
Liturgical Reflections for the first Sunday of Lent, in the aftermath of the Ash Wednesday shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL

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On Ash Wednesday, we were driven, once again, into the wilderness by the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. We move into the forty days...forty days, traditionally, of walking with Jesus as he moves toward his suffering, death and resurrection. Forty days traditionally expressed in acts of renunciation, repentance and reflection. We begin this Lenten season in the shadow of violence, and we walk through the valley of the shadow of death not only with Jesus, but also with the families of those who were wounded and lost their lives on Ash Wednesday, and with our nation as it once again confronts the powers and principalities that lead to and permit mass violence in our communities and country. How will the convergence of this event and the church's Lenten practice shift the way we preach and pray, this Lent? We offer a few thoughts about the texts in this week's lectionary, in the aftermath of these events, in hope they might be useful to preachers and teachers who may struggle with how to speak a word of meaning this Sunday.

Liturgical Suggestions

Consider using a communal reading of the Psalm for the day, **Psalm 25:1-10**, as the **Call to Worship** this Sunday. The Psalm invokes a longing for the presence of God, lifting plaintive petitions that God would protect those who wait for the Lord, be mindful of God's mercy, lead us into truth, and not let us be put to shame by enemies. The plea that we, God's people, might be led in the pathway of God, a pathway of steadfastness and faithfulness, is a strong prayer on which to stand as people of faith enter the wilderness of Lent marked by a beginning in violence and loss.

A Prayer of Confession

Oh God, who hears the cries of your children, on this Ash Wednesday we remember that we are dust, and unto dust we shall return.

But not this way, Holy One, not now. It is far too soon to watch even one more child go down to the dust, let alone so many. These your children, their lives ended by another unspeakable act of violence, deserved our care, our protection, our joyful witness as we watched them grow into the fullness of adulthood. But we have failed. We have not kept our schools safe and our children free from terror. We have not found a way to stem this rising flood of gun violence.

Oh Christ who said, *let the children come to me and do not hinder them*, comfort these lost and wounded ones, shelter them and their grieving families under the shadow of your wings. Help us to find the way to free our children from fear that hinders their ability to grow, to thrive. Walk alongside families and friends who now enter the valley of the shadow.

Oh God, hear our prayers. We are wandering in a wilderness of relentless violence, we are lost. Our mouths are filled with dust as we taste the bitterness of rage and the first fruits of grief. Our hearts are broken at the loss of these young lives and the shattering of so many families, and like our forebears, we would cover our heads with dust and rend our garments to show the depth of our sorrow and pain.

Crucified and Human One, who walked through the valley of the shadow of death for our sake, help us. Walk with us through the dark valley. In this Lenten season, give us the courage to face our brokenness and lack of will to make peace in our communities, our cities, our schools. Give us the wisdom to open our eyes and speak truth to power. Show us a way out of this wilderness. Give us strength to make our Lenten discipline one of remembrance, repentance, and action on behalf of those whose lives are being shattered every day. Let this be our fast.

In the name of the Suffering Servant, Jesus, we pray. Amen.

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Reflections and Questions for the Texts, Lent 1 B, Revised Common Lectionary

Genesis 9:8-17

“Never again.....”

The text introduces the covenant of God with humanity in the wake of the Flood which, according to scripture, destroyed the ancient world. The flood story in Genesis may be viewed as our ancestral faith community’s way of making sense of a catastrophic event, an event that killed so many people that it seemed as if the entire world had been destroyed. Such events cry out for meaning. In the aftermath of the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida on Ash Wednesday, God’s people must surely be searching for meaning, for some evidence of the reassuring, life-giving presence of God. A difficult challenge for some in this story –and certainly for children who may hear this story with literal ears—is the assertion that it was God who destroyed the earth’s people because of their wickedness. This is not a theological stance easy to reconcile with a God of love and redemption. It may be more helpful to focus on the shorter text offered in this pericope; a conclusion that affirms God’s renewed and covenantal commitment to the human family not to destroy the world or its peoples by violence.

For some, it may even be possible to explore the notion that God repented of the destruction wrought on the ancients; or wonder at the way people of faith tend to attribute divine intentionality to acts of destruction or catastrophe. Maybe our meaning-making is more usefully focused on how we, working as God’s agents, might redeem seasons of violence, death, or catastrophe with a covenantal commitment to bring peace, healing, and renewal to those who experience such events or endure such losses.

Violence is not the answer to violence. Violence is not a solution to human brokenness. God’s way reform and redeem the world, moving forward from the Flood, is a way of peace, rooted in loving relationship.

How did this story help our ancestors make sense of mass catastrophe?

How did it help them find a redemptive direction forward?

How can this story help us make sense of the mass violence in our culture, of Parkland?

If in this story it can be said that God repented...and that God made a covenant that invited God's people to repent, what might we be being invited by God to repent amidst the violence in our own world?

What might our repentance look like, in our work in the church?

How might that repentance impact our living and working for in the world? How can it help us find a redemptive direction forward?

Psalm 25:1-10

"Don't let those who wait for You be put to shame..." (v. 3)

"God leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble the way." (v 9)

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep God's covenant and God's decrees." (v. 10)

This psalm, used as a secondary voice to the Hebrew Scriptures or the gospel text from Mark, might be utilized as an invitation to center ourselves and invite our community to center itself, in the steadfast love and the faithfulness of God, as we walk through the valley of the shadow in the aftermath of the Parkland massacre. Survivors, neighbors, and those of us who are witnesses by virtue of the media to this horrific event know that people are waiting for comfort, meaning, reprieve from pain.

This Psalm includes a striking number of petitions....*"do not let me be put to shame", "do not let my enemies exult over me", "do not let those who wait for the Lord be put to shame", "make me to know your ways", "lead me in your truth", "be mindful of your mercy", "do not remember the sins of my youth".* This week, the first Sunday of Lent and a few days after Parkland, recognizing how we are all in search for all these things narrated in the psalms....

If we would imagine that the survivors, victims and community of Parkland are those who are waiting for God.... In what ways could they be "put to shame...?" In what ways might they "see God's ways?"

1 Peter 3:18-22

This text, with its focus on substitutionary atonement, and emphasis on death and punishment, might be difficult to work with in the immediate context of the shooting. We feel the other texts are more helpful for this Sunday.

Mark 1:9-15

There is such urgency in this text, beginning in the very abbreviated recounting of Jesus' baptism and concluding with the beginning of Jesus' work of proclaiming the good news. The wilderness—filled with threat and violence—is the immediate and urgent context of Jesus' ministry.

After his baptism, *"the heavens were torn open," "he was driven out into the wilderness," "he was tempted by Satan," "he was with the wild beasts,"* John was arrested. The beginning of Jesus' proclamation of the good news takes place in the context of threat and in the aftermath of loss and violence. How was Jesus' proclamation affected by the wilderness? By the arrest of John, his forerunner? What "good news" can be spoken to people in such circumstances?

It is important to remember that Jesus enters the wilderness knowing that he is God's beloved.

It is important to notice that, even while in the midst of the wild beasts and lost in the wilderness, tempted by Satan, there was respite, blessing, help. *The angels waited on him (v. 13).* Is this an image of the table spread before us in the presence of our enemies (Psalm 23)?

If angels were waiting on you this week, and through these days and weeks following mass violence, what gifts do those whose lives have been shattered by violence need? What do you, as a faith leader, need to be given? What gifts do we, the church, have to share as "angels" waiting on those who are suffering in the wake of violence? It might be important, as we reflect on the pain and horror of this week, to spend a little time reflecting on what gifts and resources of our faith are available to refresh us in the wilderness, and for the work of ministry that lies before us, responding to this event.

How does our baptism prepare us for a wilderness of violence? How does our baptism demand our engagement with the threats and wildernesses that challenge our lives and the message of good news we try to proclaim? Is there a way that our baptism actually impels or thrusts us into a wilderness or a world of threat and risk, as it did Jesus? What is the meaning and the power of our baptism in the wildernesses of violence and threat that constitute our world?

When the heavens are torn apart, when the world is shattered, what is the meaning of our identification as God's beloved?

What is the good news we can proclaim as God's beloved ones, in this wilderness of the world?

Blessings on you, preachers, teachers, and spiritual leaders in the Church, as you wander and walk through this wilderness of Lent, proclaiming the good news of Jesus.