

Zephaniah 3: 14-20
Luke 3: 7-18
December 16, 2012
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Advent

Yesterday I was having coffee with Joe Shook, a colleague who will be working with you during the first section of our sabbatical project. His first words to me had to do with a shooting in Connecticut. At that point he only mentioned two deaths—a principal and a psychologist. Later I was killing time waiting for MJ to arrive on the bus when I met Trudy at the dollar store. She too was blown away by what had happened. My reaction to this on reflection feels callous and even indifferent. I felt no deep outrage or anguish. I gave my usual bit about we have to hold the good stuff and can't let the darkness defeat us and went on my way. On getting off the bus MJ's first words had to do with the tragedy. Yet even here I felt no need to turn on the TV. I even made comments about not needing the endless analysis and inevitable blaming that follows such events. I concluded with my usual pronouncement: that is why the church is important. We cannot prevent these things from happening, but we can be communities of care and hope that offer God's healing.

Very true. But why was I so untouched by this horrible event?

This morning, I read the newspaper accounts and saw the pictures of terrified and weeping children and parents. I read about the cold and deliberate way the killer went about his business. I thought about the families that had begun the day with all the ordinary things families do, saying good bye to one another with no inkling of what was to come. I realized that my detachment was a form of self protection against the terror of this event. Even as I

wrote these words I was aware that I was still keeping my distance from all the feelings that well up at a time like this.

And so this morning I offer some reflections on a terrible tragedy that occurs in a season of hope. I am thinking as I write, so none of these are finished thoughts. Indeed I invite anyone who wishes to join me in the lounge after worship to continue this conversation.

Let me begin by being very clear. As terrible as this event is and will be for months and years to come, it does not cause me to doubt the existence of God and the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the newspaper was the photograph of a woman, a teacher I would guess. She has her hands on the shoulders of two children, holding a line of weeping terrified youngsters together. In her presence and other teachers they trust the children are led to safety. This woman has not had time to think. She has not allowed herself to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the horror. Years of training and love for the children has rushed to the fore and guided her as she leads the little ones to safety. Where is God? Where is Jesus? *Right there!* Human terror elicits God's immediate compassionate response. Where is God? Where is Jesus? In the groundswell of love and compassion and anguish which surround the families who have lost precious loved ones. Where is God? Where is Jesus? In a conversation in a coffee shop two hundred miles away. In a dollar store where the anguish touches a stranger who feels sorrow and outrage and somehow continues to do holiday shopping. At a time like this I am impressed by the fact that we who have no connection with the individuals are deeply affected by this and indeed so many other tragedies. *It is a sign that we are God-wired. We are designed to care.* We are designed to be the vehicles of God's love in Jesus Christ. To deny the pain and sadness is to deny God-in-us. To embrace the sorrow and

anguish is in fact to embrace the sorrow and anguish *of God* which seeks to bring comfort and help.

This leads me to a second reflection: It is so important in this Advent time that we lift up hope and not become focused on all that is flawed, unjust, and just plain wrong. We are called to hold the light. But what happens at a time like *this*? How do we hold the light in a setting of utter darkness? How do we carry hope in a way that does not deny and distance ourselves from the horror, but, instead, embraces it?

In short, how do we hold the anguish and the devastation in a way that does not suck us into a bottomless pit of despair? How do we open ourselves to human tragedy and, like God in Jesus, hold it in love, in tenderness?

Here are some thoughts: First and most important: *We are safe*. This tragedy *did not happen to us*. This may sound callous. It may sound like the very attempt to distance ourselves from pain that I warned against. But I assure you it is not.

In order to open ourselves to be vehicles of God's heartbreak we must claim that we are safe in God's love. There is a very human tendency at a time like this to rush head long into the hurricane of fear and anger and hopelessness that inevitably arises in our hearts. When we do this we lose touch with all that is good in our lives and we lose the sense that we are safe. When this happens we come to believe that *our lives* are the subject of chaos. We begin to behave as if there is nothing to hold onto. We become angry and bitter. We become vehicles of despair rather than hope.

The victims of this tragedy and the one that took the lives of the students from Shenendehowa, do not want or need our despair. They have plenty of that of their own. Nor do they need our pointing fingers at who or what is to blame. I believe in gun control;

however tragedy happens and all the gun control laws will not prevent it. Further, there will be those who will preach about the decline of moral values. Again, tragedy happens. We live in a fallen world. This does not excuse acts of violence or reduce the call to make the world a more loving and compassionate and just community. It is inappropriate at this stage to turn this tragedy into a political forum.

But there are times, and this one of them, when we who are people of faith must gather together and simply feel the broken hearts of those who are suffering. We must dare to do nothing but to stand in the sorrow and to claim the cataract of love and compassion which pours out of God's breaking heart. We must dare to come into the presence of tragedy and remain. This is not a time to analyze, or engage other emotions. It is simply a time to be in the presence of a broken hearted God and seeking God's embrace for ourselves so that we can become a vehicle for God's compassion to flow through us and into this hurting world.

Friends, I think this is what it means to be truly Advent people. Embracing God's sadness along with this sure and certain knowledge: even the ones whose lives have been so coldly and brutally destroyed, *even these* are safe in in the heart of God in whose love no life is lost. Amen.