



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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God's Promise, Our Action

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 23, 2012

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Based on Micah 5:2-5a and Luke 1:39-45

Today is the fourth and last Sunday of the church's Advent season. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. Ordinarily by December 23, some of us are scrambling to finish the last things on our list, some of us are enjoying holiday parties, some of us are already traveling—or trying to. Even if we've already worn ourselves out getting ready, there's still a second wind of excitement and anticipation for Christmas.

But this year things aren't ordinary, are they? How can they be, after the Sandy Hook shootings in Newtown just over a week ago? How can they be, when every day this week the evening news named the four/five/six funerals held that day for the children and teachers killed in Newtown, including one for the shooter's own mother? For Newtown, for these families, for the Sandy Hook first responders, for so many of us, maybe for our entire country, things will never be "ordinary" again.

This fourth Sunday of Advent is sometimes called "Mary's Sunday" because always on this particular Sunday our Gospel is about Mary. This year, we have the quietly powerful story of Mary's visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth. Mary, very young and newly pregnant, travels some distance to visit her much older relative Elizabeth, who is in her own sixth month of her first pregnancy.

On a very human level, we can well understand this visit. Any woman pregnant for the first time, especially a very young woman like Mary, will crave support and wisdom and advice from a woman who has gone before her in pregnancy, someone who can tell her what to expect as the baby grows and her body changes. A woman might instinctively look to her own mother or sisters for this deeply personal advice and companionship. But sometimes that isn't possible.

We don't know what impels Mary to make the risky journey to see her relative Elizabeth. Neither Mary nor Elizabeth had access to expert medical care, and they couldn't look up pregnancy instructions on the Internet. (The same is still true today for poor women in every country, including our own.) Mary would surely have been seeking information and advice, yes, but maybe even more, the warmth and understanding and comfort of another human being.

As Luke tells this story, Mary's and Elizabeth's stories—and their lives—are intertwined. Both pregnancies are of God's making; both are miraculous in their own ways. Verses just before those we heard today tell of the angel Gabriel's appearing first to Elizabeth's husband Zechariah, a priest, announcing that Zechariah and Elizabeth will have a son in their childless, barren old age. That child, now growing in Elizabeth's womb, is John . . . who will grow up to be John the Baptist, preparing the way in adulthood, as he does *in utero*, for Jesus. John's birth saves Elizabeth from the ultimate disgrace for a woman of her time: childlessness.

The angel Gabriel appears next to Mary, announcing that she, too, will bear a son under very special circumstances, even more miraculous than Elizabeth's—and in Mary's case, downright inconvenient. Mary is young, betrothed but not yet married, and Joseph will know good and well he's not this child's biological father. This news, on the surface at least, will bring disgrace upon her. And yet . . . in the face of this life-changing, difficult news, Mary chooses to accept it—to bear it, quite literally—and to move forward. She chooses to risk trusting God's promise.

So here these two women are, meeting each other perhaps for the first time or the first time in a long time. As Mary and Elizabeth meet, their two unborn children meet, too. Imagine the energy field around those four, with all the human emotions and all that miraculous energy swirling together as the two women embrace!

How can we hear this familiar story of these mothers and their babies on this particular Sunday, after what has happened this past week? How can we hear this without a sword piercing our hearts?

Elizabeth's and Mary's stories are intertwined. John's and Jesus' stories are intertwined. Our stories—our lives—are intertwined now, too, with the people of Sandy Hook and Newtown. What does being intertwined mean for us?

On the afternoon of the shooting, I received a letter from the three Episcopal bishops of Connecticut, who had gone immediately to Newtown to support their clergy there and to offer pastoral help in whatever ways they could. The Connecticut bishops asked the clergy of that diocese to open their churches for prayer; some churches stayed open all through that first awful night.

In subsequent letters, the Connecticut bishops have expressed how much it has helped to know that they and the people of Newton, especially the devastated parents and families of those killed, are being held in people's hearts and prayers in every part of this country, as well as in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, England, Dubai, Guyana, Myanmar, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa, and others. Prayers from all over the world: intertwined.

The three Episcopal bishops of New York wrote to our own diocese almost immediately also, urging us to pray, pray, pray. They noted, "This was the second mass shooting in America in three days, and the thirteenth in 2012." I've read now messages from bishops in Connecticut, New York and Washington, D.C., all calling in their own ways for us—us ordinary people—and our elected representatives to take action to prevent such deaths in the future.

Listen to the bishops' own words from their various letters: "We call on our elected representatives to engage the debate, resolve the question, and come to terms finally with the place and power of arms and weapons in our laws and in our common life." "We call on the United States to commit itself anew to the creation of responsible, constitutional measures of reasonable and effective gun control." "We call [for] a time of discernment and action on how all of us can best work to overcome the death-dealing culture of violence that seems to be so prevalent in our society at this time."

I've quoted from the bishops' messages because I'm asking you to hear the nuance in their own words. We need that nuance to move forward.

The term "gun control" by itself, without nuance, is not helpful to throw around, because "gun control" means different things to different people and is in danger of becoming polarizing. People of good faith, who can agree that we never want anything like the shootings in Newtown (or Columbine, or Virginia Tech, or Aurora) to happen again, can hold very different opinions on how to go about that. Which is ok. Let that difference be the beginning, not the endpoint, of respectful conversation and debate.

Example: This week I formed my own strong opinions about laws I'd like to see enacted nationally. This week I also called a friend—a well-educated, faithful Episcopalian in a southern state—simply to wish him a Merry Christmas. Our conversation soon turned to the horrible tragedy in Newtown and how something like that might be prevented from happening again.

I was momentarily astonished to discover my friend and I held some very different ideas. As I listened, I discovered that my friend—who is not a hunter, who does not target shoot for a hobby, who does not own an arsenal of guns, who is not a "gun person"—had actually taken the trouble to spend quite a bit of time researching gun laws in his own state and in neighboring states. In the course of his research, he discovered that the training and education required to get a concealed weapon permit was excellent, rigorous and thorough. So he completed that training as a way of educating himself, even though he has no need or intent to carry a concealed weapon. I give him a lot of credit for that.

That was not the Christmas conversation I expected to have with him, certainly not our ordinary Christmas conversation. But I learned a lot. It greatly expanded my own knowledge base and widened my own thinking. I came away from our conversation with even greater respect and admiration for my friend.

I also came away with a greater appreciation for the complexity of our collective problem in this country. There will be no one solution that solves the problem. It will take efforts on several fronts: laws around guns and ammunition, mental health reform, realizing how we nurture a culture of violence—television programs, movies, video games that involve shooting particularly. How many of those video games are already wrapped as Christmas gifts?

I've heard from a number of you this week, wondering what we can *do*, and feeling an urgency to act *now*, while this is so fresh in our minds and hearts. Here are some ideas:

Keep praying for the families in Newtown. Pray for all parents who lose their children, not just in this country but every day in every place in the world. Pray for us in our country, that we can find our way forward to take life-giving actions.

Study and educate yourself on all these aspects, or even one of them. What are your state's laws on guns? What are other states' laws on guns? Study, education and listening are the beginning point for conversation and debate that lead to legislative changes. Find other people to study and learn with, or start your own group.

Ban semi-automatic weapons and large rounds of ammunition. There is no reason any civilian needs to have a gun that fires 100, 50, even 20 rounds at a time—not for hunting, not for target practice. There are other effective ways of self-defense that dramatically limit the damage a person can do.

Tighten control on gun sales, particularly those at gun shows.

Reform our mental health care system, so that those who need help the most can get the care they need.

Take a critical look at how our culture promotes violence, including instilling fear that leads to violence. Stop participating in it and work to change the culture.

Write or call your elected representatives to express your feelings and opinions. I heard from someone this week who used to work in the highest levels of our elected government. He said, “Phone calls about a particular subject matter a lot. Individual letters [and e-mails] matter a lot. [Governors, senators, representatives] always pay attention to constituents.” Don’t know whom to contact or how? You’ll find a list at the end of this sermon.

This is not the Fourth Sunday of Advent sermon I’d planned to preach a few weeks ago. But it is where we find ourselves this day. After Mary and Elizabeth come together, each is given words, powerful words to voice her hope and faith in God’s promise to save: To bring salvation, to bring healing and wholeness into the darkest of situations, including the chaos we have created for ourselves. *Mary’s Song*, the *Magnificat*, is “God’s own song of life and love, of hope and justice, needed more than ever in these dark and difficult times.”

God acted through Elizabeth. God acted through Mary. Ordinary people. Maybe, through the many voices now calling for change, God is acting through us ordinary people to bring salvation, to bring healing and wholeness and light into our particular time of darkness and crisis.

At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus—the birth of a child, the birth of hope. We celebrate God’s promise that is born again and again and again into this world.

God’s promise doesn’t wait to be born until the world is ready, until the world is at peace, until everything is neat and clean, until all people are good. God’s promise is born exactly when it is most needed.

God’s promise is being born again . . . right now.

Amen.

Whom to Call

White House: 202-456-1111

New Yorkers, call:

Governor Andrew M. Cuomo (518) 474-8390

Senator Charles Schumer (D): (202) 224-6542

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D): (202) 224-4451

Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-5th District): 202-225-2601

Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-6th District): 202-225-3461

Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-7th District): 202-225-3965

Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-8th District): 202-225-5635

Rep. Robert Turner (R-9th District): 202-225-6616

Rep. Edolphus Towns (D-10th District): 202-225-5936

Rep. Yvette Clarke (D-11th District): 202-225-6231

Rep. Nydia Velazquez (D-12th District): 202-225-2361

Rep. Michael Grimm (R-13th District): 202-225-3371

Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-14th District): 202-225-7944

Rep. Charles Rangel (D-15th District): 202-225-4365

Rep. Jose Serrano (D-16th District): 202-225-4361

All States:

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