

“In Memory”
September 20, 2026

Revelation 21:1-5

Like many of you, I imagine, I spent some time a week ago Friday reflecting on the events of 9/11 twenty-five years ago. As many in this country have said, 9/11 was one of those rare days in history when most of us can remember exactly where we were when we heard the news and saw the pictures on that awful day. When I first heard what happened, my workday had barely started here at the church. In fact, I was in the Youth Room not far from this sanctuary and I watched the news footage unfold in real time at various points throughout that morning.

On the day of the twenty-fifth anniversary of 9/11, I came across a documentary that I had not seen before. At a little over an hour long, I wasn't intending to watch the video in its entirety. But I wound up doing exactly that.

The documentary is entitled “The Falling Man.” And it centers around arguably the most iconic photograph taken over the course of that day. A photograph of a man falling through the air...from the upper floors of the North World Trade Center after the first plane hit the building that morning and before the building collapsed. I trust a number of you have seen the picture I'm referring to. Or maybe the picture is simply too horrifying, and you have gone out of your way to avoid looking at it.

The “Falling Man” picture was taken by an Associated Press photographer from the ground near the World Trade Centers. It was among thousands of images captured in still photos and videos taken on that fateful day. Still, I don't think any other photograph generated the amount of controversy this one did.

As they told the story of 9/11 in words and images in the days following the attack, a number of newspapers around our country refused to publish the “Falling Man” picture. Those newspapers that did publish the image on September 12th or any day thereafter heard backlash from local readers that was swift and overwhelmingly negative. For many who could not “unsee” the image, the picture was too sensitive, too stark, too sad, too sensational, too soon.

Now twenty-five years later, the image of the Falling Man is still difficult to look at. Even though there may be no more poignant or visceral reminder of the tragedy of that day. However, the part of the documentary that captured my attention had to do with the quest of a few people in the years since 9/11 to determine the identity of the Falling Man. Who was he? More importantly, if we could identify the Falling Man, would it be helpful closure in some way for his loved ones still grappling with questions and ongoing grief...?

I learned a number of things I did not know watching the documentary, including the fact that the image of the Falling Man was one of twelve images of the Falling Man

the photographer captured that morning. Clearly not your average amateur photographer. And when one interested reporter reached out to the AP photographer and looked at all twelve of the images consecutively, he drew some fairly clear conclusions. One of them, based primarily on the clothes he was wearing, being that the Falling Man was an employee at the Windows on the World restaurant located on the 106th floor of the North Tower.

Knowing that piece of information encouraged one reporter from *Esquire* magazine to do further research. He showed the series of photographs to a few Windows on the World employees who weren't in the North Tower on 9/11, including the executive chef of the restaurant who, coincidentally, happened to be late to work that day. Slowly they began to narrow down the possible identities of the Falling Man.

Until finally, they came up with a name...Jonathan Briley. A forty-three-year-old man who worked part-time as a sound engineer for the Windows on the World restaurant. And a man who had been ordained as a Deacon in his father's Baptist church about five months before 9/11 occurred.

With his hunch about who the Falling Man was in mind, the reporter decided to reach out to Jonathan Briley's family. Starting with Jonathan's father, who was then the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Elmsford, New York. Yet, the Rev. Alexander Briley decided he could not look at the photos, nor could he talk with the reporter. He explained to the reporter that as a preacher he told members of his church all the time they needed to find a way to go on with their lives even in the wake of profound sadness and despair. But he himself had not been able to move on from the tragic death of his son on 9/11.

Before their conversation ended, Rev. Briley referred the reporter to his daughter, Gwendolyn. Gwendolyn and her brother, Jonathan, had a close sibling relationship. So, the reporter went down to Maryland where Gwendolyn lived. And he showed her the twelve photographs.

When she picked up the photographs of the Falling Man in her hand and shuffled through them with her fingers, Gwendolyn said in the documentary that it felt like "touching a hot stove." Which told her something and tells us something, in spite of the fact that the twelve Falling Man pictures are ultimately too grainy for anyone to be one hundred percent certain about the man's identity.

As the documentary nears the end, you can see and hear Gwendolyn reflecting wistfully about that fateful day, about the brother she loved and lost and about the twelve images she studied closely. "You know," she said, "either that man had so much faith that he knew God was going to catch him at the end of his fall. Or he was so worried and scared about what was happening to him at the top of the tower that he believed he had no other choice..."

As I watched Gwendolyn and listened to her words, this morning's sermon began to take shape. In part because she spoke of Jonathan so fondly and so passionately that it reminded me how important it is to remember our loved ones and remember them well. Long past the day they die.

Whether someone was killed because they were on the hijacked planes or in one of the places where the planes hit. Whether they died inside the World Trade Centers or falling outside the two towers to escape the smoke and the heat and the sense of impending doom. Whether they died as first responders going into the buildings and trying to save lives or they died in the Pentagon or on Flight 93. which crashed in a field in Pennsylvania before it ever reached its intended target.

Or whether they died from 9/11 related causes in the years since 2001. We hold all of the people who lost their lives on 9/11 in our sacred and collective national memory twenty-five years later...

As for me, I will also hold onto the words of Jonathan Briley's sister. Who spoke with love and compassion about a man who may well have been her brother and tried to imagine what might have been going through his heart and mind prior to and while he was falling...

One day when I come to the end of my own life, I may even recall what Gwendolyn said about those moments. If I am aware, either I will be worried and scared about what will happen when I take my last earthly breath. Or I will hold on tightly to my faith in God. Maybe both.

No matter what, in our fear and in our faith, God promises to catch all of us when our life ends. Before carrying us gently into the world beyond this one where God will love us and care for us for all eternity.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God's peoples. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'"

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'" Amen.

