

## Sermon by Pastor John Mack

### Giving Comfort

We who live in your shelter, O God, who abide in your shadow for life say,

“You are our refuge, the rock in whom we trust,” for you rescue us from every snare, and you protect us from every calamity. You shield us within the cover of your wings and your faithful promises are our armor. We need not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day; not the dangers that stalk us in darkness, nor the disasters that come in the morning. Though a thousand may fall by our side, and ten thousand are dying close by, evil will not overtake us. We will watch as the wicked are punished, but we will not share in it because you are our refuge! We choose you above all other gods to shelter us. How then can evil overtake us, or any terror come near? For your angels protect us wherever we go. On their hands they will bear us up to keep us from stumbling against stones on the trail. Whether we meet a lion or step on a snake, still we will be safe. For God says, “Because they love me, I will rescue them. I will protect those who know my name. When they call on me, I will answer. I will be with them in time of trouble. I will honor them with long life and show them my salvation.”

I don't know about you, but I've been feeling terrible these days. I'm morose, not sleeping well, addicted to the news, and irritable. Ask me how I am and I'll say fine. Tell me that I don't seem fine and I'll shrug and smile. This has nothing to do with September 11th and my son watching people jump 90 floors rather than burn; nothing to do with the school children on that plane, or the fire, police and emergency workers buried beneath the rubble at the World Trade Center.

I am not allowed to want vengeance. That's okay with me. Even if I had the people responsible for these attacks before me, I am incapable of thinking up a punishment

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that makes for justice. If this evil is ever to be punished beyond what the hijackers did to themselves, God is going to have to do it. And, frankly, I don't believe God is in that business, whatever scripture may say. Whatever punishment is served by keeping someone alive with the knowledge of their deeds, that's the best I can hope for. That, and trying to see it doesn't happen again.

The people who tell me that I am responsible, or that the country is because of its foreign policy, or that we're just getting a taste of what everyone lives with are frankly driving me a little crazy. I don't have to be guiltless to be a victim. Among the more than 6,000 people that were intentionally killed by the terrorists, there must have been some who were guilty of some pretty big stuff. And some of those may even have been fire fighters. Does that mean something just happened? Because we give \$20 billion dollars to Israel each year, does that mean we should have expected this, or that we are responsible? I don't really believe that the people who planned this evil knew what they were doing. Even as they indoctrinated the young men who did it, I don't believe they grasped the enormity of the evil that had hold of them. They kept themselves at too great a distance to appreciate the evil killing of the innocents, of their own brothers and sisters and children.

I hate their perversion of religion, their demonic devotion to an imaginary god who believes in their purity, in the righteousness of their rage, in the justice of their cause over everyone else's. I hate equally the same perversion of religion perpetrated by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson and a host of others who worship a god who so perfectly serves their purposes.

I am shocked at the book of discipline that the hijackers carried, filled with the sorts of practices - prayers and meditations and preparation - that I sometimes use. The perversion of spiritual practice in the service of their own deaths and the deaths of so many is appalling, and accomplished without any capacity to see the evil they did. How could they walk onto those planes past the children and still stay committed to their purpose? Their spirituality drained the meaning out of birth as well as death. And I want to know if they really believed in the afterlife, if they really counted on paradise. Or were

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they just so furious, so dedicated to their mission as masters of the universe that nothing mattered at all.

But, look, I'm okay. I'm getting over it. The president I didn't vote for, the one I gave the benefit of the doubt, the one who showed me that he is in over his head and way too American for my liking, has now ironically been teaching me how to be patient and careful and civilized. And, do you know who has been teaching him? The military, not the civilians! I am now agreeing with him that we need to open up the airports and get back in the skies and back to business. My anger is reserved for the Secret Service and all those arrogant security freaks want me to think that they can save me. I never asked them to save me, only do their jobs at places they were hired to be. It was their system that was pierced, not mine, and I'd be very grateful if they'd stop their silly games in our backyard.

So, you see, I'm really not that affected by the attacks and I am getting over it. It's just that I'm walking around with a chip on my shoulder demanding a zone of personal justice. You can't see it on the outside, but inside a part of me is a spiritual terrorist, inflicting imaginary death on thousands for the offenses which are either not offenses or not intended. And I know that those of you who disagree with everything I just said are doing the same to me.

What I really want and can't ask for is comfort. Can you imagine that? A U.S. citizen, one with so rich a life, needing even more comfort? It's as absurd as the joy I have seen among some of the desperately poor in Latin America.

I don't want to be patronized. I don't need a spiritual coach to tell me about life, or the politically astute to give me a lesson on world politics. I don't even want a lesson in conflict resolution or peacemaking. I want to be held and sheltered, rocked and sung to. I want reassurance that it's going to be okay, that they can't get to me, that I'm safe.

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I want attention to be paid to the wounds, especially the ones I can't acknowledge. It has been 34 years since I felt like this coming back from Vietnam completely intact, and filled with a rage I couldn't understand that came from events that were no longer affecting me.

This need for comfort travels two paths. It can open us to new dimensions of ourselves and those around us. The first male feminists I met were Vietnam veterans; they knew the suffering of those who loved them and were sincere in wanting to give comfort to their invisible wounds. Or the unmet need for comfort can turn to rage and self-hatred, destroying us and those around us. I have a little personal experience with both.

Comfort is so hard to give, and I'm not sure why. We want to attach a but to it all the time. "I feel bad for you, but ..... I know you're hurting, but you have to move on." "I sympathize, but you can't stay inside forever."

Psalm 91 is not a political statement or even a justification for who we are. In our suffering, God simply gives us comfort. God holds us and strokes us, sings to us and rocks us. God reassures us that we are safe and that everything will be alright. And this is so because God knows us better than we know ourselves and God sees the wounds which we cannot acknowledge. Nothing else changes. The answer is not more money, a good therapist, a new job, a changed outlook, religious insight or anything else. The response to death is grief and to injury comfort. Comfort touches the cuts we never felt inflicted and heals unseen damage.

At this point in time in our life together, nothing is more pressing than our need for comfort, and for most of us, in spite of Psalm 91, our comforter ultimately has to have skin. Not all of us are able to give comfort right now. Some can only receive. But for those of us that can, the need is clear. The wounded are all about us and they are only pretending that the analysis helps. We are all victims and no one of us has clean hands or a pure heart. So, to the extent that you are able, focus on holding and rocking, singing and reassuring. And let God take care of the rest. For as God uses us to give comfort, so does God use the

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hands and minds, the hearts and bodies of those entrusted with a host of necessary jobs and vocations.