

Advent 2C: 12/5/21
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*In the tender compassion of our God,
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Madisyn Baldwin. Tate Myre. Justin Shilling. Hana St. Juliana.
Those are the children whose names I carry with me into the pulpit
on this St. Nicholas celebration.

Here for good measure are the names of seven more:
Phoebe Arthur, John Ascitutto, Riley Franz, Elijah Mueller, Kylie Ossege,
Aiden Watson, and Molly Darnell –
most still children chronologically, and all surely children of God.

These are the names of the four students killed this week in the shooting
at Oxford High School in Michigan,
plus the seven others who were physically wounded.
In truth, the list of victims is far longer than I could recite here today –
all the students traumatized there,
all students anywhere who live in dread of such trauma.
Including, I dare say, many of the precious children now downstairs
in Wilkinson Hall laughing and learning about St. Nicholas --
a real life Christian Bishop and martyr,
sainted for his example of generosity and care of children,
and all who are tossed asunder by life's storms.

In coverage of the Oxford school shooting this week,
I heard someone ask a young man if he thought that students
across the country should be scared.
"The students are already scared," he said. "It's the parents who need to be scared."
It's the parents – and I would add, the grandparents and other responsible adults –
who need to be scared. *Scared enough to do something.*

It doesn't have to be this way. It's not this way elsewhere.
It wasn't always like this growing up in America.
It certainly wasn't when I was growing up, or really even my children.

My daughter was eight and my son three-years-old at the time of

the Columbine shooting. Remember how stunned we all were back then?
 It felt like such an unfathomable, freakish, tragedy.
 My heart broke for the families involved, as I'm sure yours did.
 But it all seemed far away.
 I talked to the administrators at my children's schools
 about safety measures, but deep down I never dreamt it could happen here.
 Never really thought it could happen again anywhere.
 I still remember watching Katie Couric standing in the snow reporting from Colorado.
 It was such a huge, once in a lifetime story that
 the networks sent their biggest stars to cover it.
 Now, it's just another piece of bad news.

And so it is.

I read somewhere that there had been 222 shootings in schools this year – *so far*.
 Even if that number is inflated (and I honestly don't know),
 the fact is that there are way more shootings in schools than I (and I'm guessing you)
 are able to keep track of.
 I've gone from being glued to the TV hanging on to every word
 of Katie Couric and company reporting from Columbine,
 to letting it become the ugly sound of background noise.

Am I really just going about my life
 letting news of the slaughter and trauma of children shot in schools waft over me?
 As just the way things are?

If so, then: Shame on me. And if you're the same, well, shame on you too.
 God help us all.

And yet here we are, presuming to participate in a celebration
 of St. Nicholas' care of . . . *children*.
 St. Nicholas who not only lived his life dedicated to Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace,
 but who died a martyr to the same.
 We actually know very little about the life of Nicholas,
 but what we do know tells us that he not only talked the talk, he walked it.

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Nicholas is not the only Christian messenger we celebrate this day.
 The Second Sunday of Advent we honor John the Baptist,
 as heard in both today's Gospel and the Canticle said in place of a psalm.
 We know that John, echoing the prophet Isaiah, prepares the way of the Lord.
 He prepares the way of the Lord by waking us up.
 Calling us to repentance for the forgiveness of sin.
 And showing how to walk the straight path to Jesus.

As Nicholas did after him, John the Baptist not only lived his life
 but gave his life, for Jesus.
 John not only talked about the way of the Lord, he walked it.

Parents have such high hopes and fond dreams for their children.
 We long to see them grow into who God created them to be,
 and outlive us as they do so.
 Surely, the parents now mourning their students killed at Oxford High School did this.
 Here in CT we've heard the parents of Sandy Hook express it.

And today we hear it from none other than John the Baptist's father,
 an old priest named Zechariah.
 It's there in Canticle 16, taken from a passage in the first chapter of Luke,
 called the Song of Zechariah.
 So stunned that his aging wife Elizabeth is pregnant,
 Zechariah is struck silent for nine months.
 Finally, at the birth of their son (John the Baptist),
 Zechariah is filled with the Spirit and explodes into song praising God,
 trusting God's promises throughout history,
 and revealing his fondest hope that his son will
 prepare the way of the Lord.

Zechariah concludes with what have become (for me)
 some of the most cherished – and challenging – words in our Prayer Book.
 I try to pray Canticle 16, this Song of Zechariah,
 a couple times a week during Morning Prayer.
 Our little Zoom Morning Prayer group for Advent said it together this Thursday.

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I believe that this affirms God acting in history, in our lives, right now.
I believe it calls us to imagine and work toward a more compassionate world,
as God's dawn breaks into our current darkness.
And I know it calls us to quit sitting in the shadow of the death of our children,
stop settling for the status quo which numbs us to a relentless parade of violence.

Let God do for us what God did for the aging parents Zechariah and Elizabeth,
for their son John the Baptist,
for Bishop, Martyr, and Saint Nicholas,
and so many others whose names we may never know:
Guide our feet into the way of peace. Help us walk the walk with Jesus.

Pray God that we awaken from our stupor and
repent of the terror and trauma we are inflicting upon our children.
May our hearts be broken and our minds opened
to new, saner ways of ending the epidemic of gun violence.
Take the time to learn about ministries such as
Episcopalians Against Gun Violence and Bishops Against Gun Violence,
convened, in part, by our own Bishops.

Pray that we get ourselves out of the way, and
let God move our feet into the way of peace --
for the sake of our children, in the true spirit of St. Nicholas,
preparing the way of Jesus our Lord.

Amen.