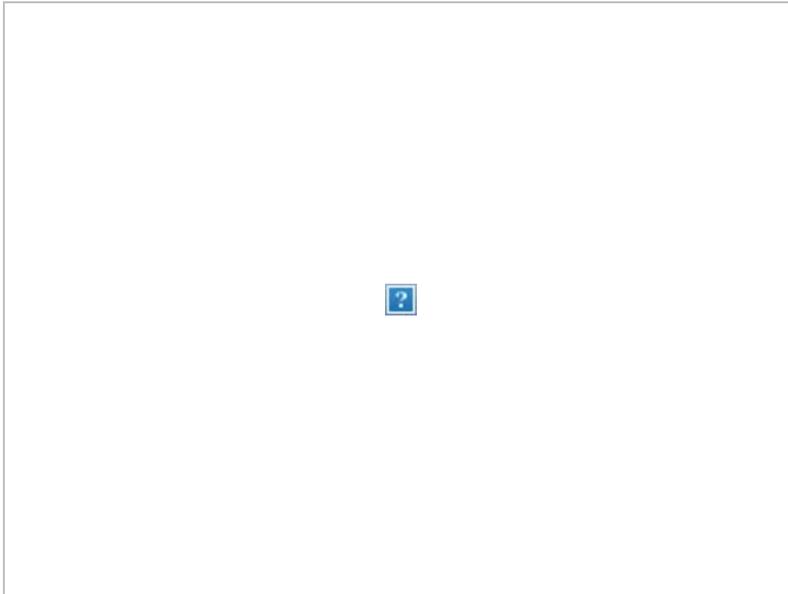

‘Not Without Us Will Your Homeland be Complete’

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 9 – Year C

We’re challenged today to lighten our mood after a week like the one just past in our country. Trying to relieve some of the gloom, here’s one of those signature cartoons from the New Yorker magazine. Not everyone enjoys the New Yorker’s wry, sometimes obscure humor. But let’s see what you think. The cartoon highlights the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, inscribed on the first door in a series of offices in the hallway of a Federal government building somewhere. Bureaucrats wearing suits are milling around or chatting, walking past the office doors. The first door shows the sign that says, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. The next door says Bureau of Heroin, Snuff, and Dynamite. To the right of that door the sign reads, Bureau of Caffeine, Cocaine, and Plutonium. The final door at the end of the hall concludes with, Bureau of LSD, Cupcakes, and Anthrax.



https://www.allposters.com/-sp/Bureaus-of-Dangerous-Stuff-etc-New-Yorker-Cartoon-Posters_i9168263_.htm

That cartoon is called, “Bureaus of Dangerous Stuff Etc.” When it appeared in 1998 it seemed ridiculous and amusing to include alcohol and tobacco alongside the overtly dangerous item, firearms. That may seem less ridiculous today, but it can still sound odd if not a little ludicrous. What do the items in that list share in common?—we wondered quizzically. But last week presented us with a different set of dissimilar things that may also be curiously related to one another: mass shootings in three of our cities on the one hand and, on the other, government raids on undocumented workers in our Southern neighbor state of Mississippi. We’ll return to those seemingly dissimilar occurrences in a few minutes.

Now back in the 80s and 90s, most of us were not as aware of the political issues involving mass shootings as we are now. Nowadays we are familiar with the debates about gun control and our constitutional 'right to bear arms,' as protected by the Second Amendment to the Bill of Rights. We're also more aware of the role of the NRA—the National Rifle Association, and its powerful influence on limiting gun control legislation. You may even be aware that the ATF—now expanded and called the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, is the federal agency tasked with enforcing gun laws and with investigating mass shootings when they occur; like last week when three horrendous shootings occurred one after another in Gilroy, California, El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio.

But as your preacher for today I'm tasked with addressing an entirely different order of dangerous things. Let's see what you think of the following account of the danger ascribed to the memory of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It's that phrase, "the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ," that influenced me among other young theology students in the 1980s, and was acclaimed by other, more seasoned political and liberation theologians whom I studied. The term was coined and popularized by the German Catholic scholar, Johann Baptist Metz, and expounded in his book, *Faith in History and Society* (1980). In that work he varies the phrase with related expressions like "the dangerous memory of freedom (in Jesus Christ)." In particular he elaborates the "dangerous memory of suffering" in the New Testament accounts of Jesus' life and death.

Now suffering itself is not key but rather the fact that we remember the sufferings of Jesus as a particular kind of suffering: the unjust and unwarranted suffering of an innocent victim. That is history's most dangerous memory, Metz implies, because it preserves in its orbit the stories of countless other victims. (Cf. René Girard, *The Scapegoat, Violence and the Sacred, Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*). For, as the quintessential innocent victim in our western history, Jesus' suffering encompasses the suffering of all victims 'since the foundation of the world' (that phrase found variously in Matthew, Luke, John; Ephesians, Hebrews, 1 Peter; and Revelation).

As Metz emphasizes, the dangerous memory of Jesus rescues suffering from silence, undermines the power and legitimacy of oppressors, and cries out for a victim-free future for all peoples. In that way the memory of Jesus is dangerous particularly to oppressors and tyrants, the status quo and the Powers that Be. For the Church, of course, it is the specific memory of Jesus' suffering that continues to serve as "the foundation for the Christian's solidarity with the suffering of the world." That specific memory, one commentator concludes, "carries the [end-time] promise of God that death will not triumph in human history."

Can we in this day and time actually believe these aspiring words? If so, if we were able to affirm such a faith and such a hope, wouldn't we show a different kind of response to our nation's mass shootings this past week; indeed, show a different response to all the atrocities that have plagued our species from the foundation of the world? Wouldn't we be more buoyant, even though heart-broken; be even more empowered to prophetic action in our country, even while grieving and sorrowful?

Now here is where our scriptures appointed for today converge on our topic. Indeed, our Hebrews passage concludes with one of the most encouraging verses in Holy Scripture: "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, [God] has prepared a city for them" (Hebrews 11:1, 8, 10, 12-14, 16). Wow! What a concept. Who are these people, about whom God is not ashamed to be called their God? What kind of people are they? And could we be those very people? What would it take for us to be those very people?

Well, it's precisely that question that Jesus addresses in our gospel reading, when he says to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32) Now isn't that a happy convergence? After Hebrews declares that God has prepared a heavenly city for people of faith, our gospel has Jesus reassure us that God is pleased to grant us such a kingdom. And then he proceeds to detail what we must do to be ready to receive such a gift: "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit!"

On the one hand Jesus warns his followers to "be dressed for action," and to be vigilant and watchful so they don't miss out on a grand occurrence. On the other hand, so eager is the master in Jesus' parable to reward those who keep watch and are ready for action, that 'when he comes will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them!'

Astonishing isn't it: the grand reversal in this parable, with its parabolic declaration that God will serve the very slaves whom custom requires should be serving God! Therefore, convergent with our Hebrews reading, these are the kind of servants for whom "God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, [God] has prepared a city for them" (Hebrews

11:16). So God is not ashamed to serve us with the bestowal of a heavenly city for us? Yes, that is the grand occurrence that we wait as the heritage and the legacy our faith, hope, and love in the Church today.

Here we continue to ask, in the context of this past week's circumstances in our nation, what would it mean for God 'not be ashamed to be called our God,' but instead to be preparing a 'homeland' for us? Jesus' precondition for such a grand occasion is clear, although symbolic, poetic or metaphorical: we must be 'dressed for action, having our lamps lit,' and "be ready to open to him when he returns and knocks to be let in.'

I suggest that this means holding our nation's victims in the light of the dangerous memory of the suffering of Jesus Christ. Less poetically, that would mean providing such victims with remedies of protection and care, to end their suffering, along with provisions to prevent the future suffering of new victims. For people of faith, more theologically, here's the checklist that we previewed above for what it means to hold such victims in such a light:

1. Act in the world as if we believe 'the end-time promise of God that death will not triumph in human history;'
2. Act in the world as if we believe that 'the meaning of the victims of history has not been decided by the victors;'
3. Act in the world with 'the hope that the meaning, value, and freedom of each human being, even those long dead, is yet to be realized in history, has yet to "make a claim on history."' [\[1\]](#)

A final illustration comes to mind when we recall another prominent set of sufferers last week. In addition to the mass shootings under investigation by the ATF, another of our federal government agencies, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency or ICE, conducted a series of raids that arrested 680 persons for illegal employment at poultry plants throughout Mississippi. Although some 300 of those arrested have been released to return to their residences after being processed by the agency, concern remains for the impact of the arrests and detentions on the innocent children involved. Indeed, the National Public Radio (NPR) news coverage is particularly laudable, irrespective of the facts remaining to be verified or falsified (re: fact-checking for 'alternative facts' or 'fake news'). For the NPR coverage in any case expresses our society's collective anxiety and concern for the impact of our political conflicts and struggles on the innocent victims who were children.

The procedures ICE followed in this week's raids stood in contrast to [President Trump's "zero tolerance" policy](#) of separating migrant children from their parents at the U.S. border. That policy came under widespread and harsh criticism.

Included among those released in the Mississippi raids were 18 juveniles, with the youngest being 14 years old, the news agency said, quoting Jere Miles, a special agent in charge of ICE Homeland Security Investigations in New Orleans.

The statement explained that detainees were "asked when they arrived at the processing center whether they had any children who were at school or childcare and needed to be picked up." It said cellphones were made available for them "to make arrangements for the care of their children or other dependents."

Friends, co-workers and family watch as U.S. immigration officials raid the Koch Foods Inc. plant in Morton, Miss., on Wednesday. *Rogelio V. Solis/AP*

"[I]f HSI encountered two alien parents with minor children at home, HSI released one of the parents on humanitarian grounds and returned that individual to the place from which they were arrested," the statement said. "HSI similarly released any single alien parent with minor children at home on humanitarian grounds and physically returned that person to the place where he or she was originally detained."

"Based on these procedures, it is believed that all children were with at least one of their parents as of last night."

—Scott Neuman for NPR-National Public Radio, August 9, 2019, "Some 300 Arrested In Mississippi Immigration Raids Have Been Released, Officials Say;" <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/09/749638655/some-300-arrested-in-mississippi-immigration-raids-have-been-released-officials>

These then are among the circumstances in which we hear our scriptures speaking to us as we begin yet another week on

this Lord's Day. Such circumstances challenge us to navigate the space between Holy Scripture and our lives as we continue on our journey of faith, hope and action; specifically the faith of Abraham that is celebrated in this week's Hebrews reading: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11.1) But finally, what is most prophetic for us is a verse from next Sunday's reading from Hebrews (11:39-40):

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better [for us] so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

As you may recall, the word "perfect" in the New Testament (telos) means 'complete,' achieved or 'fulfilled.' Certain conditions for such fulfillment are explicit in our remaining scripture for today: Isaiah's prescription for perfection is the commandment to remove to "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1.16-17). The relevance of these prophetic injunctions directly applies to our two moral debacles last week: how to prevent more victims of mass shootings and how to care for the impact of border security on immigrant children.

Precisely here, by the faith of Abraham in the "assurance of things hoped for," and the "conviction of things not seen," let us lay claim to the prophecy above that God has 'provided something better for us, so that those who have preceded us would not, without us, be made perfect.' Here we may prophetically discern that our homeland will not be complete or secure without making just provisions for the stranger and the alien on the one hand—that is, immigrants, and for the orphan and widow—that is, the present survivors and potential survivors of future violence. Otherwise stated: in the providence of God we find ourselves in "such a time as this" (Esther 4:14) that requires us to make provisions for immigrants on the one hand and to remedying past violence and preventing future violence on the other hand, so that our common homeland may be brought to completion, fulfillment, and true security.

As the Church of God, therefore, we believe and hope, pray and act, on the basis of such prophetic discernment. Indeed, even our moral crises and failures as a nation and as the Church—as the people of God serving the world in the name of Christ—even our failures provide the occasion for us more fervently to appeal to, and more faithfully rely on, God's providence; to rely even more powerfully and creatively on the mercy and grace of God to 'do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.'^[2]

Is God ashamed therefore to be called our God, or instead is God pleased to grant a heavenly kingdom to Christ-like believers who endeavor to be the Church in the world today? In order to answer that question by faith, and not according to our self-doubts or according to the accusations of our critics and naysayers, we pray again our Collect appointed in the Book of Common Prayer for today (9th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 14 C):

The Collect of the Day

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

^[1] According to Metz, "the memory of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection implies that the meaning of the victims of history has not been decided by the victors. This memory holds out hope to all [of us] that the meaning, value, and freedom of each human being, even those long dead, is yet to be realized in history, has yet to 'make a claim on history.'"⁴ Johann M. Vento, "Violence, Trauma, and Resistance: A Feminist Appraisal of Metz's Mysticism of Suffering unto God," *Horizons*, Cambridge Univ. Press, Sept. 9, 2014. [PDF link](#).

³ Johann Baptist Metz, "The Future in the Memory of Suffering," trans. J. Griffiths, in *New Questions on God*, ed. J.B. Metz (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 18.

⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1981), 76.

^[2] For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!

'For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?'

'Or who has given a gift to him,
to receive a gift in return?'

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:32-36)

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