

**On What is Rising from the Ashes**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Susan Manker-Seale**  
**September 23, 2001**  
**UU Congregation of Northwest Tucson, AZ**

America is stunned. Each of us is in a little bit of shock still from witnessing, albeit from our televisions and radios, one of the most horrific disasters of the past one hundred years. Several hundreds of thousands of us are in more than a little bit of shock. They are grieving for friends and relatives; they have lost loved ones and lost jobs, lost entire businesses. Tens of thousands of people are facing the loss of their livelihoods as a result of the repercussions of the World Trade Center disaster dubbed the "Attack on America." Everywhere reporters and congress people and the person on the street are saying that we have turned a corner, and things will never be the same again. Certainly it will be a long time, if ever, before the images we witnessed two weeks ago will fade or disappear.

America is stunned and angry, grieving and frightened. People don't make good decisions when they're in such a state of mind and body. A week ago, President Bush said to take a day off, to spend Friday the fourteenth in church or temple, and he proclaimed a National Day of Mourning and Prayer. That was a good thing to do. When people are upset, they need to take time out to settle down, to work their way beyond the anger in order to see their options more clearly; in order that we don't hurt or even kill each other in a moment of blind rage and grief.

We expect our children to exercise such forbearance with others. We teach it to them and we insist that they practice it. Adults, on the other hand, in political situations such as this, seem to think they can break the commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill," and pretend the admonitions to turn the other cheek and to love your enemy don't apply to them, even while they proclaim God to be on their side. So, in the best interest of the American people, we witness the beginning of "Operation Infinite Justice." I have heard of God's infinite mercy. Never have I heard of "infinite justice." Upon just what sort of road are we embarking? What sort of creature rises now from the ashes of the World Trade Center, from the ashes of more than six thousand people? Is it a dragon, formidable and dangerous, or a phoenix, a creature of excellence and beauty. What do we really want, in our hearts, to call upon to serve us in the days to come?

Last Sunday, during our healing service, the Rev. Sandy Szelag stood up and shook one of the scales of the dragon before us. She referred to the words that Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson had used to blame the World Trade Center disaster on groups they hate: abortionists, humanists, gays and lesbians, not to mention those despised folks at the American Civil Liberties Union. There were one or two more groups, but I can't remember them. Sandy rattled them off, said how angry she had been at first, and then how she had laughed. "I'm all those," she said to us, "and proud of it!" In her bringing us to laughter, she transformed that dragon scale into a thing of excellence and beauty: a multi-colored, radiant and beloved, feather of the Phoenix.

Yesterday morning, Scott Simon of National Public Radio, replayed Falwell and Robertson as they claimed America deserved what we got because we allow abortionists and humanists, gays and lesbians, and civil liberties advocates to dwell freely among us. Then Simon told of the gay

rugby player who stood up to the terrorists on the Pittsburgh flight and who died so courageously. Who would you rather have sitting next to you on a plane? He asked us. Who do you think is closer to God?

Wow! I thanked god for Scott Simon. Curtiss said, Isn't he great! Simon took that scale of bigotry and with a puff of air, transformed it into a feather of diversity, of the great respect for others that is the philosophical foundation of our country, not to mention the legal foundation. Not to mention the theological foundation. Falwell and Robertson have buried themselves in the ashes, and even considering their apologies, I don't see them rising again soon, not with the power they once wielded over America's heart.

We're not going to tolerate the old ways as much this time. We're not going to tolerate an unexamined patriotism. We're not going to tolerate a call to war that in itself becomes an act of terrorism on the world. It seems to me that people are acknowledging the incredible balancing act that is before us, and the types of behaviors and considerations we must demand from our leaders. We are discussing the difference between an "act of war" and a "crime," and the ramifications for our collective response. We are talking about the difficulty in waging a war against terrorism when terrorism does not claim a particular country or ideology. We are showing the world, through email statements forwarded throughout the world and through documentaries shown on CNN, that the Afghan people are not the enemy, even as Pakistan strives to stem the flood of exodus from Afghanistan, a flood of the poorest of the poor, fearing the bombs of United States fury and grief that will surely pulverize the rubble of their already war-torn land. Are they not terrorized already?

People are holding up the scales of previous dragons and saying, "Not this time!" We must stop terrorism, but not with our own acts of terrorism. We must bring terrorists to justice, but not at the cost of innocent and already abused lives. One of the best emails I read was written by Tamim Ansary, an Afghan-American writer who lives in San Francisco and is the son of a former Afghani politician. Three people from three different source groups forwarded it to me last week. Here is some of what he wrote, September 14, 2001:

I speak as one who hates the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. There is no doubt in my mind that these people were responsible for the atrocity in New York. I agree that something must be done about those monsters.

But the Taliban and bin Laden are not Afghanistan. They're not even the government of Afghanistan. The Taliban are a cult of ignorant psychotics who took over Afghanistan in 1997. Bin Laden is a political criminal with a plan. When you think Taliban, think Nazis. When you think bin Laden, think Hitler. And when you think "the people of Afghanistan" think "the Jews in the concentration camps." It's not only that the Afghan people had nothing to do with this atrocity. They were the first victims of the perpetrators. They would exult if someone would come in there, take out the Taliban and clear out the rats' nest of international thugs holed up in their country.

Some say, why don't the Afghans rise up and overthrow the Taliban? The answer is, they're starved, exhausted, hurt, incapacitated, suffering. A few years ago, the United Nations estimated

that there are 500,000 disabled orphans in Afghanistan--a country with no economy, no food. There are millions of widows. And the Taliban has been burying these widows alive in mass graves. The soil is littered with land mines, the farms were all destroyed by the Soviets....New bombs would only stir the rubble of earlier bombs...."

If you want to read the rest of his letter, I have it up here in the pulpit or I can email forward it to you. I was wondering if President Bush had seen it. He acknowledged in his speech to the people last Thursday that the people of Afghanistan are not our enemies. He said:

...In Afghanistan we see al-Quaida's vision for the world. Afghanistan's people have been brutalized, many are starving and many have fled.

Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television. Religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough.

The United States respects the people of Afghanistan--after all, we are currently its largest source of humanitarian aid--but we condemn the Taliban regime.

On CNN the other night, reporters again cautioned the world not to blame the people of Afghanistan. Then they showed the documentary, "Behind the Veil," in which a woman of Afghan descent goes undercover to show us what is really happening there. She said that in Afghanistan you can be executed for just about anything, and she showed the football stadium grounds where people are shot. She showed it happening. She interviewed people from a secret camera under her garments, traditional clothing that revealed nothing of her face or body. People told her of the massacres in village after village, of how their family members were shot by the Taliban.

I am so grateful to see the way the people of our country are trying doggedly and desperately to divert the common rage, to defuse the common demand for retaliation, to present a case for a people on the brink of existence but who have come under the terrible eye of...what? Of a formidable and dangerous dragon, or of a phoenix, creature of excellence and beauty, with a compassionate eye towards suffering itself. What will we learn from our suffering? Compassion and thoughtful, intelligent action? Or hate and dispassionate destruction?

When people die, we do not create memorials that are ugly. We bring flowers, say compassionate words, give money to build beautiful monuments and to fund actions that rain respect and honor on the one who has died. In the name of six thousand five hundred innocent and beautiful people, what sort of memorial should we create? What actions would bring honor and respect to their sacrifice? What decisions can turn the scales of the dragon into the feathers of the Phoenix? Perhaps no more than a puff of air, or a courageous laugh that says we will not bow to the hate mongers. We will not become what we ourselves despise: terrorists with no compassion and with the vilest of plans. No. We the people must not act upon our rage, but rather take time out to remember who we really are, what we really are, where we really are: here in the United States of America, America the beautiful, a creature of beauty and excellence, of

pride and of love; a country where all peoples can live in peace and justice. We must remember who we are, so that all the world might live in peace. We must find the ways.

I want to quote from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. How wonderful that his words live on, like Gandhi's, to give us strength in terrible times:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it... Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate.... Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

Do you believe it? Love has great power, builds things of strength and beauty. There are people needing us to defend them: our Muslim brothers and sisters living in fear right here in the United States of America, here in our beloved city of Tucson, fearing that they might be the next target of hate, to be shot down in the street like the man in Mesa. We must respond with love. We have taken a first step, and made a pact with the Islamic Center here in Tucson to be present in love at least once a week when they gather to pray, to use our bodies as sacred shields in a candlelight vigil of protection outside the Center. They said thank-you with huge hearts. They invited us in and told us, "They say we are terrorists. This is not true." For a long while they spoke of their faith, almost in a desperate effort to be understood, to be trusted, to be appreciated. And we listened, and we were changed. It was not a little thing. Love is never a little thing. Love is the greatest thing of all. At least three major religions teach that it is so: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They are not the only ones. Love is not a little thing; it is the strongest force we have to eradicate terrorism from the world. We must remember that. We must remember who and what and where we are, in order that we might raise the Phoenix and leave the dragon in the ashes where it belongs. This would be the greatest memorial we could ever create: a memorial that is a people, wise and compassionate and incredibly strong, a people of excellence and beauty, a people who are love incarnate, wearing feathers of radiance to enlighten our world.