

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga

February 18, 2018

Year B, 1 Lent

God in the Wilderness of Parkland

The Rev. Leyla King

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me be honest with you: I find it incredibly difficult to stand here in this pulpit today after yet another mass shooting, another *school* shooting. As a priest, a pastor, a mother, I find it so very hard to know what to say to you from where I stand.

I find it hard because this newest horror erupted in a world that is already so fraught with unnecessary violence, with stories and images from all over the world of the consequences of human evil, of the ways in which humans hurt each other.

I find it hard because in a country that is already so deeply divided, when such a tragedy should, at least, give us opportunity to be unified in our grief and our longing for something better, it seems to me that, only hours after the shooting took place, the pundits were already twittering and the lines of division between us were being even more firmly and darkly drawn.

I find it hard because on my way into work on Thursday, I listened to the public radio broadcaster ask thousands of listeners whether or not we've all just grown accustomed to the murder of our own children and it occurred to me that it's my job, *my. job.* to make sure we haven't, to make sure that we never do. It is my job to stand here in this pulpit this morning and tell you that we cannot, we must not turn away from the heartbreak and frustration, the grief and the horror of it all.

And we must not turn away because we believe in a God who does not turn away. We believe in a God whose love for us, God's creatures, is so great that when God sees our brokenness, God *really* sees it and let's God's heart break over it, again and again. The heart of God breaks over our constant and consistent failure to prioritize the justice, safety and peace of the least among us above all else, whether in Chattanooga or Myanmar, in Parkland, Florida or Aleppo, Syria; God sees our violence and our sin against one another and God's sorrow is greater even than ours. But God does not turn away. God does not turn away from the horror and the heartbreak and God does not, God *will not* turn away from us.

And our readings for this first Sunday of Lent remind us of this faithfulness of the God in which we put our trust.

First, there is that ancient myth told in Genesis about a great flood, that truth-told-in-story which we call "Noah's Ark." In it, our forebears in the faith imagine a time when God might have seen the sickness and brokenness and violence of human beings and solved that great and terrible problem by simply wiping out most of humanity. But, even in this mythical truth, that doesn't really work. As one commentator puts it: "All we have to do is take in the human scene to see that when Noah and his family got on the ark, something was smuggled on board with them, tucked away in their hearts, and that is the seed of violence. The seed of violence existed even in Noah, a seed waiting to

grow like a weed and entangle the world in violence again... This story reminds us that sin... was in Noah and is in us, even in the good guys.”ⁱ

And, perhaps that's why in this story God decides such destruction isn't worth the eventual outcome, since it doesn't really *solve* the problem anyways. The story of Noah's Ark ends with God choosing to never again meet human violence with divine violence. So, God “hangs up” God's weapon, putting God's war-bow away forever in the sky. And instead, as the writer of the first letter of Peter interprets it, instead, God works to destroy what is broken and sinful in human beings not through the literal death of all humanity but by the spiritual death and rebirth of each one of us, through Jesus Christ, in the waters of baptism. There, in *that* flood, each of us finds redemption, hope that God's love and grace is powerful enough, abundant enough to swallow up even the most awful and horrific human sinfulness and restore us to right relationship with God and each other.

And then there is the story of Jesus we hear in Mark's Gospel. Immediately after his own baptism, Jesus is driven out by God's Spirit into the wilderness, the wilderness which is so much like that great void and chaos, the emptiness that existed before God's good creation.ⁱⁱ After his baptism, Jesus is forced out into the worst of what is possible when God's creative love and power feel absent. And that is where we find ourselves this morning as we remember the victims of Parkland, as we begin our Lenten journey to the cross, with Jesus, God incarnate in human flesh, in the wilderness of human brokenness.

And it is only *after* Jesus has been in that empty and dangerous place that he begins to preach the good news: that the kingdom of God *has* come near. *After* he has seen and experienced first-hand, the full possibilities of human frailty, Jesus assures us of the promises of God that still stand, even in the face of such wilderness. Jesus brings the good news of God's kingdom right there into the places where God's good creation has gone wrong, right there into humanity's brokenness and sinfulness and chaos.

One of the practices that Christians through the centuries have used in Lent is public lamentation. Episcopal theologian Mark Jordan writes of this practice: “Lamentation is a forgotten rite deep in our religious traditions. It is often associated with repentance. In the old language of the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, we are taught to ‘acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness.’ We could certainly benefit from a little national repentance. But we need even more to kneel down beside the reality of the mounting losses. The politics we most require in the wake of [mass shootings] is a politics of tears shed over what we have destroyed and can never ourselves restore. The civil politics of religious lamentation: No hashtag can do this for us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

On this first Sunday of Lent, after yet another tragedy, yet another horrific event to drive home our human brokenness and sin, I think we can do only two things: first, let us lament. Let us lift up our voices in lamentation and repentance for all that we have done and all that, together, we have left undone. And second, let us have faith. Let us, together, put our trust and hope in the God of love who does not turn away from us, who refuses to meet human violence with divine destruction, who brings good news of God's kingdom into our devastation, and whose goodness and mercy will one day prevail, in our hearts, in our systems, in our world. Today, let us just stand here with Jesus in this particular, heartbreaking, oh-so-difficult wilderness and pray: “Come quickly,” Lord Christ, “Come quickly to help us... and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one [and all of us] find you mighty to save.” Amen.

ⁱ Copenhaver, Martin B. “Starting Over.” *The Christian Century*, (February 21, 2006, p. 21).

ⁱⁱ I am indebted for this comparison between the wilderness of Jesus’ temptations and the “void” before creation to commentator Scott Hoezee who argues convincingly about the shared nature of the “void” and the “wilderness” and makes the connection much more explicitly in his article on Mark 1:9-15. (“The Center for Excellence in Preaching,” Lent 1B, posted February 12, 2018: http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-1b-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel)

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://religionandpolitics.org/2016/06/14/orlando-a-lament/>