

## Hope Grows

I need to begin this morning by being honest about my struggles with preaching today. For most of the week, I have been at a loss about how these texts could address the events unfolding in our world. It has been said that good preaching results from holding the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. But this week, the hand with the newspaper was aching under the weight of one thing piled on top of another.

This week the news has been filled with **unending grief** and sorrow. Funerals were held for the victims of the Sandy Hook school shooting - an event so horrific, it has spread a **pall** (as in a funeral pall) of grief over the entire nation. And that was by no means the only outbreak of violence. In this country alone, more than 130 people have died this week in other shootings<sup>1</sup>, with many more injured. One of those occurred only a few miles from Bloomfield.<sup>2</sup>

In the past week, we have seen our political system rendered **impotent** by factions that value ideology over compromise. A self-imposed "cliff" looms in the new year. Markets are shaky. Economic outlooks uncertain. The whole process suffers from undue influence by those with money and power while the vulnerable in society are likely to be further marginalized.

In the past week, war continued to rage in Syria. Cluster bombs fell on civilian populations.<sup>3</sup> Israel announced plans to build homes in East Jerusalem<sup>4</sup>, damaging future chances for a two-state solution and a peaceful end to the long hostility between Jews and Palestinians.

And then on Friday, a debate about the proper regulation of firearms and ammunition in the wake of another mass shooting was **taken to a whole different level** by a demand from one of the nation's most powerful lobbies that every school have an armed guard - and this demand was justified by the philosophy that "bad guys with guns can **ONLY** be stopped by good guys with guns"<sup>5</sup>. The assumption seems to be that violence can be deferred **ONLY** with the threat of more violence. Sales of bullet proof vests that attach to children's backpacks has risen 500%.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/crime/2012/12/gun\\_death\\_tally\\_every\\_american\\_gun\\_death\\_since\\_newtown\\_sandy\\_hook\\_shooting.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2012/12/gun_death_tally_every_american_gun_death_since_newtown_sandy_hook_shooting.html)

<sup>2</sup> [http://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/nebraska/state-trooper-hurt-suspect-shot-tuesday/article\\_44aa5802-4a2a-5eea-aa6a-c85dfa2ce5a5.html](http://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/nebraska/state-trooper-hurt-suspect-shot-tuesday/article_44aa5802-4a2a-5eea-aa6a-c85dfa2ce5a5.html)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/21/world/middleeast/syria-uses-cluster-bombs-to-attack-as-many-civilians-as-possible.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/21/world/middleeast/syria-uses-cluster-bombs-to-attack-as-many-civilians-as-possible.html?_r=0)

<sup>4</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204831304576597003146590100.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/21/us/connecticut-school-shooting/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/sales-of-kids-bullet-proof-backpacks-soar/2012/12/20/6cba668a-4a1e-11e2-820e-17eefac2f939\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/sales-of-kids-bullet-proof-backpacks-soar/2012/12/20/6cba668a-4a1e-11e2-820e-17eefac2f939_story.html)

After 2000 years of preaching "peace on earth and good will toward men" this is state of affairs. This has been the news.

This is the world that the birth of Jesus is supposed to bring "joy" into.

So now the question becomes, "**Where is God in all of this?**" That's not an easy question to answer and unfortunately there have been several so called "christian leaders" (*who aren't leaders of any church and who mainly peddle their opinions in exchange for ratings or money*) stating with little reservation that God either causes -or allows- tragedies like the one in Newtown as a consequence of not following their particular political/religious agenda.

Usually it sounds something like, "If we wouldn't have taken God out of schools and allowed gay people to marry and legalized abortion, then God would not have turned his back on those children in Newtown and allowed such a tragedy to happen"<sup>7</sup>

I've got one thing to say about theology like that: **It's a bunch a crap** and if you ask me about it in private, I'm likely to use even stronger language. Not many things really get under my skin but when people turn their own moral/political agenda into a requirement for God's presence and protection, I get pretty worked up. I'm not going to lie. People who claim to speak for God in such black and white terms do untold harm to the Christian confession and they commit **heresy** in the name of **grabbing headlines**.

The horrific slaughter of innocent children is not the result of God's inaction. **It is the result of evil** in the world and tragically it's been happening for a long, long time. No one likes to talk about it, but the murder of small children is part of the original Christmas story.

When King Herod (*who uses Micah 5:2 to determine the baby king is to be born in Bethlehem*) discovers he has been duped by the Wisemen after they fail to report back with the exact location of the child, the king goes on a murderous spree and sends soldiers to kill all the children under two years old in Bethlehem. He wants to eliminate any future competition to his throne. The writer of Matthew doesn't give any theological justification for such violence. Instead he gives **voice to grief** using the ancient words of Jeremiah,

"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"

Which brings us back to the texts for today. How can the words of a prophet 2800 years ago and the song of an unwed, pregnant teenager help guide us in a world that is still filled with violence and some very wrong ideas about God?

After much struggle, I believe it can be summed up like this: **The birth of hope is an idea more powerful than any other.** It is light that outshines the darkness. It is the undoing of despair and the disarming of evil.

Micah gives voice to the birth of hope in his own day. This text did not begin as a prophecy about the birth of Jesus nearly 800 years later. It began as a word to the people of the day that despite all the turmoil happening at the time, (*and there was a lot of*

---

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/15/bryan-fischer-god-did-not-protect-connecticut-shooting-victims-prayer-banned\\_n\\_2303903.html?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+HP%2FPolitics+\(Politics+on+The+Huffington+Post\)](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/15/bryan-fischer-god-did-not-protect-connecticut-shooting-victims-prayer-banned_n_2303903.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+HP%2FPolitics+(Politics+on+The+Huffington+Post))

*turmoil including civil war and rampant idolatry*) God was not about to abandon his people. A king is coming, a leader from the ancient line of the great King David. A ruler who would **"feed"** his flock, not **"fleece"** them with policies that favored the well-to do at the expense of everyone else. (If you read the entire book of Micah, you will find stuff like that really got "under his skin" as well!) This ruler would be known far and wide, not for his military arsenal, **but for his way of peace**. Peace after all, is what provides true security.

And just like that, the idea of **hope** was born among a suffering people and that **hope** was still sustaining Mary as she sang about the birth that was "literally" going to take place in her own life. It is the **hope** that God is not absent and has never been absent.

God is instead turning the world upside down. God's power is opposite of what we typically understand. God takes the media moguls, the well-connected, the insiders - and brings them low. At the same time, God takes the lowly, the poor, the marginalized - and lifts them up. Those who are empty are filled with good things and those who are already full are emptied of all their excess and sent away.

Things will not always be as they are.

**Hope** -for an end for injustice,  
for an end to violence,  
for the outpouring of mercy

**is the "animating" idea of Mary's song**. Today may be filled with difficulties but a new day is dawning. God is always faithful. A new reality is always being born.

And that I think is the ultimate take-away for us today. God is not responsible for evil. Indeed the bible testifies that evil grieves God in a much deeper way than we can possibly imagine. **In response to this pain**, God does something truly amazing - **God gives birth!**

God's response to evil is to outgrow it. It is to give birth to the idea that we have a choice. We do not have to respond to violence with the threat of more violence. There is a better way. A more powerful way to change the world has been unleashed. That **WAY** is being formed in the womb of Mary as she sings, and it is freely given to us to keep singing today.

*In darkest night Christ's coming shall be, when all the world is despairing,  
as morning light so quiet and free, so warm and gentle and caring.  
Then shall the mute break forth in song, the lame shall leap in wonder,  
the weak be raised above the strong, and weapons are broken asunder.<sup>8</sup>*

When bad news fills the air waves. When tragedy and evil cover us in darkness - we SING!

We sing God's new song...and hope grows.

AMEN.

---

<sup>8</sup> "Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn" text: Marty Haugen (b. 1950)