

“Waiting for Hope”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent III – December 16, 2012

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Needless to say, the original plans for today’s sermon changed dramatically following the events of Friday. Before Friday, the message was going to center on the prophet Zephaniah’s context, the hope he shares with the Israelites in the midst of their exile, and the Advent themes which speak to us today. That had been the outline for the sermon. After Friday, that all changed.

As Americans, we are living in the aftermath of another violent tragedy. We’ve lived this nightmare before: Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora, and just two days earlier, Portland, Oregon. Individuals who are mentally ill or seriously disturbed decide to act out violently with weapons, attacking innocent, defenseless people. It is a nightmare we wish we could wake up from and never relive again.

But while the events in Newtown, Connecticut, this week bring back memories of the past, this tragedy is different. The victims were not all adults, or older students. The large majority were children – boys and girls – none of whom had reached their eighth birthday. And the hundreds of children in that school who survived have had their childhoods stripped away by this act of violence. That’s what makes this harder, what makes this more painful, what makes this – different.

As Christians, we are struggling with our faith. We are searching for answers, when all we are left with are questions, and doubts, and heartache. We are wondering how a God of peace could allow innocent lives to be taken in such a horrific way. We want to believe that God yearns for the best in all of us, especially for the children in our world. So, for twenty children to not have the chance to grow old, fall in love, have kids of their own – we begin to wonder, as the Psalmist lamented, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?” (Psalm 22)

Where is our hope in the midst of such a hopeless situation? How are we supposed to trust in God’s hope when we are battered over and over and over again by trauma, violence, and fear?

David Burroughs wrote the following devotional on Saturday:

Sometimes our understanding of hope changes. Life intrudes in ways that threaten us and cause us to doubt, we are left disoriented and confused. We can’t help but wonder what hope means any more.

Be still. Be very still. There is a light still on the horizon, beckoning you to trust again. Like a gentle snow upon a meadow, your fear is blanketed in peace and a star is reflected from above. It is the star that leads to hope again.

In the second chapter of Matthew, we read: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:18)

We are weeks from this part of the story. Jesus is born, wise men come and then, warned in a dream of King Herod's intentions, they go home by another way. An angry Herod makes sure no one takes his kingdom, and kills all the two-year-olds from Bethlehem. It is called "the slaughter of the innocents."

We are shocked at what happened (Friday). Innocents slaughtered. Sunday we are to light the next candle (on the wreath) – the Joy candle. Really? Peace. Hope. Joy. Love. These words seem so distant, like a memory of when we were little.

It is the Lord who speaks in Matthew's text – Rachel's voice is heard. When we lament, God listens and acts toward us in perfect love. And God hears the cries of children everywhere – Somalia, Syria, Afghanistan. Just after this story in Matthew 2, John the Baptist appears and Jesus' ministry begins – the hope bringer. These huge words of Advent don't always happen for us; sometimes they happen through us. We carry hope to someone who needs it
(www.d365.org, December 15, 2012).

Perhaps it is there that the prophet Zephaniah speaks directly to us today. He carried hope to a people distraught with fear, unsure about their future. He spoke words of assurance, telling his people that they will be restored and brought back home after years of exile. The hope that the prophet spoke of is what we need to hear in our exile of fear and anger and heartache.

As Christians, we are expectantly waiting the Advent of God in human form, the incarnation of our Lord who lives and dwells among us. The prophet speaks of this incarnational hope, telling the people on two different occasions that "the Lord your God is in your midst" (3:15,17). In the chaos and storms of life, in the midst of the most hopeless of situations, God is with us, God is here, God is in our midst.

The prophet also speaks a declaration which we will hear throughout the Advent season, and which we need to hear in the aftermath of these events. *"Do not fear . . . the Lord, your God, is in your midst."* *"Do not fear" is not a plea, but a declaration. Luke speaks it to instill confidence in unsuspecting recipients of God's news: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah," "Do not be afraid, Mary." Later in the story we will hear, "Do not be afraid . . . I am bringing you good news of great joy." Another Gospel proclaims at its end, "Do not be afraid . . . He is not here, for he has been raised" (Matthew 28: 5-6)*
(Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 47-49).

Fear is our natural response when we come face-to-face with a tragedy like Newtown. But if we allow fear to rule our hearts, our communities, our public policies, we will fail to hear clearly the word of God which is in our midst.

I read a post on Facebook which said, “How could God allow such a terrible thing to happen?” And someone replied, “I imagine God is asking the same question to us.”

If we fail to take mental illness seriously and get help to those who most need it, then we will dishonor the lives of those twenty children who died.

If we fail to talk honestly about the roles of guns in this country, rather than conveniently “forget” about them until the next shooting takes place, then we will dishonor the lives of the teachers who sacrificed their own lives to protect their students.

If we fail to see that we are all part of one family, that we are connected to one another in real and tangible ways, that when one suffers we all suffer – if we fail to see one another as our brother and sister in Christ, then we will never fully and completely be able to welcome the Prince of Peace into our hearts.

I will close with a hymn written by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, a Presbyterian pastor, who wrote “God We Have Heard It” in the wake of Friday’s shootings.

*God, we have heard it, sounding in the silence:
News of the children lost to this world's violence.
Children of promise! Then without a warning,
Loved ones are mourning.*

*Jesus, you came to bear our human sorrow;
You came to give us hope for each tomorrow.
You are our life, Lord God's own love revealing.
We need your healing!*

*Heal us from giving weapons any glory;
Help us, O Prince of Peace, to hear your story;
Help us resist the evil all around here;
May love abound here!*

*By your own Spirit, give your church a clear voice;
In this world's violence, help us make a new choice.
Help us to witness to the joy your peace brings,
Until your world sings!*

(Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, www.pcusa.org)

Thanks be to God for the hope in which we still trust, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.