
Starting from Zero

Genesis 2:4b-9

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 11, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

The term “Ground Zero” is not an ancient phrase that goes back to America’s founding fathers. But neither did it enter the dictionary on 9/11. The term “Ground Zero” was first used during the Manhattan Project that planned the deadly bombing of Japan. The fearsome weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 killed around 200,000 civilians. After the Manhattan Project and its apocalyptic climax, Ground Zero came to mean that part of the ground situated immediately under an exploding bomb. Since 9/11 “Ground Zero” has come to refer to the site in New York City where a rather different Manhattan project turned airplanes into guided missiles and left over two-and-a-half thousand people dead.

All of us know exactly where we were when we heard or saw the news. All of us experienced shudders of disbelief, panic, bewilderment and horror – a sense of something new, and mesmerizing, and terrifying.

Of all the distressing images of that terrible day, one of the most poignant and disturbing is the quantity of dust that was generated. When you watch the towers collapse, the first thing you see is an upsurge of dust and ash coming out of the descending buildings. That dust remained in the air for days and weeks, even years afterwards, and residents of New York City couldn’t avoid it in the air they breathed. When you appreciate that around half of those who died in the twin towers were not afterwards in any way identifiable in the remains, you realize with horror the incinerated lives that made up so much of that dust.

The original Manhattan Project went out into the desert of New Mexico in June 1945 and tested the world’s first nuclear weapon. The code name for the spot chosen for the explosion was, “Zero.” Out of the dust of the desert, out of Zero, came the project of death. The Manhattan Project, and the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that resulted, put an end to the War in the Pacific. That war had begun with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Responding to Pearl Harbor led, four years later, to Zero, to the dust of the New Mexico desert, and to the use of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons were a new development in the history of warfare. They changed everything. They opened the door to the killing of defenseless civilians in almost unimaginable numbers. For the four-and-a-half decades of the Cold War, the NATO powers pointed such weapons in the direction of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. They did so because it was believed Communism posed a fundamental threat to the identity and integrity of the West in general and America in particular. So great was the fear of the Soviet Union that there was a consensus behind going to almost any lengths to withstand its advance. Ronald Reagan called his adversary the “Evil Empire” – a designation that elevated political rivalry to the status of religious zeal. Reagan also maintained Communism would soon be consigned to the “ash heap of history” – a claim that seemed to have come true a few years later, when the Soviet Union imploded and the Cold War came to an end.

But out of the dust and ashes of the Cold War, two things happened without many Westerners noticing. One was that the nature of warfare quietly changed. The one war that everyone was obsessed with for 50 years, and that never finally happened, was a war between nation states: the Soviet Union on one side, and the United States on the other. In the 15 years following the end of the Cold War, there were fewer than 118 armed conflicts worldwide, and yet only seven of them were the old-fashioned kind in which one state fought against another. The rules of war changed almost overnight. War is no longer something fought by soldiers on a foreign field; in the last generation the casualties of war have been mostly civilians, and their killers have usually been citizens of their own country. Part of the outrage of terrorism is that it seems terrorists are taking cruel advantage of democratic freedoms and not playing by the rules of warfare; but the reality is that the

rules of warfare changed some time ago and almost no one is playing by the old rules anymore. People who say “9/11 changed everything” are simply naming the moment they came face to face with this new reality.

The second thing that happened was that a significant body of people in different places around the globe, but especially in the Muslim world, came to regard America very much as America had once regarded the Soviet Union. America had set the precedent for describing its adversary as an evil empire, for arming itself with terrifying and indiscriminate weapons, and for going to almost any lengths to undermine a culture that seemed so deeply to threaten and challenge its own. It turned out more than one party could play that game. Part of America’s strategy had been to support and advance the *mujahideen* who fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Among those who rose to prominence in the Afghan guerilla war was a young Osama bin Laden.

For Bin Laden and many people like him, the demise of the Soviet Union didn’t dismantle the notion that there was an evil empire that was to blame for all the world’s ills. The notion remained, but the name of the culprit simply became America. As America found itself, somewhat unexpectedly, to be alone as the world’s only superpower, it inherited the mantle of being the source of all the world’s woes. And this view of America appealed especially to those who saw the world’s evils as lying principally in the global political decline of Islam since the seventeenth century – epitomized by the creation of the state of Israel and the long-term presence of America troops in the dusty desert of Arabia, not far from the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Such people plotted to consign America to the ash heap of history. And the zeal with which they did so produced a phenomenon almost unprecedented in American history: the attacker who knew that his attack would instantly cost his own life. And not just one, lone, perhaps possessed, confused, or unstable attacker: no fewer than 19 hijackers, of one unwavering heart and one unswerving mind. It wasn’t Islam that attacked America on 9/11: it was 19 single-minded people who’d turned being anti-American into a whole new religion.

America is a country constructed around the idea that it is a wondrous thing for any person, however humble or eccentric, to fulfill his or her dreams. But what if their dreams are violent, murderous, and destructive on an unprecedented scale? The reality is, it’s very difficult indeed to stop them. Every step we make to stop them gives us less freedom, less to be proud of about our country, and less space in which to dream. You can’t cultivate a freedom worth having without the danger that someone will abuse it. That’s the risk of articulating a dream: someone, sooner or later, will trample on it and reduce it to dust.

Painful as it is, it’s important today to recognize that the 9/11 hijackers achieved almost exactly what they set out to do.

- They showed vividly, and in a way no one could ever forget, how profoundly some people in the world resent, detest, and reject American global power and cultural influence.
- They used the definitive weapon of the new kind of war – a shocking attack upon unwary civilians, so as to achieve maximum casualties.
- They provoked the leadership of the United States to drastic responses, in the dusty heat of Afghanistan but even more so in desert dust of Iraq, in internal security but even more so in the use of torture and indiscriminate imprisonment abroad – and these responses replicated and expanded precisely the kind of arbitrary and overbearing use of power that they’d accused America of in the first place.
- They concocted a blood-curdling potion that has poisoned the last ten years of American history, a dizzying cocktail of terror and incomprehension, that’s induced the most powerful economic and military power in history to adopt the mentality of a wounded and half-crazed lion, breathing vengeance and losing sight of proportionate response, resolved to do whatever it takes to obliterate terror from the earth and thus assuage the memory and the pain of its horrifying scar.
- And, most of all, the 9/11 hijackers left a series of searing visual images that continue to populate America’s worst nightmares, of sudden horror, hideous carnage, and terrifying destruction, the infinite

might of America reduced to zero, an icon of the demise of an evil empire, all Ronald Reagan's evocative imagery turned on its head, the most famous ash heap in history, tower and temple turned to dust.

In this Chapel on Ash Wednesday each year, and in millions of churches around the world, Christians line up and mark the beginning of Lent by receiving on their heads a vivid image, an imprint of dust and ashes. And as the ashes are drawn in the shape of the cross on our foreheads, we hear the words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." In the book of Genesis, we are told "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life."

Listen carefully to those words. This is a day to contemplate dust. Its horror, its ubiquity, its place in God's purposes. The dust – the dust of the earth, the dust of the desert, the dust of trampled dreams, the dust of destroyed buildings, the dust of fire-ravaged bodies, the dust of dead skin, the dust that filled the nostrils of Manhattan on 9/11: this is death, shocking, earthy, unavoidable, overwhelming, mundane. Dust is death. *But this is where God began.* God made humanity out of this dust. This is Ground Zero. This is the epicenter of dust. This is where the good news begins. This is where God makes humanity. God formed us from the dust of the earth. God started from zero.

When Christ walked the way of the cross, three times he fell under its weight. The freedom God had given the world was abused so badly that it turned to the ultimate perversity of consigning Christ to Calvary.

- Three times the weight of the world's folly and foolishness and cold-blooded hatred made Christ implode and plummet to the ground.
- Three times Christ fell into the ash heap of history.
- Three times Christ bit the dust. But on Easter Day, God remade Christ out of the dust of the earth.

Just as on the day of creation, God turned dust and ashes into flesh and blood. God started from zero and built something that truly would last forever.

God didn't send 9/11. God doesn't condone the atrocity of 9/11. God doesn't make us for violence or suicide attacks or mass murder and destruction. But hear the words of God, speaking out of the rubble of that dreadful day, whispering to us from the ash heap of history: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." In other words, "Go back to the beginning. Start from zero."

- We feel the terror of those poor people on the hijacked planes, facing their imminent death, powerless and panicked. But the truth is, *we're all on those planes.* We're all going to die, we're all ignorant of our destiny and powerless to prolong our life. We shall all be dust.
- We live in a beautiful country, flowing with milk and honey. Let's leave aside the fantasies about it being the greatest country or having the most spacious skies. Let's concentrate on being a good country, a faithful country, a country where the poor are respected, the stranger is made welcome, the enemy is treated like a human being, the victim can find justice, and the criminal can find restoration and forgiveness.
- We feel the horror of that pile of dust at Ground Zero. But the truth is we shall all be part of that pile of dust one day.

Sixty-five years ago we had the temerity to create Zero, to create destruction so overwhelming that we could reduce a whole metropolitan area to dust at a stroke. Ten years ago today we saw with horror that we too could become Zero, very suddenly, very cruelly, very painfully. Ten years ago today we saw that we too are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Towers and temples do turn to dust. Our lives will turn to dust. There is no freedom that can ultimately prevent the devious, the determined, and the deranged from creating terror and turning goodness and pretension alike into dust.

But all our hope lies in the God who makes beautiful things out of dust –

who made us,

called Abraham out of the dust of the desert,
remade Christ from the dust of the tomb,
will remake Manhattan from the dust of Ground Zero
and will finally make all things new –

the God who abides in the dust of Afghanistan,

the dust of Iraq,
and the dust of Arabia,
the God who transforms the dust of our trampled dreams,
the God who restores those who repent in dust and ashes,
the God who breathes life into nostrils cloyed by dust,
the God who lifts us up like a firefighter
and carries us home like a shepherd –

if only, if only amid all our anger and self-justification and sadness,

if only we can find the humility and the humanity,
ourselves, slowly and painfully,
to start from zero and let God make something beautiful out of even this.