Christmas Sermon 2012

December 25, 2012

One of the greatest preachers and theologians of the 20th Century, Reinhold Niebuhr, said: “No one goes to the Christmas Eve service for the sermon. They go for the music. Preaching cannot convey the deep meaning of this night. Only the hymns can do that.” Not that I want to put too much pressure on the choir...

Although I agree with Niebuhr, that won’t stop me from rambling on for the next twelve minutes. But if in the midst of this sermon, “Come All Ye Faithful” or “Joy to the World” starts playing in your head, just go with it. Follow the Spirit.

At my old parish, we had the Christmas Pageant on the Sunday before Christmas. Every year, without fail, something would happen at that Pageant that would serve as the theme of my Christmas sermon. One year we had donated toys near the front of the church but off to the side. They were to go to the children of migrant workers. At one point in the Pageant there is this great procession down the middle aisle with all the many characters coming to adore the Christ child. As they are singing and processing, one of the sheep, played by a three year old crawling on all fours, spotted the toys. So he, still crawling, veered off the procession to where the toys were. And all the other sheep followed him. Then they started playing with the toys, many of which made all manner of sounds, which we heard through the rest of the pageant.

On Christmas Eve I preached on the symbolism of that. How often do we, in the deepest part of our hearts, want to be with Jesus. We want to stand with Jesus. But on our way to him, we get distracted by all the toys of this world.

At another pageant, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her she was to give birth to a child, the Savior. After delivering her lines, the angel was supposed to exit stage left. But she did not. She was so fascinated with the story, she just stayed with Mary. And as Joseph and Mary went from door to door, asking to be let in, she looked on with disbelief expressed on her face as the holy couple were turned away again and again.

That’s not in the script but maybe it should be. Because the angels, God’s grace, never leave us. We are never abandoned. The favorite Psalm of so many, Psalm 23 , tells us “surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” That’s our translation but those who know the original Hebrew version say the word for “follow” is really closer to “pursue.” “Your goodness and mercy pursue me, they chase me down, all the days of my life.”

There is no Sunday night Pageant to inspire me this year. But I did get some early inspiration from a most holy service held here at the Cathedral on Friday afternoon. It was a memorial service for all the homeless who died in the past year in Western Massachusetts. They were all named and it was, sadly, a long list. Candles were lit in their name and people got up spontaneously to eulogize them. It touched my soul.

Dean Jim Munroe asked me for a two minute “word of encouragement” at that service. I offered that and later Jim told me I should say the same thing here tonight. Bishops should always listen to their Cathedral Deans. Here is what I said Friday and then I will expand on those themes. But remember, if Silent Night starts playing in your soul, pray with that.

The Christmas Story is really about counting. Remember why Joseph and Mary leave their hometown of Nazareth and go to Bethlehem. The Emperor has ordered a census. He wants to count every person in the whole world. To do so all need to go to the original family home of the man. For Mary and Joseph this means Bethlehem.

But notice what happens tonight. The shepherds are out in the fields. Why aren’t they back home, being counted? Because they are poor shepherds and in the eyes of the Empire, they do not count. They do not matter. And yet these are the very ones that the angels come to with news of great joy “to YOU is born this day in the city of David, a savior.” And Luke tells us this message is backed up by not one angel, or two, or a hundred, but by a “multitude of the heavenly host.” More than anyone could ever count.

Luke is telling us that God’s grace is not limited. You cannot count it but you can count ON it. God’s love and mercy knows no boundaries. You can’t ever use it up. You do not have just enough grace to face whatever you need to face in life, you have more than enough grace. When God creates, God creates abundantly. God creates so abundantly that we cannot use up all the life God gives us.

The story goes on. We hear that Jesus is born homeless. Thereby taking the homeless into his soul. Matthew tells us Mary and Joseph are forced to flee Israel with Jesus and go to Egypt to escape the jealous wrath of the King. Jesus becomes a refugee and thereby takes refugees into his soul. And so it will be with Jesus. Until he dies, thereby taking death into his eternal soul. I can tell you a lot more about how that works but you need to come back at Easter to hear it.
All of this leads Jesus to be the prophet of compassion. That compassion was shared by his cousin John the Baptist. When John was asked what people should do to get ready for the day of salvation, he said “If you have two coats, share with anyone who has none.”

That was the plan of John and Jesus. Get all the multi-coat people (are any of you multi-coat people?) and put them together with the no-coat people. And see what happens. Because we all need each other. According to Jesus we are all ONE. You see, ONE is the only number that really counts.

Let’s keep going past Friday’s sermon with this theme. These last ten days we have been ONE with the suffering people of Newtown, Connecticut. We are all Newtowners now. In a song he wrote after another tragic shooting ten years ago, Bruce Springsteen in his song American Skin, sang: “We are baptized in these waters, and in each other’s blood.” The human family has suffered an unimaginable tragedy and we are all a part of that family.

Just a little while ago, when we read the gospel, we heard that after the shepherds visited Mary and Joseph and Jesus, and conveyed the message of the angels, Mary pondered these words in her heart. She thought about it. She prayed about it.

This past week, like you, I have been thinking and praying about what happened at the Sandy Hook School. As I did, I read the words we had earlier from the prophet Isaiah. The Savior we celebrate tonight will be named “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” These are not just flowery words strung together. These are not empty titles. They mean something. They have content.

The Prince of Peace has an agenda. Peace on earth. Not in heaven. On earth. We can’t spiritualize this. If we are committed to following the Prince of Peace, what should we do to prevent another massacre involving automatic assault weapons? The issue is complex and demands reflecting on our culture of violence. But one dimension of this complexity is obvious. This is not a problem that can be solved with more guns.

But why don’t we do anything? The Dean of the National Cathedral preached these words last week in Washington D.C. “Everyone in this city seems to be in terror of the gun lobby. But I believe the gun lobby is no match for the cross lobby.” Then he got specific: calling for bans on assault weapons and high capacity magazines, tightening rules for sales at gun shows, and putting in more resources for the care of the mentally ill. THAT is showing the Prince of Peace is more than an empty title.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace and Jesus is Wonderful Counselor. What an intimate, personal expression: Wonderful Counselor. God counseling us. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes: “God’s revelations are always pointed, concrete and specific. They are not a Platonic world of ideas and theories about which you can be right or wrong, or observe from a distance. Divine revelation is not something you measure or critique. It is not an ideology but a Presence you intuit and meet. It is more Someone than Something. For Christians we meet that Someone in an ordinary looking man named Jesus. God materialized in human form, so we could fall in love with a real person, which is the only way we fall in love.”

As we gather here tonight, I hope we can experience that Presence in the Wonderful Counselor. Thomas Merton expressed that Presence in a time when was confused and conflicted, when he really needed the Wonderful Counselor. This prayer has become very popular because it is so real: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean I am actually doing so. But I believe the desire to please you does in fact please you. I hope I never do anything apart from that desire. And I know if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will fear not, for you are ever with me, and you will never let me face my perils alone.”


Let’s get back to the music. Amen.
Prayers for Connecticut

December 20, 2012

With you, I have been praying all week for the victims of the Newtown massacre, their families, their community, and for Adam and his mother. And like you, I have been searching for wisdom. One source of insight came from the sermon given by The Rev. Rich Simpson at St Francis in Holden. Here it is in its entirety:

******************


As you may know, the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut has had a special companion relationship with the Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney in Scotland that goes back to 1784, when Samuel Seabury travelled to Scotland to be ordained the first bishop of Connecticut and of the entire The Episcopal Church USA after the War of Independence. Robert Gillies, Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney in the Scottish Episcopal Church has written a special collect for the people of the Diocese of Connecticut in this time of their grief and loss after the tragic deaths in Newtown. I want to begin with his prayer, this morning.

Let us pray:

Sustaining and redeeming God, In sadness and in the tragedy of awful loss, we offer before you those young lives lost as a consequence of human violence this past week. We raise in the distress of this time the families of whose children are no longer to share life and joy with them. We mourn those other families also fractured by the needless killings of that day. As Jesus first came to his people and lives of the young and innocent were lost in the cruelty of one individual upon others, so now 2000 years on we stand alongside those whose similar grief is beyond our imagining. Holy and loving God bring all consolation that can be brought to those most in need of your presence today, and never cease to make your presence real in this their hour of need. To you we voice this prayer,

Amen.

We remember the departed: Charlotte, Daniel, Olivia, Josephine, Ana, Dylan, Madeleine, Catherin, Chase, Jesse, James, Grace, Emilie, Jack, Noah, Caroline, Jessica, Avielle, Benjamin, Allison, Rachel, Dawn, Anne Marie, Lauren, Mary, Victoria, Nancy, and Adam. May they rest in peace, and light perpetual shine upon them.
At least until we see madness and violence break out in an elementary school classroom, in a town not so different from our own. And, literally, when that happens; it makes no sense, because evil makes no sense. Our hearts are broken and for a time we can barely catch our breath and the darkness is overwhelming. As I heard one commentator put it on Friday night, investigators will figure out what happened at a crime scene, but at some level no one will ever know “what happened in the damaged mind and broken soul” of the twenty-year old perpetrator of such violence. That is what evil does—it damages minds, and breaks souls—sometimes beyond what is even fathomable or comprehensible.

It is tempting, when we do dare to speak of evil we tend to want to project it onto some villain — the usual suspects are people like Adolf Hitler or Saddam Hussein or maybe even Adam Linza. But the truth about evil is that it is far more insidious than that. It’s more like a cancer that leaves behind “damaged minds and broken souls.”

So I have no words of explanation about what happened on Friday morning in Newtown, Connecticut. I don’t think we can “make sense of it.” What I can say, in trying to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in the face of such horrific violence is this: evil is real. And then this: love is stronger than evil.

Seventy-one times in the Psalms, the Hebrew word Selahis used. It’s a very difficult concept to translate into English, but basically it is a musical mark—kind of like a rest. It’s a note to the choir-master that can be translated to mean: “stop and listen.” The Amplified Bible translates Selah as “pause, and think of that.”

So let me say it again and insert a mark for the choirmaster:

Evil is real. Selah. Love is stronger than evil. There is nothing easy or self-evident in that truth and at this moment in time we are still in shock; that Selah may last a long time. Even so, our faith points us toward the empty tomb, even if getting there will take some time. Sometimes the world feels like Good Friday. Selah. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

If we believe that, then in the face of tragedy and death we are called to be again and again, and each time at an even deeper level, to become an Easter people, with God’s help; a baptized community who are renouncing Satan and all of the evil powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, and renouncing all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God, in order to turn again and again and again to Jesus Christ and to put our whole trust in his grace and love. With God’s help, we try to follow him into all of the pain of this world by way of the cross. Like the principal of the Sandy Hook Elementary School, Dawn Hochsprung did, dying as she lived, for the love of her students. Or Victoria Soto, a 27-year-old first-grade teacher who gave her life, a ransom for many.

Our broken hearts go out to the all victims and their families and those congregations and their clergy where funerals will be happening days before Christmas. But there has to be more, going forward. We have to talk seriously about gun-violence in this country and gun control, and then move beyond rhetoric to real solutions. And then we must hold our politicians accountable. We have to talk seriously about mental illness and how to support all who suffer before their minds are damaged and their souls are broken. All indications are that Adam Lanza was a deeply troubled soul long before Friday morning.

Have you ever noticed how often, in the face tragedies such as this one that people of so many different faith traditions and of no faith tradition gather for candlelight vigils? There is something deeply human about this instinct: while it is so tempting to want to curl up in a ball and isolate ourselves and curse the darkness, people nevertheless come together and light candles. This instinct takes us to the very heart of Advent: even as the days are getting shorter and darker, we light a candle. And then another. And then another. We come here today to light that third rose candle — the candle of joy — at a time when we are not feeling very happy. But joy is not the same as happiness. Joy takes us to that place where we again put our trust in the God who is with us not only in the manger but on the Cross as well: the God who is with us whenever two or three gather in his name to share the bread and the wine as signs of Christ’s ultimate victory over sin and death, and signs of hope for the journey. Christ has died. Selah. Christ is risen. Selah. Christ will come again.

In moments like this, we need God to be God, because we have no place else to turn. But in such times, the darkness feels overwhelming. We light candles to remember that we are part of a communion of saints who have walked through darkness before, but we have seen a great light. In Holy Baptism, that light has been given to us, to let it shine through us. That is why every time we celebrate Holy Baptism at that font, we light a candle from the Paschal Candle for the baptized: as an outward and visible sign of our calling to be little lights that shine in the darkness. To walk as children of the light, for the sake of the world.
In our regularly scheduled Advent program, this sermon was meant to focus our attention on the First Song of the Prophet Isaiah. I have to tell you that I gave very serious thought to changing that plan today, and perhaps going with another song, maybe the twenty-second Psalm: “my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The feeling of the absence of God, with which our tradition is quite familiar — is itself a crying out to God. But this is the song we have been given on the third Sunday of Advent — a song that blesses God, remembers God, and gives thanks to God for doing so many marvelous things. We may not all be ready yet to sing such a song when it still feels like Good Friday, while we are still so numb. But maybe we need to sing it until we can believe it again, and then when we begin to believe it again, to allow it to transform us until we can live it.

Even at the grave, we make our song. It would be tempting to hear these words as an historical statement: the days are surely coming, Isaiah sings, and then we think that since Isaiah sang his song hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, that he was making a prediction. And then on December 25, the Year of Our Lord, One, his prediction came true and Jesus was born. But that is not really what the prophets are all about, and if we read the text that way then Advent is little more than a nostalgic journey back to first-century Palestine, back to the historical Jesus who may or may not have been born in Bethlehem anyway.

If, we mean to join this song, then something more is required of us than going back in time to the days of Isaiah or the days when Jesus was born. So let’s try it another way: surely it is God who saves me. Surely it is God who saves us. Each of us are invited to make these words own, here and now. It’s not a one shot deal. It’s not something that happened once upon a time in Bethlehem on Christmas morning or even on a hill outside of Jerusalem on a Friday afternoon or once upon a time in our own lives, maybe when we were baptized, or quit drinking, or started going to church again. Our salvation is still unfolding.

To sing it together today is not an act of denial: we come here far too mindful of all the ways that sin and death have a grip on our lives in places like Newtown, Nickel Mines, and Columbine — and in places like Damascus and Gaza — and in the violence of poverty and despair much closer to home, including our own struggles against despair and addiction and the dark night of the soul. Selah. Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust in God and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and will be my Savior. Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation. And on that day you shall say, Give thanks to the Lord and call upon God’s Name; Make God’s deeds known among the peoples; see that they remember that God’s Name is exalted. Sing the praises of the Lord, who has done great things, and this is known in all the world. Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.

I also found inspiration in the words of our President on Sunday night. Our parishioners at St. John’s in Williamstown supported the President’s call for change in a creative way. Here is what they did:

On the left is our simple sidewalk message put in place yesterday and staying up until meaningful action happens. Black and white ribbons a homegrown idea, nothing more — invited folks to hang a black and white ribbon at their home entrance, made ribbon available; some are doing so. We had the candles on the altar for the morning services; afterward, volunteers of all ages moved them to the ramp. The sign reads, “Supporting the President’s Call for Meaningful Action”.

Our Presiding Bishop, Katherine Jefferts-Shori, has called for new gun control laws. I join her in this call and I am looking for opportunities to collaborate with other religious leaders to demand action in Washington. Some will say we are starting political action on this too early. I say we have begun far too late and we need to ask forgiveness from the Living God for our inaction.

Let’s keep praying together always knowing that the Light has come into the world and the darkness could not overcome it.

+Doug
In a time long ago...  

December 13, 2012

In a time long ago when I was in seminary, we were told in homiletics class to make one point and never divert from that point. Then in my first assignment I worked with a wonderful priest named Diarmuid McGann. He disagreed with my seminary professor. He said (in an Irish brogue): “The preacher should make several points (in 10-12 minutes). Give your listeners plenty of places to jump off and pray. If you said something, anything, that gave people an opportunity to go into their souls and pray a while, the Holy Spirit worked. Who cares if they heard the rest of the sermon or not? They were holy daydreaming.”

That wisdom is always with me when I prepare a sermon. And now I am going to bring that strategy to this blog. And I'll do it by bringing some words of hope from three Episcopal consecrations this year in New England. These sermons had numerous insights (and lots of humor) but here is what invited holy daydreaming in me.

Our own Margaret Bullitt-Jonas (Grace, Amherst) preached at the consecration of our own Rob Hirschfeld (Grace, Amherst) as the 10th Bishop of New Hampshire. She reflected on the Transfiguration of Jesus and expanded it out to all religious experience and specifically the religious experience of Rob's consecration. And then she tied it all to social justice. Here it is:

“Sometimes we begin to shine, and the people around us feel the blessing and catch the fire. You notice that when Jesus was filled with light, his disciples shared in the experience, too: they saw his radiant face and clothes; they were overshadowed by the same cloud that overshadowed him; they heard the same divine voice that rang in his ears. There is something about religious experience that is not for ourselves alone: when one person lights up with the presence of God, other people light up, too. It's infectious. It's catching. And so other people are inspired to take up their own spiritual journey and to learn how they, too, can become who God intends them to be. They, too, will be impelled to engage in the great work of our time – to tackle climate change and poverty, discrimination and war.”

I hope we all fill overshadowed by that holy cloud from which comes the voice “You are my beloved.” And may Margaret's prediction come true: may we all become who God intends us to be and engage the great work of our time.

Kirk Smith, the Bishop of Arizona, preached at Nick Knisely's consecration in Rhode Island. He started his sermon by inviting all of us to turn ON our cell phones. He went on to encourage and implore us to use social media to spread the Gospel. We have a great story to tell – the love of God coming to us in Jesus with the power to transform the world in the power of his Spirit. Christianity has used new communication methods throughout our history. There would have been no Reformation without the printing press, as just one example. But we have been slow to use the technology of the last 20 years.

We are taking Bishop Smith’s inspiration seriously in Western Massachusetts. Under the leadership of Deborah Johansen Harris’ leadership, you will see many new ways of communicating the Good News. These include a new logo, new names for our publications, a whole new website, weekly meditations on that website and Facebook. And some of you are trying to talk me into using Twitter but I am resisting.

The third of our sermons come from my friend Barney Forsythe. Barney was the Academic Dean at West Point and now is the President of Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. I was so blessed to have Barney preach at my consecration. Barney looked at many dimensions of the scriptures and our life together in Western Massachusetts. But my holy daydreaming centered on his calls for “compassion, inclusion, bringing forth gifts and risk taking.” With Barney I see those dimensions of life as essential to following Jesus in his mission of mercy, compassion and hope. I look forward to exploring God's imagination with you here in Western Mass as the Holy Spirit swirls among us with endless creativity.

In his references to risk taking in service to the Gospel, Barney quoted my “reckless abandon” (R.A.) invitation at our Convention. Why not use some R.A. and comment on this blog so we can widen the discussion?

+Doug