

Sermon for 2-18-18; The First Sunday of Lent
Scriptures: Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15
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Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, was 4 days ago. It was a long day for me, with three worship services and three pastoral visits, and when I got home at 9:30 pm I felt exhausted. I removed my collar and my shoes, went upstairs, stepped quietly into my son's bedroom to kiss his forehead and whisper a prayer, and then found my husband watching the news. I could tell from the look on his face that something horrible had happened.

"Another school shooting," he said. And my immediate response was a question: "How many kids died?"

"How many kids died?" What a question. What an obscene, horrendous, unholy question. How can any of us ask or hear such a question without falling on our knees, without our very breath being knocked out of us, without begging our God for forgiveness?

The unspoken, implied ending to the question is two words -- *this time*. How many kids died this time? Because, you see, school shootings have become so normal in this country, so commonplace, that a shooting in which 2 or 3 kids die gets hardly any attention from the media or from the politicians or, if we are honest, from any of us.

But 14 kids, and three of their teachers -- that's too big for even the most desensitized among us to ignore.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark is brief, and it takes us back a few weeks; back before Jesus calls his disciples, before he casts out demons, before he feeds the hungry and heals the sick. We're back before Jesus began his ministry, his service, his God-work. We're back at his baptism in the Jordan River and his temptation in the wilderness.

Forty days he was in the wilderness; forty days he was tempted by Satan. We tend to think of the word *Satan* as a proper name for a being we also call "the devil," but a better translation might be "the tempter" or "the adversary." Satan, the adversary, represents all that is the opposite of God. God is mercy, and Satan is vengeance. God is peace, and Satan is violence. God is truth, and Satan is falsehood. God is humility, and Satan is pride. God is compassion, and Satan is hardness of heart. God is self-giving, and Satan is self-serving. God is trust, and Satan is fear. God is love, and Satan is hate.

This adversary, this anti-God, tempted our Lord and Savior in the wilderness for forty days. For forty days, the adversary used every strategy it could, every weapon in its arsenal, to lure Jesus away from all that which is holy and good. But our Lord resisted every one of the adversary's traps and snares. Where the very first humans had failed to resist temptation in the garden so long ago, Jesus succeeded. Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus could not be tempted away from the path of righteousness.

We, too, are tempted by the adversary. We are tempted, and cajoled, and manipulated, and tricked, and pushed and pulled away from the path of righteousness. This path has been laid out plainly before us by the One who calls us to follow him... the One who says "Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart... Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."ⁱ Jesus did not promise us that following him would be easy or comfortable. He never promised that we would not have to face the adversary ourselves, in our own time.

When violence surrounds us, the adversary whispers in our ears, seeking to convince us that our safety and security depends only on our willingness to inflict violence upon others. When fear surrounds us, the adversary places targets on the backs of those who are most at risk and easiest to blame. The adversary plies us with words of false comfort, telling us that nothing is wrong, that we bear no responsibility, that we must harden our hearts against the suffering of others. When the bodies of dead children and their teachers lay everywhere we look, the adversary tells us to shield our eyes.

While God's children are bleeding on the floors of their classrooms, the adversary tempts us to look the other way.

We know that death and violence, pain and suffering have been part of our existence ever since the very first humans gave in to temptation so long ago. Adam and Eve strayed from the path of righteousness, and they paid a steep price, a price that we are still paying today. But we need only look at the news, and look at ourselves, to see that the guilt is not theirs alone. Adam and Eve strayed from God, yes; and so have we. We have strayed so far from the path of righteousness for so long that we now accept the slaughter of schoolchildren as routine, as our new normal. We have allowed the adversary to trick us into believing that there is nothing to be done, no way to stem the rising tides of violence in our midst.

On this "Sunday after" yet another school shooting, we may be tempted to point fingers, and blame each other, and blame God. But before we blame God for our collective misfortune, perhaps we should remind ourselves of God's promises to us, God's eternal covenant with us.

Our reading from the ninth chapter of Genesis tells of God's promise to Noah and his family after the Great Flood. The Great Flood, the terrible flood, had destroyed all life on earth... life that was riddled with sin, life that had fallen under the corrupting influence of the adversary. The only survivors were Noah and his family, and the many animals they had taken with them on the ark.

To this tiny band of survivors, our spiritual ancestors, God makes a promise: "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."ⁱⁱ

"Never again shall all flesh be cut off" -- listen to these words. God has not promised that there will be no more pain or suffering or tragedy in the world, but that we will never again "be cut off" from the rest of Creation with only an ark to protect us.ⁱⁱⁱ The Great Flood was a universal tragedy, and in this post-flood covenant God promises that no such thing will ever happen again. Sin has not disappeared, evil has not vanished; but we are not left alone to deal with it. Those who suffer will not suffer alone, and those who do not suffer directly have a duty to reach out and help those who do.

We who survive are left with God-given responsibility to comfort, to bind up wounds, to heal rifts, to repair breaches. The adversary may tell us that we cannot, or should not, do anything but sit back and wait for more suffering, more tragedy, more violence. The adversary may try to convince us that the blame and responsibility are found everywhere but within ourselves; we may be tempted to say "there but for the grace of God go I" and thank God for protecting us even as we do

nothing to protect the children of this country. But we kid ourselves if we blame God for our collective sins.

You and I know better, because we have the blessing of what Paul calls our "good conscience," given to us by God through our baptism in Christ's name.^{iv} If we heed that good conscience, if we resist the adversary's temptations and instead follow the path of mercy and peacemaking and love laid out for us by Jesus, we can live in to the human side of the God's covenant with humanity. We can be the 'ark substitutes' whose very presence and dedication to preserving life is a balm to our aching nation.

Right now, we must resist the temptations of the adversary, just as Christ himself resisted in the wilderness. We must be present to the pain and suffering of the world, just as Christ was present. We must not shield our eyes from the adversary's handiwork, no matter how much we are tempted to look away. We must examine our own conscience, and acknowledge the ways we have contributed to this "culture of violence, hatred, anger, and fear."^v And we must commit ourselves again and again to the God-work of compassion, self-sacrifice, mercy, and peace. God has not promised it will be easy, or simple, or quick, but God has promised (and Christ has shown us) that we will never suffer alone.

May the Holy Spirit guide us, today and always, in devoting ourselves to the holy work of peacemaking -- in our families, our communities, our nation, and our world. Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 5:7-9 NRSV

ⁱⁱ Genesis 9:9-11

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Oldenberg in *Sundays and Seasons, Year B, 2015* (page 93)

^{iv} 1 Peter 3:21

^v Elizabeth A. Eaton in *ELCA presiding bishop responds to Florida high school shooting*