

It is hard to light the candle of joy this morning, isn't it? After the tragic events on Friday, it would seem more appropriate to light the **candle of sorrow**. At this time of year, classrooms *should* be filled with the excitement of Christmas parties as little ones count down the days until winter vacation and Christmas - classrooms should not be filled with terror and death. At this time of year, children should be worried about whether that one special toy will be underneath the Christmas tree not whether a gunned man will enter their lives. And at this time of year, parents should be up late at night wrapping presents not weeping inconsolably for children who are no more. The senseless murder of 20 six and seven year olds and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School has left us all reeling with grief and anger and it stirs in us horrible questions that we don't even want to admit that we are asking God, **"How O, prince of peace, could you have allowed this to happen? You can part the Red Sea and roll back the stone from the tomb but you couldn't save these children?"** And if you have come here for answers, I am afraid you will leave disappointed - but beware the preacher with quick answers to senseless tragedy.

And yet in spite of our sorrow we light the candle of joy, even while it feels as if there is little room for its light in our broken hearts. But as our candle lighting liturgy promised: in times of despair and pain when the light seems to be crowded out with so much darkness, the light of joy shines bright with the promise:

**The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.**

Advent is a season filled with promise: that a desert shall bloom, that the valleys will be lifted up and the mountains brought down low, that a child shall be given to us and he shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

But these promises are just that: promises; they speak of a reality that is *not yet*, they are a hope that lies just beyond the horizon of today- and they are promises that feel particularly distant today. But the promises that we have in scriptures are not the saccharine words of naive optimists who never faced darkness and despair but rather they are the words of men and women of great faith who in the midst of suffering and pain trusted and leaned into the promises of God. This is the great paradox of our faith: we affirm the pain of today while looking to the promised joy of tomorrow. In thinking about this paradox that is at the heart of our faith I am reminded of the words from our funeral liturgy that proclaims, **"yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."** We sing because we are not without hope, for Christ has come and Christ will come again and he will wipe every tear from our eyes. Today we are learning the balancing act of our faith: how to not rush too quickly to hope and yet not give in to despair.

And this truly is what advent is all about. Advent is a time when we long and yearn, for peace in a time of war; for love in a time of hate; hope amidst despair, for joy in the midst of pain - a time when we long for the coming of Christ who will make all things new.

The tragic events in Newtown are a stark reminder that Christ did not come into this world because we needed another holiday and an excuse to buy gifts and fill stockings. God came into the world through Christ because the world is a dangerous, frightening, wounded place in desperate need of God's healing. That is as true today as it was at the time of Christ's birth. Perhaps, the night of Christ's birth was a peaceful as our greeting cards would lead us to believe. But that holy and silent night would soon be a distant memory as Herod unleashed his wrath upon that little town of Bethlehem. I am guessing that just about every preacher attempting to find words this morning have turned to the gospel of Matthew where we read, **"When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was *infuriated*, and he sent and killed ALL the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet 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."**

This Slaughter of the Innocents defies understanding - that on the heels of the long awaited coming of the Prince of Peace that doors would be kicked in, babies torn from their mothers arms, and killed by Herod's henchmen. It makes us wonder, what good was the coming of Christ if such things could happen in Bethlehem, if such things could happen in Newtown? In light of the violence surrounding his birth and in light of the violence that continues in our world today we wonder what does it mean to profess that the Word became flesh and lived amongst us? What does it mean to profess Christ as the Light of the World that shines in the darkness, never to be overcome? These are the questions that we ask ourselves in the wake of such tragedy and I wish that I had better answers for you this morning. But here is what I do know: that the meaning of the Incarnation of Christ into this world means that God did not wish to remain safe and distant from the pain of the world but God desired to descend into the suffering. It means that God was so in love with us that God wanted to be with us no matter what that meant. And God desired that the experience of that love and that pain and suffering would become part of who God is because it would bring God closer to us. And so though we may feel as if we are sitting in the ashes, without hope, without comfort, the power of God's coming is that Christ sits with us, without hope, without comfort, weeping with us.

In trying to find words of hope for this morning, I had to turn to someone with stronger faith than me. In his eulogy for the Martyred Children of Birmingham in 1963, Dr King, said, **"Life is hard, at times as hard as crucible steel. It has its bleak and difficult moments. Like the ever—flowing waters of the river, life has its moments of drought and its moments of flood. Like the ever—changing cycle of the seasons, life has the soothing warmth of its summers and the piercing chill of its winters. And if one will hold on, he will discover that God walks with him, and that God is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace."**

This is the meaning of the incarnation, the power of Emmanuel, God with us, is that we do not mourn alone, we do not grieve in solitude, God is with us. For even when we cry out, "my God, my God why have you forsakenness us"- we cry out with the words of Christ himself. And we lean into the promise that one day in the words of the prophet Jeremiah will be fulfilled, "then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow (Jer. 31:13).

This Advent we have been focusing on the songs surrounding the coming of the Christ-child. And this morning it is difficult to hear the songs of angels above the wailing of mothers, refusing to be consoled, because their children are no more. But above their cries we also hear the song of Zechariah rejoicing at the birth of his son John. And we are reminded of the hope that is kindled, of the joy that arrives with the birth of a child. But Zechariah had another cause for his joy because it had been revealed to him by an angel of the Lord that his son would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. And so in the midst of the suffering of his people Zechariah sees the fulfillment of the promise and he sings: (Susan sings Song of Zechariah, verses 4 &5)

This morning the light of joy shines bright with the promise of its fulfillment and we struggle to lean into this promise. This is the great paradox of our faith - that we lay claim to something we cannot yet grasp; that we boldly proclaim a vision that we have not yet seen with our own eyes; and we speak words of hope even when our hearts may be filled with doubt.

And so this morning the candle of joy is joined by the candle of sorrow. They shine together today but we know one day when the Light of the World comes again that only joy will remain. For today they shine together and within their light we dare to proclaim:

**By the tender mercies of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.  
Amen.**