

Takoma Park Presbyterian Church

The Third Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2012

Pastor Mark Greiner

“Public Lament”

Isaiah 52:2-10

On Friday, December 14, 12 girls and 8 boys, ages 6 and 7, 6 adults (mostly who worked at their school) and the shooter himself were killed in Connecticut.

We light a candle: Christ have mercy.

Every day in the U.S., 18 children and young adults are killed by gunfire.

We light a candle: Christ have mercy.

Every day in the U.S., 85 brothers and sisters of all ages are killed by gunfire.

We light a candle: Christ have mercy.

In the U.S., brothers and sisters, who are under the age of 45, and who are African American, are more likely to be killed from gunfire than to die from any other cause.

We light a candle: Christ have mercy.

Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell.

We light a candle: Christ have mercy.

When our lips have almost no words, still we light candles to express our hearts. We light candles to remember.

The scriptures were almost always written in ruins.

The 5 books of Moses end in the desert wastes: Moses and the Hebrew people had still not crossed into the Promised Land.

Almost all of Job is written from the ruins of his life.

The 4 Gospels, the stories of Jesus, are written after his crucifixion.

And Paul writes the letters to the churches often from prison.

The scriptures of the Jewish and Christian Testaments were written by people who have been through hell, so they may speak to us in our times.

The scriptures show us how to give voice to torment.

They even give voice to bitterness.

To captive Jerusalem, God says, "You were sold for nothing." For no good end, no gain, no purpose.

Every day in this country, hand guns and assault rifles are bought and sold for no good end, no good purpose.

Lament is essential: remembering the pain, naming the pain, giving voice to the problems as clearly as we can so we face the challenges.

Lament is bold speech: bold speech with one another and bold speech with God.

Give voice to lament is an antidote, so we are not driven to the despair of silence.

Public lament moves towards public action, civic action.

God also said, "my people went down. My people were taken away without cause."

Can we hear the powerful affirmation here?

God says, "MY people."

Even in terrible times, we are not alone. We are God's.

And not only are we God's, we are God's PEOPLE, together.

Thank you for coming to worship today.

It's so important that we come together, rather than be isolated.

We suffer together, we lament together...and we encourage one another, so we may act together.

Roger G., thank you for giving us a beautiful children's sermon today on the theme of "Fear not! Rejoice in Emmanuel, for God is with us."

That theme is just right for today.

Roger, you remind us of another Roger – Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Rogers was not only a teacher for children and parents, he was also a Presbyterian minister.

He has this very helpful guide for talking with children about tragic events in the news:

<http://fci.org/new-site/par-tragic-events.html>

Whether or not we have children of our own, we are aunts and uncles and neighbors to children. So we can help.

For the youngest children, if they do not already know, we do not have to tell them the recent news. They do not have to know.

For children of all ages, including us adults, turn off the TV.

Don't let yourself be flooded, re-traumatized by disturbing images.

Increase your availability to children, so they can feel your presence and know you are available to talk.

It is almost cliché, but increase the hugs. For all of us, of any age, that contact can be a big consolation.

For elementary school age children, answer their questions. We may begin by asking them with what they know or have heard. That way, we can speak to the concerns they have.

And if you engage in writing a letter or a service project in response to events, share it with them and even ask them to participate.

With children, being concrete helps. Like "I am with you now and you are safe."

For teenagers and adults. Engage in honest conversation.

Share what you know. And be honest with what you do not know.

Returning to Isaiah, it is from the ruins that God speaks:

"My people SHALL know my name. They shall know that it is I who speak. Here am I."

God offers God's own presence with us.

"Break forth into singing together, you ruins of Jerusalem.

Listen to your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy.”

Sentinels are on the watch; they see what is coming.

We are sentinels, too.

We light this joy candle in remembrance of Christmas, Jesus birth 2000 years past.

And yet even more, we light the joy candle in anticipation.

The reign of God is arriving. God is at work.

The Apostle’s Creed earlier said, Jesus descended into hell.

But he did not stay there.

Jesus put down death by death.

Through the grave, he conquered the power of the grave.

He released the captives of hell, working deliverance.

So we light the candle of joy because joy is not extinguished. We just gathered for the children’s Christmas pageant during Sunday school. This is encouragement: gathering with the children to tell the Christmas story. Their delight brings joy.

We light the candle of joy because we already participate in a reality that is coming, and join in doing the work to usher in the reign of God.

In the trials that he faced, Dr. Martin Luther King said “the arc of the moral universe is long.” That is, we don’t always see justice at work immediately. But he continued, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

We light the candle as an act of courage, for public courage, for the courage to speak, to do what needs to be done in our nation.

Fear not. Rejoice in Immanuel, God is with us.

So let us turn to sharing our lamentations and prayers together....