



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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A Bell Too Soon

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 16, 2012

The Third Sunday of Advent

Based on Luke 3:7-18

The holidays were coming soon, and the kids were probably like kids everywhere, having a little trouble getting settled down on a Friday morning so close to Christmas. Their imaginations no doubt were filled with visions of anything but dancing sugarplums; their lists to Santa probably long since made and filled with such items as American Girl dolls, video games, elaborate Lego creations and some seasonal hot toy of which I am too unhip to even be aware. Most of these gifts were most likely already purchased, stashed safely (or so they thought) from prying young eyes in someone's trunk or attic. Just regular folks they were. Until Friday morning. Now for twenty sets of parents, the handling of these presents will be another in a series of heartbreaking moments that by Christmas will just be starting to sink in, as they begin to wonder if their grief is indeed even survivable.

As we all know, our glittering season of joyful anticipation was shattered early Friday morning by the killing of 20 children and 7 adults in a quiet little town not far from here in Connecticut. They weren't victims of the Taliban with some ax to grind against Americans; profoundly and disturbingly, they were killed at our own hand. How long O Lord will there be senseless killings at the hands of madmen with assault weapons? This year alone we have had mass shootings in malls in Oregon (just this week) and Minneapolis, Tulsa, a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, a movie theater in Aurora, a coffee shop in Seattle, and a college in California. And in almost every case, our outrage for justice notwithstanding, we will eventually have to live with the fact that the perpetrators are deeply disturbed people, paranoid schizophrenics most of them, from whom we must indeed be protected but of whom we can hardly conclude that true accountability is even possible.

It makes our hearts sad, deeply sad, even as it makes us want to grab our children and grandchildren, holding them close enough to know beyond a doubt that they will always be safe. The great dark knowing of adulthood is the awareness that such a place of absolute safety does not exist. A place like Newtown should have been the perfect example of a safe haven, a place where crime was practically non-existent, and, yet, a place that suddenly, without expectation or warning, was catapulted into the history books as the scene of notorious horror.

The remarks that tend to stand out at times like this are the ones that would be best left unsaid: the gun advocate in Wisconsin who opined that had the bill he wants passed been in place, armed teachers inside Sandy Hook Elementary School would have, "if not prevented, then perhaps minimized," the tragedy. For the record I don't want the teacher of my first-grade grandson, Connor, to be packing heat. And then, of course, from Mike Huckabee, we get these words: "We ask why there is violence in our schools, but we have systematically removed God from our schools. Should we be so surprised that schools would become a place of carnage?" That one makes me particularly crazy because it so directly enters my world with its clear implication that God at least allows, if not causes, such melee because we are not "doing something right," something right such as praying in school, at least as Mr. Huckabee sees it. Really, really is it that simple?

I stake my entire life upon the conviction that God does not cause or even allow such carnage to teach us a lesson. Don't get me wrong: there are lessons to be learned from this tragedy, but it is our actions that give rise to the teachable moment. The combination of continued proliferation of and easy access to assault guns and the presence of mental illness will mean that there will be more and more of these moments. In a compassionate, evolved culture, it is our obligation to ask why certain kinds of assault weapons need to be available for purchase,

even with proper registration and background checks. Why did this young man's mother need to have assault weapons, and why weren't they safeguarded? Many questions persist, but isn't it possible that certain kinds of guns simply need to be off-limits to civilians, in an effort to protect us, not to limit our rights.

The only reason I am risking speaking so clearly on a topic that has been widely politicized is that people of faith have to speak out. I don't know what constitutes a national crisis, but I think we are getting close to one when our death by mass murderers is compared to other developed countries. We handily lead them all.

What does any of this have to do with Advent, the season in which we find ourselves? Does it have anything at all to do with it? In fact, I believe that it does. Advent, when all else is said and done, is about the coming of God. In all of John the Baptist's rants about what was about to happen, the main thing that had him stirred up was that God was coming, coming in the form of Jesus, one who was coming to show his people how to live, to bring new life, to bring a way of salvation for a people who had gone far astray. The mystery of Advent is that it remains an event in process, organic and ongoing. Christ continues to come this year and every year, never quite fully realized but, yet, quite definitely already here in part. Somehow in these shattered lives—the lives of these devastated families in Connecticut—in whatever way they know to speak of God, the coming again of God into their lives is the only possible way they will endure the pain and loss that now overwhelm them. The lessons to be learned, the politics to be considered: Concern with all of that must be preserved for another day, for today the only thing that can help is the presence of God, Presence that sustains when all else fails, Presence that is most often transmitted through those who hold and love them most. On Friday evening I heard a large gathering of families, some of the victims, some friends and strangers, singing "Silent Night." And though the sweetness of it broke my heart and brought tears to my eyes, I heard the words, "Sleep in heavenly peace," with a full heart and new ears, and I prayed that those children and adults would indeed find the rest and peace of which we currently can only imagine.

Were I to have the chance to speak to these families I'd say all that I know to say—that there is no answer save the broadest claims about the sustaining love of God in the universe. Only divine love survives such loss; and it is a terrible love, a love that aches for the loss but in its rawness reminds us that we are fully human and that we shall survive somehow. Nothing stops love that intense and no one is excluded from it.

A psalmist once claimed that though weeping may linger through the night, joy comes in the morning. In Newtown, Connecticut, there is no darker night than this one; and beyond question at this moment, weeping is winning the night. But with all my heart and with all I hope and trust to be true, I believe that the morning will come. And in that morning there eventually will be joy again even for these families—a new joy that comes not as memories of their beloved ones fade but as a deep sense of their presence continues and grows in the hearts of those who loved them the most. Already little signs, most that I know not of, are beginning to emerge which speak to God's goodness far beyond our imagination. Robbie Parker, who lost his six-year old daughter, Emilie, offered sympathy to the family of the man who did the killing, saying, "I can't imagine how hard this experience must be for you."

We, most of us, cannot stand in their shoes; but as we go through this holy season we can commit ourselves to pray for them, to love them as we can from afar even as we acknowledge and cherish our own humanity, and to work to bring about a world that does all it can to avoid the senseless death of innocent people.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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