

Sermon for Sunday December 16, 2012, Advent Three
Watching Avenue Presbyterian Church
Rev. Shannan R. Vance-Ocampo
Isaiah 12 & John 3: 7-20

Let us pray:

O Lord our God—Light of our Salvation.

It is hard to find the right words for this time.

It is hard to hear your voice in the midst of so many voices demanding to be heard.

In these moments quiet our hearts. Still our minds. Open our souls.

Let your Word fill us with new life.

Let your Word move us to faithful action.

In Christ we pray. Amen. Amen.

"Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."

-Saint Augustine

Two Sundays ago Presbyterians in Coudersport, Pennsylvania gathered for worship at First United Presbyterian Church. It was the first Sunday of Advent. Twenty minutes into their worship service a man walked into the sanctuary and up to their music director of many years, Darlene Sitler. He shot her and killed her in front of the congregation. He was her ex-husband who she had divorced two years ago.¹

On Tuesday of this past week a man walked into a mall outside of Portland, Oregon and killed two people. Their names were Cindy Ann Yuille, she was a hospice nurse, and Steve Forsyth, a father of two and a youth sports coach.

On Friday of this week 20 children aged 6 and 7 years old and five of their teachers were killed in Newtown, Connecticut—the second largest mass school shooting in US history. The gunman killed himself and his mother.

Since Friday, at least 10 people have been shot in Chicago.

Statistically, about 80 people die day each day in the United States from gun violence.

It is the official policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), our church, to seek a ban in all 50 states on assault weapons, armor-piercing bullets that are intended for the sole purpose of killing law enforcement personnel, and .50 caliber rifles². It is also the official policy of the Presbyterian Church USA to work to strengthen access to mental health care in the United States. As a church we have a historic commitment not just to peacemaking, but to nonviolence³. We do not believe, and we are not called to do these things as Presbyterians because we are political. We believe and are called to do these things as Presbyterians because we follow Jesus.

¹ Presbyterian News Services, December 4, 2012 <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2012/12/4/church-musician-shot-killed-during-worship/>

² Gun Violence, Gospel Values, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2010.
<http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/acswp/pdf/gun-violence-policy.pdf>

³ These words were used in the PC(U.S.A.) Statement on the shootings in Newton, CT.
<http://www.pcusa.org/news/2012/12/14/aftermath-two-mass-shootings-week/>

I am just as heartbroken, sick and sad as everyone else. I confess that I feel powerless to some degree by the evil that is not just before us—but a part of the communities we all live in. Just because it hasn't happened here in North Plainfield doesn't mean it won't. Mass shootings make the news, but the truth is we have a mass shooting every day of every year in our country. About 3X the number of people killed this past Friday in Connecticut die every day in the United States because of a gun and a because of a person who pulls the trigger of that gun. Two days ago feels very different for all of us because it was 6 and 7 year-olds who were mowed down by guns, wielded by a 20 year-old. It is sad and it is senseless. And I do not have enough of the right words to say today. I am still, like you, full of grief. My soul and my heart are emptied by the sadness I feel.

I had another sermon written for today. The only thing that was usable from my first sermon is the scripture lesson about John the Baptist. John is a prophet. He's someone who tells others what God wants them to know, and how God wants them to change their lives. Let's be honest...no one really likes a prophet. None of us really likes it when we are told we have to change, or that we are living a sinful way of life. Who likes that? John uses the word repent. Change your ways. Do something different. Do something new. Live in a new way. Take God seriously. Repent.

Today I am thinking about the fact that none of us have really done enough, and that there is a lot we all have to repent for. Today I am thinking about the incredible sadness that families who lost their children and loved ones feel and that we all have. Today I am thinking about the helplessness we feel, and today I am thinking about the fear that has gripped us, keeping us from prioritizing our lives in the way Jesus would ask us to do. Most of us do not heed the wake-up calls when they arrive. God through the prophets like John the Baptist calls us on to repent and live in new ways.

So, that means we have to take an honest, real look at our lives and figure out what needs to change so we can be the people we say we are. People who follow Jesus. So, today I am thinking about my personal sins as a person who tries to get up every day and follow Jesus. Less than two months ago a large part of the State we live in was knocked out by a huge mega-storm—most likely a harbinger of things to come with global warming—a result of a sinful way of living we all take part in in one way or another as we participate in the destruction of God's beautiful and beloved Creation. We had gas rationing. People died and communities were destroyed including the one I live in. I know I haven't really changed my ways, or my life choices since October. Have you? I haven't really repented for the sin my consuming way of life visits upon God's Creation every day by doing something radically different with my life. Have you?

We've watched the news too many times before about these mass shooting but have we ever changed our ways? I still sometimes let my child watch some shows on TV that have violent themes because they entertained us. I have engaged in that sin as a parent. Have you ever done that? I know I can't be alone.

I haven't spoken up enough about gun violence and when I look back on the entire ballot I cast last month in the elections, not one person I voted for has had the moral or spiritual core inside of them to do what needs to be done on the issue of guns in our

country and access to mental health care. I sinned that day when I went to vote, because I did a lot of research on every single candidate I voted for—so I knew what I was doing. My confession is that about a month ago I voted for my wishes and dreams for those people, for what they might do if re-elected to new terms, rather than go with their records. And every single last one of them has a bad record on gun violence and access to mental health care. Most so-called “leaders” in our country do. Instead I participated in voting in what John the Baptist would call a “brood of vipers.” In my heart of hearts I wanted to vote for some other candidates, but I was afraid and so I didn’t. I know I cannot be alone in that sin I committed a month ago.

I am confessing my sins today to you as your Pastor because I think we all need to if we want to really change our lives and live in a new ways after something like Friday. We are all in deep because we are all have complicated lives that are enmeshed with a world that is far from what God would have it be. Just like the people who came to John the Baptist for help and advice. They probably felt sick about their lives, about the state of their communities, and how hard it is to change just like you and I do on weekends like this. John gave them prescriptions for change. How many of them were able to make the leap and walk away from all they had built up in life in order to really follow God? How many of us come here to church looking for that same thing: help? Don’t we each have a longing in our hearts today?

I do not have answers today, only many questions and a heart heavy with sorrow as I meditate on sin. My sin. Our sin.

The only words of consolation I have come from my dearest friends in this world—my friends who lead the church in Colombia—their church motto: “In a culture of violence, we choose to live the resurrection.”

Let us be that church. Let us be those people. Let us walk away from the broods of vipers—the sin in our lives. Let us have courage and do what we know is right. In this Advent season let us live the Resurrection that the Child we wait for has invited us into.

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