



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR C, MAY 29, 2022
ACTS 16:16-34; PSALM 97; REVELATION 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; JOHN 17:20-26

COURAGEOUS HOPE IN THE WAKE OF MORE GUN VIOLENCE

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21[At the end of the visions I, John, heard these words: "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. "It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let everyone who hears say, "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.]

This Seventh Sunday of Easter—between the landmark holy days of Ascension, which was last Thursday, and Pentecost, which is still a week away—this Seventh Sunday of Easter is “in-between” time. The followers of Jesus watched him ascend into heaven, leaving their midst, leaving them to decide next steps in a fledgling movement as People of the Way. It would take the patient ferment of a full ten days before they would experience the gift of the Holy Spirit lighting on them at Pentecost, and then turn into their discerned mission with courage and

resolve. Their witness to the God of life and love and resurrected hope would change the world.

But here on this Seventh Sunday of Easter, there is still very much an essence of in-between time. We hear scriptures that bookend the full story, from Acts of the Apostles, and the early witness of a growing cause that would become known as the Christian way and life, and then from the final verses of Revelation, the final book of scripture, casting a vision of what is to come. It is a

hopeful scene of healing in the new city, the city of peace, the shalom after all the violence of war and hatred has ended, the city to which anyone who is thirsty is welcome to come and drink the waters of life. John's vision of the end times is offered to us here on this Seventh Sunday of Easter, this in-between time, so that we might know that God is keen to heal the whole of creation, including our broken humanity.

But here on this Seventh Sunday of Easter in the year 2022, I suspect for most of us it is difficult to see any vision of end-time hope through the lugubrious tears that blur our ability to see beyond the horror of another school shooting. It is difficult to cast a vision downrange when parents are forced to bury their children and the hopes born in them. It is difficult to hold hope when a decade ago, after Sandy Hook, we thought things would change, but they have only worsened.

We are bewildered, angry, disillusioned, outraged, disgusted, horrified. We are terrorized and traumatized by the cumulative weight of loss and fear and dis-ease that has landed on our doorstep and seems in no rush to leave.

My friends, this week has been forged in our hearts as in-between time, and there is no exigent off-ramp that will deliver us succinctly from the pain we feel. I wish there were, but there is not. So what are we to do?

First, let me say I do not believe that doing nothing is an option for people of faith. We have something to say and do in light of the evil that lurks in our midst, so while I have nothing to offer that will inoculate you from the pain

in this moment, I do want to say a few things about what can be done that will help us find our way, and I believe with all my heart that these endeavors are worthy of this moment.

Much has been said this week about the role of prayer in the wake of such tragedies. Some castigate prayer as a copout, as doing nothing substantive. Folks, prayer is hard work if we take it seriously—it requires time and intention, it requires vulnerability because we are asking God to inhabit the space of our soul wounds, it requires courage to ask God to change us and to change the world, it requires energy to be inspired to work for change with God. Prayer is not an excuse to do nothing; it is aligning ourselves with the Source of Love that we so desperately need in this broken hurting world.

So do not let anyone be dismissive of the role of prayer in your life, especially in these difficult times, these in-between times.

Second, there is a form of prayer that has been largely lost in modernity, but the provocative and powerful role it can play in our lives, especially in times such as this, is an important one to reclaim. Lament is a form of prayer that may seem on the surface to be simply an expression of sorrow, or perhaps anger, but it takes those emotions that weigh on the heart in times of loss and orients them to God. Lament is a way of being honest with God, with ourselves and others.

Lament insists that things are not as they should be and can be changed. Lament emboldens us to the possibility

of another way, but lament does not deny the harsh reality of what is. Importantly, lament enables us to consider the question of theodicy—the role of God in the face of such evil—with a modicum of integrity.ⁱ

And let's be clear, friends, God can handle whatever we have to say in our prayers. Lament is about being honest with God and demanding that God do something about it. So I bid you, find your voice of lament and bring it with all your heart.

Thirdly, I want to say something about what we as people of faith must consider doing if this violence is to end. And here I am going to meddle in the political milieu of feckless politicians whose hands are stained with the blood of innocent children once more. No number of red herrings about mental illness or arming teachers will sway me from the conviction that assault-style weapons have no place in the hands of civilians, and they should be banned. Here are three reasons why:

First, the Sixth Commandment (thou shalt not murder) takes precedence over the Second Amendment. I understand the purpose of the right to bear arms, born in late 18th Century America, as the new nation faced the real threat of the British re-invading, which necessitated muskets in the hands of its citizens who stood ready as militia when needed. The US Constitution is a living document (amendments have ended slavery and given women suffrage), and the second amendment is not beyond reproach or potential revision or reinterpretation, even if that may be political pie-in-the-sky at this time. The authors of the Bill of Rights did not envision assault

rifles with large magazines capable of killing dozens of fellow citizens, including our children, in a matter of seconds.

Secondly, I am a veteran of the United States Army, and I understand the role of weapons. I have fired M-16 rifles, M-50 guns, and semi-automatic pistols, all of which are designed to kill their targets, fast and sure. On the battlefield, I get that intent. I pray for peace every day, longing for a time when such military force is not needed. In the meantime, I understand the presence of such weapons in the military. For the life of me, though, I cannot understand their place in the hands of anyone else, and certainly not the public. It is madness.

Thirdly, I am a southerner by heritage, which means I grew up in a family that hunts for food. I was given my first hunting rifle, a 22 caliber capable of killing small animals, when I was just 8 years old. I was a lousy hunter myself; I never enjoyed it, but I honor the tradition and the real need for such work in agrarian societies. That said, there is no assault weapon that has a place in hunting wild game; there is no sport in mauling the animal with multiple rounds, and so I find arguments that such weapons are used for the sport of hunting to be fallacious.

Now I know there are some in our nation who are suspicious of the government, people who believe their right to bear arms is their protection against tyranny. I am convinced that the grand design and greatest gift of our republic is that the ballot is the best weapon against corrupt power and cruel government, and it is precisely the tool we have now as we engage this work of safe gun

legislation. The proliferation of guns has translated not to a more secure peace, but to the thousands of mass shootings we have experienced in our lifetime. It is a dim theory that suggests more guns make us safer, it is morally bankrupt, and we must have the courage to demand a different way.

After Sandy Hook, interfaith clergy joined with civic leaders to form The Washington Alliance for Gun Responsibility, which in this state has seen major achievements in safe gun legislation.ⁱⁱ It can be done, even nationally, if we take the long view, and resolve to work for change. Which is to say, there is hope.

As I wrote in my missive sent last Wednesday, I refuse to concede hope to evil and its conspirators. I refuse to concede hope in God who is calling us into this work even now. In my spiritual journey, I have discovered paradoxically that the human heart can hold deep sorrow and joy at the same time—it is the mark of a courageous heart to do so.

Which brings me back around to the end of Revelation—the vision of the end times, with the river of life flowing through the city of God, and the last words of good news

offered to all: let anyone who is thirsty come and drink from the waters of life.

Here's the deal, friends: You need not wait to the end of time to drink and assuage your thirst. If you thirst, come...

Resurrected hope offered by a loving God does not work that way—it is miraculously always here and now...even as it is not yet fully known, but it is here, in this troubled life. The question is will we hold the ladle for this world to drink from the healing waters of God's grace and peace? Will we hold the ladle for one another in this community?

Finally, let me say to you: be gentle with yourselves, and others; be courageous to hold sorrow and joy in your heart, gladden the hearts of those with whom you travel, be swift to love, make haste to be kind, let the Spirit guide you in these rough days, and as you are able, have sufficient hope to lament what is while also looking to a future where God's reign of peace prevails, and put your energy there.

I am convinced that our witness to the God of life and love and resurrected hope will change the world.

ⁱ For more on this, I highly commend the article:

Brueggemann, Walter. "The Costly Loss of Lament." In *The Psalms: The Life of Faith*, edited by Patrick D. Miller. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995, pp. 98-111. Originally published by the author in *JSOT* 36 (1986) 57-71.

ⁱⁱ <https://gunresponsibility.org/>