariness about this anniversary. How much more of this must we read and see? And so some of us are wondering if the media has gone too far in replaying all those images. That is perhaps a text for some of us.

Yet another text, vastly different in tone and affect, is this homecoming, our rallying together as a community, the embarking onto yet another annual journey of life and death, goodness and struggle. You have hopes and expectations for what this year will be, don't you? Maybe the text for you is a desire to know God more clearly, or to have an encounter with the Holy that will inspire you, if not to great things at least to new things. Maybe you're new and you've come this morning to check us out, hoping to find a welcome and a word or a tune that will make sense of life. Some of us are carrying those kind of texts.

In Boston there's a billboard from the Ad Council to mark this anniversary of September 11th 2001. If you're on 93 northbound you'll see it plainly, on the left. It's blue with white letters. The letters form to spell three words. That's all. Just three words.

Remember.

Honor.

Reunite.

That's a text and an image that I can't get out of my head. Remember. Honor. Reunite. But how?

Then there are these actual texts, literally--the ones we've read from Holy Scriptures. Thousands of Christians are listening to these same readings today. Given the day you might think we chose these readings...for is it not uncanny how fitting each is? What we have is what the lectionary happened to assign for this the 13th Sunday after Pentecost. I don't subscribe to the magical theory about synchronicity. I don't believe God planned for us to have these readings this week. It's just that the core of our faith is densely and inescapably packed with the hardest stuff.

If there is a single most important Bible story, the reading from Exodus just may be it. Scholars tell us that the Exodus, the saga of the people of God being led by Moses, from slavery into the wilderness for 40 years and then finally across the river into the promised land, contains within it all the major themes and motifs of the rest of the Bible. It sets forth the idea that God calls people from slavery to freedom, that God provides, that God chooses men and women, that God

will never abandon, and that, therefore, there is nothing to fear. All those ideas will come to full fruition in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But what about the Egyptians? How can we hear this text and not wonder about their deaths? Did they have to be drowned? Did we have to see their bodies dead on the seashore?

Some of you know what comes next in this story. Moses and the Israelites sing a joyous victory song. Like unto the songs of victory some in our own country were singing the night Osama Bin Laden was captured and killed. Do you think God wants us to sing those songs? We must remember 9/11--as the billboard commands and our hearts know--but remembering is something different from revenging.

The readings from the New Testament are no less applicable. One calls us to refrain from judgmentalism, underscoring that people are really just the same. Surely that means that we have more in common with our Muslim neighbors than we sometimes acknowledge. The other, from the Gospel, is a parable of Jesus forgiveness...almost a kind of denial of possible denial. Forgiveness, at least the credible, real kind, is way up on that hard list.

The essence of forgiveness is refusing to allow past actions and failures to define our future. Jesus stretches the legal requirement, saying to Peter, that it's not seven, but seventy-seven times seven...what he means is always. Jesus goes on underscoring the importance of forgiveness, but it's a sobering parable: beware if you're unable to extend the mercy God has already given because when we can't we're left with a life of relentless calculations and emotional scarcity. Yet it can't be forced, can it?

It's right for us to find a balance between our homecoming today and the observing of 9/11 anniversary, or at least to try. But we must also remember the events 2000 years ago when God's own son, surveying a field of broken lives and desolate hearts, chose to call down from heaven forgiveness, not vengeance, and in this way opened a future marked by mercy, not judgment; by trust, not score-keeping; by hope and courage, rather than despair and violence. By life, instead of death.

If we wanted a theme for today, or a theme for the rest of this program year, we could get a banner to hang over the railroad tracks in Winchester center that reads "Forgiven and Forgiving: Join us this year at the Parish of the Epiphany." Easy work? Absolutely not. But so essential for kingdom life.

Whatever texts you brought with you this morning, I pray that you'll find here a strong expression of the best of what Christianity offers. Take from here other texts, ones that will renew your trust and your hope, texts that give you a sense of God's goodness and bounteous gifts, and texts that lead you from strength to strength in the joyous work of being forgiven and forgiving.