

“Oh, you brood of vipers!”

You gotta hand it to John the Baptist –  
he must’ve had a lot of nerve to start a sermon like that.

I admire John the Baptist for having the guts not to mince words.  
Sharp though they may be, his words come from a place of caring.  
He wants us to know the Jesus he knows.  
He wants us to be more like Jesus.

For all his bluster,  
the things John challenges us to do are remarkably do-able.  
Give your extra coat to the poor -- share food with the hungry?  
Don’t cheat? Do your job?  
These are the common-sense measures that  
John says prepare us for the coming of the Messiah,  
the One he knows as Jesus.

So I can’t help but wonder what John the Baptist might say  
if he were here on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent,  
this Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath,  
this eve of the 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Sandy Hook shootings.

Of course John never faced the exact issues we have before us today.  
But he did live in a violent society.  
John was a victim of that violence,  
being jailed and beheaded rather than toe the status quo.

John the Baptist gave his life pointing toward Jesus,  
who himself died a violent death for living a life of  
radical mercy and peace and above all love.

Based on what we do know of John the Baptist,  
I think we can draw some reasonable conclusions.  
We do know that John was all about waking us up  
to the world around us.  
He was all about *doing something* to make way for Jesus,  
not settling for either complacency or despair.

We've seen that John the Baptist was a big fan of common sense.  
And that he didn't play favorites,  
but was an equal opportunity rabble rouser.  
He liked to stir things up.

So I'm thinking that John wouldn't fit neatly into  
any of the categories we've come to know in our conversation about guns.  
I'm going to venture that John might tell us not to pick a comfortable side,  
but look at every option.

In other words, be concerned about the availability of guns in our society  
AND ALSO the relative lack of available mental health care.

Why can't we strictly enforce the gun laws now on the books  
AND ALSO pass laws to close loopholes that put guns into the wrong hands?

Surely we can respect the rights of outdoorsmen and hunters (like my father)  
AND ALSO keep combat weapons on the battlefield and out of our workplaces  
– and schools.

For goodness' sake, let's clean up that no-fly list  
to make it more accurate in order to protect ourselves  
AND ALSO refuse to sell guns to terrorists.

And of course we need to offer our heartfelt "thoughts and prayers"  
for the victims and their families  
AND ALSO take action to prevent further violence.

In church music terms, in pipe organ terms,  
we'd call this "pulling out all the stops" –  
making a lot of noise  
to do everything in our power to protect our people,  
especially our children.

One of the things I like best about being a Christian  
is that we come together as a motley crew of disparate ideas,  
which is just the way God wants it.  
We dare not let ourselves be divided along typical partisan lines  
because we know that God sent Christ Jesus for all people.  
From him, we learn to look for the good,

to seek the good idea, in everyone.  
Surely preventing gun violence is urgent enough to do just that.

One of the twenty children shot to death three years ago  
at Sandy Hook Elementary School was Ana Marquez-Greene,  
daughter of jazz musician Jimmy Greene.

Earlier this year Jimmy Greene released an album in tribute to his daughter  
called “Beautiful Life”.

After losing his child in a manner beyond any parent’s worst nightmare,  
he chose to celebrate her life,  
to let the world “hear a little bit about how [she] lived.”

The selection we’re about to hear is divided into three parts –  
the first is from a raucous family Christmas celebration in Puerto Rico,  
and the last is a moment between Ana and her brother here in CT.  
The bulk of it is Jimmy Green’s jazz rendition of a hymn  
which may be familiar to you.

*[“Saludos/Come Thou Almighty King” from Beautiful Life by Jimmy Greene]*

Yes, come thou Almighty King,  
help us thy name to sing;  
help us to praise.  
Father, all glorious,  
o’er all victorious,  
come, come quickly, to reign over us,  
and teach us to walk in thy peace,  
Ancient of Days.  
Amen.

