



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

June 19, 2016

**Though I Walk
Through the Valley**
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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: June 22, 2016

Though I Walk Through the Valley

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me ... (Psalm 23:4)

Today is Father's Day, and I was planning to talk about the importance of men in general and fathers in particular for the influence we can have in the lives of our families and friends, and in our whole society. I still want to come back to that subject soon because it's so important, but the news from Orlando rolled over the country like a tidal wave this week, drowning out most other matters in our common life. Reporters and commentators have been talking about it all week, and it seems as though our gathering in church this morning should offer something too, by way of response to such a terrible tragedy.

But what to say? The most obvious words are what people always say when this sort of thing happens: Our hearts go out to the victims and their families, and our thoughts and prayers are with them. That's certainly true, as far as it goes. But truth be told, such sentiments alone don't go very far, do they? Our hearts may go out to the families, but they can't come back with the lives of their children who were killed.

Are sympathy and prayers all that the church has to offer in times like these? Is there nothing more we can say, nothing else we can do?

This is not the first time, of course. Not the first, or the second, or the fifth, or even the tenth time in recent years. Names roll off the top of our memory: Columbine High School; Sandy Hook Elementary School; Virginia Tech; Emanuel Church in Charleston; Ft. Hood, Texas; a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado; a holiday party in San

Bernardino, California I could go on, but the point is, there have been so many of these in recent years, we can't even remember them all.

And the sequence has become so predictable, hasn't it? Somebody shoots up a roomful of people, and the nation is shocked. Leaders everywhere stand up and say, "Our hearts go out to the victims and their families. Our thoughts and prayers are with them." Then some people ask, "Now, finally, can't we do something more to limit the violence?" Then other voices declare, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people," and "The only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." Then nothing changes, and a few months go by, and the whole cycle repeats itself.

It's all become so terribly predictable, except for the details of when and where and how many will be killed or wounded, and how old or young the victims will be. Of course we're shocked and saddened whenever it happens. If we ever stop being shocked and saddened we will have grown hard and calloused hearts. But why are we still surprised, after so many times? In Alcoholics Anonymous they say that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. If we never change our response, why on earth should we expect the shootings to stop?

It's hard even to talk about it, though, because our society has become so deeply polarized. Every issue is so politically charged even in ordinary times, and the whole atmosphere is superheated now in an election year. Trying to say more than some anodyne words about thoughts and prayers feels like the scene in *Mission Impossible* where Tom Cruise has to snatch an object in a room so full of lasers that he drops from the ceiling suspended on a wire in

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order not to set off a cacophony of alarms. People run so quickly to their ideological corners without listening to any other perspective that it's hard to have a reasonable conversation even about matters of life and death.

Some people think the church should say nothing at all about such things, other than the safe and steady stream of sympathy and prayers—as if the church had no business speaking to the great concerns of the day but should focus entirely on getting individuals into the afterlife. But that's a profoundly unbiblical view of Christianity. The Old Testament, which makes up well over half of our Bible, has almost nothing to say about heaven but a great deal to say about the way people live as individuals and as a nation before God. And even the New Testament, though it certainly lifts up the promise of eternal life in Christ, offers not much detail about life after death but all kinds of details about how people should live before they die. The truth is, the overwhelming majority of the Bible is about the way we live here and now, as individuals and as a society.

The church is a community that wants to be faithful to God in the concrete details of everyday life. Church should be a place where we calibrate our moral compass. We look to the living Word of God, and to the written word that bears witness to God's redeeming work in the world. This living Word points to love and justice and grace and reconciliation, and a commitment to truth, the whole truth as we see it in Christ, as guides to our private life and our public life together.

Seeing the whole truth means understanding the challenges before us in much of their complexity. Simple slogans may be popular because they're so easy, but they

won't serve as solutions if they're simpler than the problems themselves.

Sermons aren't the place to go into all the details, but they are a place to remind ourselves of the Christian responsibility to understand issues more fully and seek God's guidance in addressing them. Two of the issues coming from Orlando this week have to do with gun violence on the one hand and the fact that the shooter pledged his allegiance to a Muslim terrorist organization on the other. So here, briefly, are a couple of resources that might be helpful to our understanding.

First, on the question of guns, there is Adam Winkler's book called *Gun Fight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America*. Winkler is a professor of constitutional law at UCLA and he offers a balanced legal and historical perspective on the current gun debate. The upshot is, contrary to extremists on all sides, the right of individuals to own guns has always been part of American culture, and at the same time that right has always been regulated to some extent by local, state, or federal authorities in order to protect public safety. Details have varied from time to time and place to place, but as Winkler says, "Americans don't need to choose between two absolutes—between unfettered gun rights on the one hand and unfettered gun control on the other.... Americans have always had both gun rights and gun control."¹

A second major theme coming out of Orlando has been the controversy over whether Islam per se poses some kind of threat to American security, since the shooter was a

¹¹ Adam Winkler, *Gun Fight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 296.

Muslim and declared his allegiance to ISIS in the middle of his rampage. Here again, slogans on all sides obscure the complexity. One faction claims that Islam inherently leans in the direction of violence, so we should be wary of Muslims in general and not shy away from talking about “radical Islamic extremists,” while another group insists that “Islam is a religion of peace” and anyone who practices terrorism isn’t a true Muslim but is only distorting the religion.

Peter Bergen is one of America’s most authoritative analysts on the subjects of terrorism in general and Islamic terrorism in particular. In his latest book about America’s “homegrown” terrorists—those who come from this country rather than from abroad—he summarizes the connection between terrorism and Islam this way:

Assertions that Islamist terrorism has nothing to do with Islam are as nonsensical as claims that the Crusades had nothing to do with Christian beliefs about the sanctity of Jerusalem Of course, only a tiny minority of Muslims are willing to do violence in the name of Allah, and Muslims as a group are certainly no more violent than the adherents of any other religion. Christians, for example, have invoked Christ’s name to justify any number of crusades, pogroms, wars, and imperial adventures.²

The movement that calls itself the “Islamic State” has committed all sorts of evils and needs to be stopped, of course, along with Al Qaeda and any other terrorist organization with ties to Islam, as well as terrorism from all other sources. On the other hand, Muslims make up roughly

² Peter Bergen, *United States of Jihad: Investigating America’s Homegrown Terrorists* (New York: Crown, 2016), 28.

one-fourth of the world's population, and to lump 1.6 billion people together with the most vicious terrorist movements is as unwise as it is unjust.

I read a variety of Muslim writers, and I've met every year for the last ten years with some American Muslim leaders at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. The Muslims I meet renounce the violence done in the name of their religion, the way you and I would renounce the Ku Klux Klan that claims to be Christian. They talk with great sadness about how Islamic jihadists try to recruit their young people, and they're afraid not only for their youth but also for the hatred and bigotry that come raining down upon their people every time someone does something terrible in the name of Islam.

In the unfolding story of Orlando this week, an article came out about a U.S. Marine who recently completed active duty and happened to be at the night club when the shooting began. His military training taught him to recognize the gunshots right away, and to stay focused on the situation. When other people were frozen in fear near an exit, he got them to open the door so that 60 or 70 people managed to escape who might otherwise have been killed or wounded. The Marine's name is Yousef. I don't know whether he's a Muslim or a Christian or has no religion at all, but Yousef is an Arabic name, and his story is just one more reminder that we need to beware of sweeping generalizations about whole groups of people.

The Christian faith is about many things, but surely it's also about pursuing the truth and trying to know and do what is right in God's eyes. Our faith teaches us to expect hard times in this life, and not to be surprised even when terrible things happen. Jesus says there will be wars and rumors of

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wars, and famines and earthquakes and all sorts of troubles in the world, down to the end of the age; but he tells us not to be alarmed, and he says that those who endure to the end will be saved.

We love the twenty-third psalm because it sounds so peaceful and comforting. But remember that the peaceful spirit of the psalm—lying down in green pastures, passing beside still waters, restoring our soul—comes in the context of walking through the darkest valley. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.”

Our faith tells us not to be surprised when bad things happen, because this world is still fallen and waiting to be redeemed. Life has always been challenging, and sometimes it can be very hard, individually and collectively. But God will redeem this world one day. We can never rid the world of evil by ourselves, or stop all the violence, and yet our task is not to acquiesce in evil but to do what we can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to serve on the side of God’s redemption. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” Jesus tells us to pray—and not only to pray but to work, because as Paul says, we are summoned to share in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation.

Our church is a community where we can talk about things. We all bring our own interests and inclinations to the conversation, naturally, but we’re committed to caring for one another and for our world. Caring means listening to one another and learning from each other, and working toward solutions as subtle and complicated as the problems we face. We can do that, by the grace of God. And we must do it, because it’s one of the reasons God calls us together: to be the church in witness to a world that desperately needs to

hear good news of God's redeeming love, and to see that love reflected in the way we live.



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