

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

A Light in the Darkness

John 1:3-5

Sunday, May 29, 2022

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It has been an extremely difficult couple of weeks for us. In the last two weeks, an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas and a grocery store in Buffalo, N.Y were shattered by gun violence. Both of those communities share the tragic loss of children, family and friends. Last week, a beloved United Methodist pastor in our very city was stabbed to death by someone she was trying to help.

All of us are still reeling from these horrific tragedies, one on top of the other. We are shocked, we are angry, we are afraid, we are heart-broken, and I feel led to speak to these events today.

Like many of you, my heart has been heavy the last several days. Many of us have cried over these unspeakable events. Two more mass murders to add to our country's shocking and ever-growing list. Each of them so tragic, so awful. The most recent one so unthinkable, so unspeakable! Children. Children, anticipating the fun of summer taken from us. Innocent children who had their whole lives ahead of them, all their hopes and dreams, gone ("First, We Cry" by Jim Harnish).

We cry for the parents and family of those lost. We cry for these communities going through unimaginable and unbearable grief.

So, we cry. And we hug our children a little tighter. And we tell each other "I love you" a little more. And we recognize how precious life really is.

But then after we cry we SHOUT! We are like the Old Testament prophets who shouted out with anger and indignation at the evil in this world. One community leader who experienced a mass shooting was right when he said, "Evil has visited this town today." So, we shout with anger at these expressions of evil. We express our offense at the evil that goes against the life, love and peace of God! (Harnish)

We shout in anger and ask why we can't stop the pervasive violence and hatred in our culture? We shout out in anger and ask why can't we put our political differences aside and come together as a nation? We

shout out in anger and ask why we can't have meaningful dialogue about how we can prevent such tragedies? We shout out in anger and ask why we can't have more affordable mental health care in our country?

After we cry and after we shout we PRAY! O do we pray. We pray to God our questions, our anger, our grief, and our despair - "Lord, how could this happen? Lord, why did this happen? Lord, is there a word from you in all of this? Lord, the world is so dark, so violent, so bloody, so hateful! Lord, may your Kingdom come, now! Why is there a delay to your Kingdom, O Lord! When will your Kingdom come, O Lord!"

This morning I want to address the questions that many of us are praying – the questions we are struggling with. Because I know all of us come here today with questions we want answered. Our hearts cry out with questions because this kind of tragedy shatters our ideas of how the world is supposed to operate.

Why Would God Allow These Tragedies to Happen?

I remember back several years ago when a man named Mark Barton walked into an Atlanta business office and shot and killed people. The next day the Atlanta Constitution carried a poignant cartoon. A little boy is sitting next to his mother on the couch and there is a newspaper on the coffee table that shows the headline: "Atlanta Murderer: Mark Barton." The boy looks up at his mother and says, "You said monsters don't exist."

Well, that pretty much sums it up doesn't it? How many children right now are asking, "Mommy, Daddy I thought you said monsters don't exist?" How many of us adults are asking the same question in different ways: "Why do these evil things exist? Why would God allow these tragedies that have broken America's heart? Why would God allow children to be killed? Why would God allow a pastor who was simply trying to help a troubled soul to be killed?"

Why didn't God divert the shooter? Why didn't God intervene?" People have been texting me, emailing me and calling me asking this question all weekend. So, what is the answer?

In a word – Freedom. We live a world where God has given us freedom. The same freedom that allows us to choose to love and serve God allows others to pick up weapons and kill innocent people. Freedom itself is good, like all of God's gifts, but some choose to pervert God's gift and use it for evil. So, why didn't God intervene? Why didn't God do something to prevent this? Because freedom was at stake. If God took away our freedom to do evil He would also be taking away our freedom to do good! And if God did that we would just be a bunch of numb robots incapable of love or hate. God doesn't want us to be like that anymore than you want to be like that ("Fear Itself" by Jim Somerville).

So, God is like a mother who sobs as her child chooses to wrong path. And God wraps his loving arms around the victims of this tragedy and around a broken and devastated nation. God's heart is torn apart as He sees his gift of freedom being perverted once again.

We hold on to the hope that one day God's Kingdom will be fully realized on earth and God will wipe away every tear. Fear, violence, hate, war and bloodshed will be no more!

But until that day comes we have to cope with tragedies like these. How do we do it? Let's take a look at the next question many of us are struggling with.

Where is God in Midst of these Tragedies?

To answer that question, I want you to remember the birth of Christ. Why? We tend to romanticize Christmas – that when Christ was born all was clean – all was majestic – all was calm and silent – all was bright. No, it wasn't! This is not the world Christ was born in. He was born rejected in a smelly, messy, rat infested feeding trough for animals in the small town of Bethlehem. When Jesus was born King Herod felt so threatened he commanded all little boys two and under in and around Bethlehem to be slaughtered. Jesus was born in the midst of mass murder of children (Matthew 2:16-18).

God did not connect with this world from afar with angels surrounding Him singing the Hallelujah chorus. God became flesh in the midst of our ugly and messy lives. Christ reminds us there is no place so dark or

dirty or ugly that God will not go to be with us, to love us, to understand us, to comfort us, to save us, to redeem us! Only the Christian faith dares to claim that God emptied Himself completely and went through the entire human experience. God gets down beside us to feel our pain and to heal our lives.

Isaiah 40:11 says, **"God will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them close to His heart."** You want to know where those precious children who were killed are? God has gathered these lambs close to Him and says, "Don't you worry. They are in the safest place imaginable. I have tucked them close to my heart and I will never let them go."

Where was God when those perpetrators committed these unspeakable acts? He was holding the victims, feeling the pain of their wounds. Where was God? He was wailing with the parents of the victims. Where is God? He is wailing and crying with our nation. And as God cries with us I believe he says, "How long will my children do this to each other? How long will this precious world of mine choose such evil and destruction? How long?" Oh, the patience and longsuffering of Almighty God!

It does not escape us that we even killed God when He came upon this earth. Of course, He conquered death, but what do we think the cross means? As God in Christ is on the cross he cries out, "When will the world learn that my love is the answer? Not more violence – not more war – not more political rhetoric – not more arguments. How much clearer can I make it?"

So where is God? God is right here, closer than our breath, tasting our tears, loving us eternally.

How Do We Respond to these Unspeakable Tragedies?

By showing the world the light – the light of Christ that overcomes the darkness. The same light that was in Christ lives in each of us. **"What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:3-5).**

We need to be the light of Jesus in this world. We need to start acting like the Christians we claim to be. Because I will tell you, we can debate all day long about what needs to change. We can debate all day

long about what needs to change. We can debate all day long about how you prevent these tragedies. We can say it is a gun issue, or a mental health issue, or a family issue. But folks first and foremost it is a theological issue! The world is broken. The world needs Jesus. The world is desperate for the love of Jesus! That is one thing we can all agree upon.

This means when the world is at its worst, the church needs to be at her best!

What other institution can offer hope, light, love, strength and faith in the midst of these tragedies? What other institution can do what the church can do? We are the light! And tragedies like this...Remind us that this dark world is desperate for our light!

Jillian Peterson is a co-founder of The Violence Project. Their research organization studies gun violence, mass shootings and violent extremism.

"Usually what's motivating these shootings is an element of self-hatred, hopelessness, despair, anger, that's turned outward to the world," said Densley, who is also a sociologist.

I don't know about you but I believe the only thing that can save someone from self-hatred, hopelessness, despair, and anger is a relationship with Jesus Christ. What are we doing to give witness to the light and love of Christ to those who desperately need it?

It is in the midst of tragedies like this that we must relearn the lesson that we don't draw people to Christ by being judgmental, self-righteous, ecclesiastical, and spiritually arrogant. We don't draw people to Christ by telling others we are right and they are wrong. "We draw people to Christ by reflecting a light that is so lovely and compelling that they want with all of their hearts to know the source of it" (Madeleine L'Engle).

The message of our faith is that God's light is stronger than the darkness, God's love is stronger than hate, and God's power is stronger than death. But how will the world know unless we show them! We have a nation filled with broken and hurting people who are wondering, "Where is God? Is this all there is to life – killing, hate, violence and bloodshed? Is this all there is? Is there a way to prevent these tragedies?" How will the world know any different, how can we help them unless we show them the light of Christ?

So, I agree with those who are saying, "We need more than thoughts and prayers." Praying is important, but praying should lead to action. So, the question is what

are YOU going to do? We can debate all day long about what people do or not do. We can argue on Facebook all day long about who is right and who is wrong. But that is not productive. Don't worry about the other person. What are you going to do? Each of us needs to put our actions where our opinions are. What is the Holy Spirit guiding you to do? Act on the conviction that God has given you. How is Christ calling you to share his light? How is Christ calling you to be make a difference?

We need our lights to shine in as many dark places as possible. We need the church to be the church because one thing is certain. There is not one answer to this problem. There are no quick fixes. Is it a family problem? Yes. Is it a mental health problem? Yes. Is it a school security and safety problem? Yes. Is it a political problem? Yes. One approach is not going to solve it. But one person will – Jesus working through his body, the church.

It is going to take each of us doing our part on several fronts to make a difference. It is going to take each one of us being Jesus in every dark corner in this world. In other words, it's going to take us being the church! Many gifts, but one Spirit. But one thing motivates and empowers all of it – the light and love of Jesus.

That's why I love this church! We are making a difference. We have Summit counseling, Kids Hope, a vital children's ministry. We are the light of Jesus in this community. We will never know the lives we are saving by influencing so many young people and preventing them from self-hatred and despair.

So, our job is to take the light of Christ and carry it with us – to our work places, homes, neighborhoods – to the grocery stores and shops we visit. Let Jesus' light shine through you! If there is to be peaceful change in this world, it begins in each of us!

Mister Rogers said it so well: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world."

You be the helper! You be the light and show the

world that the light of Christ is stronger than the darkness.

You will remember the Sandy Hook school shooting several years ago. One of their first-grade teachers Kaitlin Roig remembers hearing what sounded like the rapid firing of an assault rifle. "I knew something was wrong," she told ABC "World News" anchor Diane Sawyer.

She rushed the 14 children, ages 6 and 7, into the class bathroom. She helped some climb onto the toilet so they could all fit in the tiny room. Then she locked the door. "I just told them we have to be absolutely quiet," Roig told Sawyer. "If they started crying, I would take their face and tell them, 'I love you. It's going to be OK.' I wanted that to be the last thing they heard, not the gunfire in the hall." She said "I told them I loved them. That is the last thing I wanted them to hear."

Isn't that what God wants us to hear? Not the gunfire, but the love. Listen, even in our darkest hour of need God has us in his arms and He whispers, "I love you and nothing can separate you from my love. It is the strongest power in the world."

How do we respond to what has happened? Well we do something that Jesus said to his disciples that the world really hasn't tried yet because so many of us really don't believe it works. But those precious few people who have tried it know it works. And when all of us finally do it the world will be healed. What is it? You know it. You have heard it a thousand times. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). This love is what will heal you, me, this country and this world ("To Mourn, Reflect and Hope" by Arthur Caliendo). "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." Amen.

Let us pray:

O Lord, our hearts break with your heart as we grieve over children, adults, a teacher and a pastor being killed. We cry out with fear, anger, and despair. Lord, comfort those who have lost loved ones. Strengthen law enforcement officers and public officials. We also pray for the family of the perpetrator. Lord, your love became flesh in the midst of our mess. We need you to come once again and enable us to reflect your light so that the world will know that you are stronger than death and more loving than hate, and that nothing will be able to separate us from you. Amen.