

The 9th Sunday after Pentecost
August 11, 2019
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20
Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12:32-40

Last Sunday, I tried to say something in response to the latest news of yet another round of mass shootings.

Let that sink in a moment: *another round of mass shootings.*

It wasn't so very long ago that we were unmoored by the news of a single mass shooting. That was horrific enough. Now they seem to come in clusters.

Though I felt the inadequacy on my words last Sunday, some of you have said that my words last week were helpful. If so, I'm glad of that. The challenge is bigger than what I offered last week, so faith demands (I think) that I return to the topic again this week ... though I fear more words will still be inadequate even so.

Scholars say that our second reading this morning isn't a letter; it's more likely a sermon. It's a sermon preached to a congregation that has known trials and tribulations, a people who have endured suffering and made sacrifices for their faith. But they have, it seems, grown tired and weary. They no longer see the point and are on the edge of giving up.

And so the preacher reminds them of those who have gone before them, of others who had grown dissatisfied with the world as they knew it and set off for something new:

But as it is, they desire a better country ...

Those sojourners are *our* forebears, as well. We count them as heroes of the faith. People of faith who dared venture forth from a land they once called home in search of a better country.

They desire a better country.

And this, by the way, is the moral force of the mention in our reading from Isaiah this morning of Sodom and Gomorrah. Their sin was not sex or sexuality. Their sin was brutality and the failure of a community to protect the foreigners in their midst. Isaiah, the prophet, desires a better country, one where widows and children are cared for.

@e, too, desire a better country. That desire is the story of immigrants past and present. It's the story of every reform movement down through the centuries: labor unions, St. Francis of Assisi, women's suffrage, and civil rights. It's the story of young people today who have grown up learning drills to keep them safe in the event of an active shooter in a public school.

Following the news last weekend of mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, people are more on edge than ever. Public spaces no longer feel like safe places. There are anecdotal reports of people who have stopped going out to movie theatres and outdoor music festivals, of people who do more of their shopping online rather than be exposed in a place like Walmart. The world feels less and less safe. And people feel more and more afraid.

A motorcycle backfired in Times Square this past Tuesday night, and the crowds apparently mistook the sound for a gunshot ... and they raced to escape. "Witnesses called it a stampede as people ran away from the area down nearby streets into restaurants, stores and even theaters. Several pedestrians were hurt in the panicked rush ... 22 people were injured," and four of them sent to the hospital for treatment.

In our gospel this morning, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, little flock ..." He offers it as a word of consolation and encouragement. But it's a hard word to take to heart these days. That's a sign of our own desire for a better country.

Nearly 100 bishops of the Episcopal Church have formed a network they call "Bishops United Against Gun Violence." They issued a statement this past week that calls for common sense measures and a sane gun policy. And because they, too, "desire a better country," they lament the deadly mix of gun violence and white supremacy. They decry the rise in anti-immigrant sentiments and racist tropes and inflammatory language that incite crowds against people of color. And they call for our elected leaders to "embrace humane immigration policies that follow God's command and the Biblical imperative to welcome the stranger in our midst." ⁱ

In Hebrews, the writer suggests that what we need is a little faith: "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

But faith, I hasten to add, is more than an antidote to reality, belief in spite of the evidence. That's an appallingly shallow notion. I think of a conversation between Susie, the little girl in the *Miracle on 34th Street*, and Fred Gailey, the attorney who manages ultimately to prove that Kris Kringle, the Macy's Santa Claus, really *is* Santa Claus. When Susie isn't so sure, Fred tells her, "Faith is believing in something when common sense tells you not to."

No, that's not faith; that's wishful thinking at best, superstition at worst. Faith, at least in this reading, is the seed of something new – something already real, but fragile and not yet visible. Hebrews insists that faith already anticipates what is believed. Faith is itself a kind of power that makes the new possible. The Presbyterian preacher and writer Tom Long describes faith in terms both of an inward and an outward reality. Harkening back to the Civil Rights Movement in our country, he writes:

Faith as an inward reality sings "We Shall Overcome." Faith as an outward reality marches at Selma. ⁱⁱ

The Civil Rights Movement is an example of this kind of faith, for many of us the best example in our lifetimes. In 1955, Rosa Parks felt increasingly dislocated in her own land and desired a better country, so she took her seat on a bus and helped end segregation on the city buses.

In August of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and spoke of his dream of a day when children are “not judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” and “all God’s children ... join hands and sing ... ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!’” His dream was God’s dream, borne not of facts but of faith. And his faith, the assurance of the things hoped for, was a step forward for our nation. Martin Luther King, and millions more with him, desired a better country, a land well-watered by justice and righteousness.

It should go without saying that this kind of faith is not easy, not a quick fix. One writer says:

The magic wand store is closed. It's fun to imagine what we'd do if we had a magic wand, something that, with a wave, could produce the funding, the open door, the technology, the breakthrough, the insight, the inspiration, the shortcut, but they stopped making magic wands several millennia ago. ⁱⁱⁱ

Faith isn’t hoping for a magic wand; it’s taking a first step toward the dream God has for us and our world even if we have no guarantee that we will ever live to see the dream come true. And yet we take a first step. And then another.

And that brings us to the heart of today’s reading from Hebrews, that list of biblical heroes, of Old Testament saints, who stepped out in search of a better country.

And it’s remarkable that Sarah is named on this list, not just because women are so often not mentioned but because she’s not an obvious exemplar. Her husband Abraham was the one we usually hear about. He was told to set off for a foreign land, and he left. He was told he would have descendants “as many as the stars of heaven,” and he believed.

But Sarah was not so gullible. She was hiding behind a tree when a messenger from God made the promises to Abraham. She was already old by then ... and her husband, Abraham, “as good as dead” (as it says in Hebrews this morning). And she laughed. She was incredulous. She didn’t have faith, at least not as we would typically describe it. She thought the whole idea was a joke. She thought it was ridiculous. And yet she, too, gave birth to a son they named Isaac, with means “laughter.” And she joined her husband in search of a better country.

I’m glad she’s listed for us this morning as an exemplar of faith. She’s easier to relate to for most of us, I dare say, than Abraham and his unflappable faith.

And she gives us an example to follow. Because the better country we desire seems increasingly hard to believe in. It might seem, even to ourselves, laughable. And yet ...

And yet, we long for that better country.

This coming week, I suggest a little faith is in order. Not believing in fairy tales. Not hoping for a magic wand. I suggest that what our world needs from us is the kind of faith described for us in Hebrews this morning, the kind of faith that helps unsettle our complacency, the kind of faith that lets us acknowledge feeling a bit like strangers in our own land, the kind of faith that desires a better country and dreams of other possibilities for our world, ourselves, and all our brothers and sisters. It is the kind of faith that does more than wish it were so, but sets out to discover what God intends for us, and then to inhabit it as our own. One step at a time.

We need a little faith to that first step. And then the next. And the one after that. We may not get there in our lifetime – as Martin Luther King knew so many years ago and as the preacher in Hebrews knew so very many years before him, as well. We may not get there, we may not even see it, except as that country which beckons us just over the horizon. But we know it as the place God has prepared, the only place where we truly belong.

ⁱ The full text of their statement @ http://bishopsagainstgunviolence.org/bishops-united-repudiates-christian-nationalism-systemic-racism/?fbclid=IwAR3XziSyXTBfe0LmRdqTOu9vdRLpx6wJ1StK6Bp6xljopGtG2UKUaEDZz_8 follows:

AUGUST 6, 2019—Since last weekend, three young white men—all American citizens, all in legal possession of assault rifles—have murdered more than 30 people in cold blood. Most of the precious children of God who are dead and injured are people of color.

When gun violence makes headlines, politicians supported by the National Rifle Association are quick to call white shooters “mentally ill,” while characterizing black and brown shooters as “criminals” and insisting that guns are not the problem. They choose to remain loyal to the gun lobby and its campaign contributions while denying the incontrovertible evidence that more guns mean more deaths.

Common sense measures like universal background checks, assault weapons bans, handgun purchaser licensing, and restrictions on gun ownership by domestic abusers point the way toward sane gun policy that is well within any sensible interpretation of the Second Amendment. They are necessary and long overdue, but they are not sufficient.

This latest sickening cluster of mass shootings has thrust into the headlines the deadly mix of white supremacy and gun violence that is coming to define our era of American history. Anti-immigrant sentiment is on the rise and our government holds asylum-seekers on our southern border in inhumane conditions. The president of the United States uses racist tropes and inflammatory language to incite crowds against people of color, refugees and immigrants; and hate crime reports have increased for three consecutive years. The hatred and fury that drives mass shootings can also be turned inward, where it fuels the invisible and growing death toll of gun suicides.

As Christians, we must work actively to dismantle the systemic racism that is part of our country’s founding narrative and that continues to fuel mass shootings and urban gun violence today. We must insist that both our fellow Christians and our elected leaders repudiate white supremacy and white nationalism and embrace humane immigration policies that follow God’s command and the Biblical imperative to welcome the stranger in our midst. And we must refuse to participate in scapegoating people with mental illness, a ploy too often used to distract from the urgent yet simple need to enact common sense gun safety measures.

Seven years ago yesterday, six people were murdered by a white supremacist at the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. That massacre, one of two events that galvanized the creation of Bishops United Against Gun Violence, (the other was the shooting at Sandy Hook in Connecticut) brought us together across our differences to demonstrate that we believe in a God of life in the face of death. Today we are weary of witnessing the slaughter gripping our country. But we are no less determined to continue speaking, even when it seems our words make no difference; to continue praying in order to gather our strength to act; and to follow Jesus in speaking truth, especially when it seems that truth is out of season.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Long, in *Hebrews (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, John Knox Press, 1997), pp. 113-114.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Ramsey @ http://day1.org/8412-mark_ramsey_today.