



*Gun Violence Awareness Sunday:
Reckoning with Death*

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
Gun Violence Awareness Sunday ~ September 22, 2019*

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Joy abandons me. There is no cure for my grief. My heart is sick. 19 Hear the cry of distress of my people from a distant land: “Is YHWH not in Zion? Is its ruler not there anymore?” And YHWH replies, “Why do they provoke me with their carved images, with their useless foreign gods?” 20 The harvest is past, summer is ended and we are not saved. 21 I am devastated, for my people are devastated. I mourn. Terror grips me. 22 Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my people not been attended to? 9 :1 Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my people!

Psalms 79:1-9

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| 1 O God, the heathen have come into your inheritance;
they have profaned your holy temple; *
they have made Jerusalem a heap of rubble. | will your fury blaze like fire for ever? |
| 2 They have given the bodies of your servants
as food for the birds of the air, *
and the flesh of your faithful ones
to the beasts of the field. | 6 Pour out your wrath upon the heathen
who have not known you *
and upon the nations
that have not called upon your Name. |
| 3 They have shed their blood like water
on every side of Jerusalem, *
and there was no one to bury them. | 7 For they have devoured Jacob *
and made his dwelling a ruin. |
| 4 We have become a reproach to our neighbors, *
an object of scorn and derision to those around us. | 8 Remember not our past sins;
let your compassion be swift to meet us; *
for we have been brought very low. |
| 5 How long will you be angry, O God; * | 9 Help us, O God our Savior, for the glory of your Name; *
deliver us and forgive us our sins, for your Name's sake. |

Revelation 21:1-7

Then I saw new heavens and a new earth. The former heavens and the former earth had passed away, and the sea existed no longer. I also saw a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, beautiful as a bride and groom on their wedding day. And I heard a loud voice calling from the throne, “Look! God’s Tabernacle is among humankind! God will live with them; they will be God’s people, and God will be fully present among them. The Most High will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death, mourning, crying and pain will be no more, for the old order has fallen.” The One who sat on the throne said, “Look! I’m making everything new!” and added, “Write this, for what I am saying is trustworthy and true.” And that One continued, “It is finished. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To those who are thirsty I will give drink freely from the spring of the water of life.

Matthew 5:43-48

“You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor—but hate your enemy.’ 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. This will prove that you are children of God. For God makes the sun rise on bad and good alike; God’s rain falls on the just and the unjust. If you love those who love you, what merit is there in that? Don’t tax collectors do as much? And if you greet only your sisters and brothers, what is so praiseworthy about that? Don’t Gentiles do as much? Therefore be perfect, as Abba God in heaven is perfect.

What do you think about when you think about gun violence? What kinds of scenarios, settings, and contexts come immediately to mind? Active shooter alerts? Schools on lockdown? Mass shootings in public places? Heated debates and political stalemates about gun control laws?

Gun violence is on all of our minds these days. We're wondering, worrying about when and where the next mass shooting is going to take place. We're rallying for stricter gun control laws, trying to bring our nation to its senses.

And as I've been preparing for today, this is mostly what's been on my mind: our national-level policy debates, re-awakened by this summer's mass shooting in El Paso.

Yet the Memorial we're installing today, as much as it reflects our deep national concerns, is also intensely and intimately local. This traveling Memorial is the work of a Philadelphia area non-profit: Heeding God's Call To End Gun Violence.

It is a Memorial created in remembrance of our fellow Philadelphians killed by gun violence. In the year 2018, 295 Philadelphians were killed by guns, and some of their names will be displayed on t-shirts in the churchyard for the next few weeks. We only have room to remember 61 of these beloved children of God here in the churchyard, but even this number of deaths is quite overwhelming.

Or is it?

Are we really all that shocked? Have we become so accustomed to the relentlessness of death that it has lost its power to alarm us? Have we been numbed by the parade of death that marches daily across our screens convincing us, by its sheer ubiquity, that *this_is_normal*.

Of course, it is **not** normal. Death by gunshot is simply not normal.

And yet, we struggle to imagine the world any other way. We have difficulty imagining a world without guns, without weapons. We have difficulty imagining a world where people can resolve differences, can resolve pain...without violence. A world where weapons are not our primary tool of conflict resolution. Because gun violence, ultimately, is about pain. And in Philadelphia, I came to discover, as I tried to learn more about who is dying in this city, gun violence is by-and-large about black men's pain.

A 2019 report from the City of Philadelphia, entitled *Brotherly Love: The Health of Black Men and Boys in Philadelphia*, concludes that "gun violence in Philadelphia disproportionately involves Black men—nearly 75% of all victims and known perpetrators are young Black men. Homicide is the leading cause of death for young Black men ages 15 to 34."ⁱ

And so, as we enter into this act of memorialization today, I think we must be very clear about who it is that we are remembering. Each of the t-shirts that we will display in our churchyard bears a name. The name of someone who was alive in 2017 and who died sometime in 2018. The name of a person who was shot to death. The name of a person whose death may *still feel like yesterday* to their family and friends. The name of a person whose death is likely still being grieved. The name of a person who was more-than-likely black and male.

And so, even as we join our voices in calling for stronger gun regulation as one vital response to the horror of these deaths...other voices are making other pleas for how we conceive of and respond to these deaths. And I think we need to hear these voices, too.

A young, black, male editorialist in *Philadelphia Magazine* puts it this way:

Philadelphia continues to be the country's largest major city hit with poverty. We are one of the most racially segregated cities, with gross inequity that has led to more than a quarter of the population living in deep poverty. Given that Black men have the lowest life expectancy rate in Philly, it shouldn't be hard to comprehend why they are in crisis. Gun violence is what happens when you leave a class of people behind to self-destruct."ⁱⁱ

This writer, Ernest Owens, suggests that if we aren't working together to reduce poverty, then we aren't really working on the deeper cause of a great deal of gun violence in Philadelphia.

Yet, just as we cannot quite imagine a world without weapons, we also have a difficult time imagining a world without poverty. Both seem more or less inevitable, more or less impossible to eradicate. Unfortunate...but sadly just *how_things_are*.

When we look at the world in this way, however, no matter how realistic this view may feel, we are simply not looking at the world with Biblical eyes. Because Biblical eyes see something different when they look out at God's good creation. Biblical eyes can always glimpse a new heaven and a new earth. Biblical ears can always hear echoes of the truthful words first heard and recorded by John in the Book of Revelation.

See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God's people, and God will be with them, wiping every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away (Revelation 21)

Death, poverty, pain – they are not simply inevitable. They are not just the natural way of things. Always and everywhere, God says: there is another way, a better way. God shows us glimpses of this way, again and again, inviting us into new life at each and every moment.

But perhaps we cannot really see it yet, can not really take hold of this vision until we have grieved. Until we have fully grieved the way things are. The way we have allowed things to be. The systems and structures that promote the flourishing of some and the suffering of so many others.

It is no wonder that so many are in pain, and we are here today to acknowledge that violence and death are ramifications of that pain. So we must find some way to grieve, some way to mourn, to lament. We must join with the prophet Jeremiah, in praying:

O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! (Jeremiah 8)

For it is not until we weep...until we weep as if these were our children, our siblings, our parents that our yearning for a new heaven and a new earth might overcome our satisfaction with the present arrangements.

So let us weep holy tears, and may those tears change us...for good.

Amen.

ⁱ https://www.phila.gov/media/20190314105459/Brotherly-Love_Health-Of-Black-Men-And-Boys_3_19.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2019/06/18/gun-violence-poverty-killadelphia/>