

## ADVENT PEACE

Isaiah 11:1-9

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Wednesday couldn't have started better. First text message of the day was from Nate, with news for the church staff that their daughter had arrived just after midnight, and that everyone was healthy. He sent pictures, we all congratulated him.

In the middle of the afternoon, I received a text message from my daughter. She was driving for work and heard on the radio breaking news of a mass shooting in California. "Another one", she texted to me and her brother.

The rest of the afternoon and evening I did what I'm sure all of us did: check into the news sporadically and wonder what we would find out...which "kind" of shooting was this one? What will the political fallout be? What ramifications?

In the end, I was left, like I'm sure many of you, feeling sad, angry, and hopeless. Actually I was left speechless. What is there left to say? I remember preaching after Columbine, after 9/11, three years ago after Newtown Connecticut, and just three Sundays ago after Paris. What is there left to say?

A weary resignation sets in. It could happen anywhere. This one was a social service agency in San Bernardino, California. My daughter works for a social service agency. My stepdaughter lives 30 miles away from San Bernardino. My son lives and works in Chicago where there have been 2,771 shooting vic-

tims in 2015. Well, actually 2,771 was the number when I wrote this sermon draft on Friday. As of this morning, the number is 2,777. It could happen, couldn't it, to any of us?

There is a biblical word for how many feel right now. That word is "lament." To lament is to mourn, to grieve, to passionately express sorrow. I think of the sound of someone crying, keening we sometimes call it, that deep unrestrained crying when one first hears bad news. There is a literature of lament in the Bible, many psalms in which people express anger and outrage from the heart, from deep in the soul. Sometimes they express that anger to God. "Where are you, God?" "Why have you abandoned us?" "Why do these things keep happening?" We're reminded when we read the lament psalms that God is not offended by our honesty. All God wants us to do is communicate; we don't have to be polite about it. God knows what we're thinking anyway.

Wednesday I was supposed to start writing a sermon called "Advent Peace." What I felt was speechless. But you pay me to speak; speaking is my job, my calling, my vocation.

I believe there are things we can do, from a civic and political point of view. I have written my senators and representative with my political opinions.

What I'm here to talk about this morning is what we do, spiritually. How do we react as people of God, as people who proclaim the prince of peace to be our savior?

If you want to use the Bible to promote one particular point of view, you can always pluck a verse out of context and prove just about anything. If you

want to use the Bible as a weapon or to help you win a debate, you can find passages of scripture for that purpose. But if you really want to know what the overarching message of the Bible is, you need to read it differently. You need to look for the major recurring themes.

Let me lift up three of them for us today.

“Do not be afraid.” Those words appear over and over again; they’re especially prominent in the Christmas story. The angel Gabriel says them to Mary; the angel says them to the shepherds. In the book of I John, we read, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out all fear.” In other words, it’s impossible for us to live both in a state of love and in a state of fear. One attitude or the other wins out. “Fear not,” we are told. It doesn’t mean to act foolishly, throwing caution to the wind. But it does mean making sure that we have more love than fear.

“Pray without ceasing” is another biblical message. We’re told to stay in touch with God, and our means of communication is prayer. We don’t have to have eloquent words, or any words at all. Prayer sometimes is composed of “sighs too deep for human words.” Prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of gratitude, but also prayers asking “why” and prayers asking “what can we do?” Prayers of anger and outrage that stir us to action. Pray without ceasing.

And finally, “Never give up. Be persistent and patient. Things take time.” 40 years is how long the people of Israel wandered until they were prepared to enter the promised land. Faithful waiting is never idle waiting; we talked about this last week. We’re called to persistence, and we’re called to take the long

view. What we're not allowed to do is give up, or retreat to our comfortable cocoons. We are called to be a part of God's work of bringing more love and justice and peace into the world. We are called to do our part to make God's vision of a peaceable kingdom reality.

Remaining speechless is not an option, no matter how tired I am of addressing horrific events. Giving up is not an option, not for disciples of Christ. Giving in to fear, throwing up our hands in despair: they are not options for people who worship the prince of peace.

God's vision is for a world of justice and peace. Which part of that vision are you called to help make real? Is your part raising children who truly care about the future of the planet and each person in it? Is your part chaperoning mission trips so that the next generation of young people is filled with compassion and empathy? Is your part serving meals to the hungry, providing hospitality to the homeless? Is your part a ministry of relentless prayer? Some of us are called to political action, some of us to education, some of us to service to our neighbors. We can give time, we can give money. None of us is given a pass. We're either people who worship the prince of peace or we're not.

I don't want little Nora Taylor to grow up in a world where social service agencies become killing fields. We have to remain engaged, as hard as it is. Where would Jesus be, were he in human form in our time and place? He would be comforting the victims and the grieving, he would be lobbying our legislators, he would be giving wisdom to our leaders, he would be speaking out for the rights of those who have the least.

It is not easy. None of it is. It's not easy to shake off fear, or maintain a habit of regular prayer, and it's not easy to be persistent, day after day, week after week, doing the work we're called to do, not knowing what good it's really doing. But we're not doing it alone. God is with us. The God of Christmas is also the God of Easter who promises that the power of love is greater than the power of hatred, and evil, and even death itself. Let us recommit ourselves today to the work of peace, because the world God loves is hurting, and we are needed to make God's vision become reality.