

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Lent 1-B; 18 February 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
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Testing for Truth

In nomine...

I. Parkland Shooting

Do you remember where you were this week when you learned there had been a school shooting in Parkland, Florida? Do you remember how you felt?

I remember: I was offering Ashes to Go out by the Lych gate. I remember how I felt: angry, frustrated, and depressed. I refused to cry because it's just going to happen again. So instead of feeling compassion and sorrow, I become hard, cynical. It's a self-protective ploy. There have been 30 mass shootings in the U.S. in 2018 already¹. 30 incidents in the last six weeks where four or more people, not including the shooter, were injured in a single attack. Why is this particular mass shooting the one to catch my attention, my sympathy?

A student at Douglas High caught my sentiment exactly. He said, "I'm kind of surprised it happened here, but I'm not really shocked. School shootings happen all the time, and then the news just forgets about them."

When tragedy struck this week, Jesus wept. I didn't. So let's talk about Jesus. How did Jesus respond to the trials of life?

II. Jesus

Jesus is introduced to us in Mark's Gospel this morning as one who comes to John to be baptized in the Jordan. Rising up from the water, Jesus is met by an epiphany: the heavens split open, the Holy Spirit descends in form like a dove, and a voice declares, "You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus is given this great, amazing truth of God's love for

¹ <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>, accessed 16 Feb 2018.

him, God's pleasure in him, the fact that he is chosen by God as God's own child, God's own beloved. What an incredible vision!

What happens next, though, is important. Jesus is *driven* out into the desert by that same Spirit of God. The desert is a place a testing, a place of tears and hunger and desolation. Jesus is with the wild animals: that sounds to me less like cute chipmunks and songbirds than the hungry coyotes and rats of an arid land. Jesus faced difficulty, trials, exposure, and darkness. Jesus was hungry and alone.

Isn't it interesting how Jesus' status as God's beloved does not protect Jesus from the trials of life? In fact, Jesus' baptism and experience of God's paternal care seem to have been the things which *prepared* Jesus to meet the trials which followed. The trials were always going to come, they were unavoidable. If you remember any number of subsequent episodes in the life of Jesus, leading right up to his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane and his crucifixion, Jesus faced no shortage of testing in his life. So the real question is, when you take a vision of belovedness, and combine it with a lifetime of trials and testing, what do you get?

In Jesus' case, you get a declaration of Good News that changed the world.

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

The tests and trials that Jesus endured in the deserts of his life did not negate his own belovedness. In fact, they confirmed it.

Let me lay it out for you here:

First, Jesus *had a vision* of God's love in the community, in baptism.

Then, Jesus *experienced* God's love in the desert, in the midst of testing.

Finally, It was that experience of God's faithful love that *empowered* Jesus to change the world. Listen to Jesus' words: they are an exclamation of joy, the declaration of an unexpected truth. He said, "Hey, it's true! The Kingdom of God is here and now!" It was precisely the testing that

catalyzed Jesus' vision of God's love into something that was powerful and effective in the lives of others around him. In the desert Jesus learned what the Kingdom of God looks like, how God chooses to act in the world, and how Jesus could participate in that work that God is doing. In Jesus' life that participation looked like preaching the Gospel, healing the sick, blessing the little children, proclaiming forgiveness to the guilty, and bringing community to the unwanted.

III. Christians

This week we find ourselves in the desert.

I don't care who you are or how you feel about guns, not one of us thinks it is OK for mass shootings to be the norm and school shootings to be unsurprising. That's not the world that any of us wants to live in.

Yet it is our world, every week, if only we had eyes to see. This is nothing new or strange! Most of us keep the eyes of our hearts shut most of the time because to open them would to open ourselves to despair. What is it that enables us, like Jesus, to open our eyes and to respond in the power of God, transforming the world around us?

Here's the secret: The desert isn't where you start. The desert, whether it's a school shooting; whether its racism, sexism, or sexual harassment; whether it's war in the Middle East, poverty in Camden, hunger and homelessness in Glassboro, discord in your home or brokenness in your body, the desert isn't where you start. The desert will teach you fear and scarcity and poverty. The desert is not the whole truth and, in fact, it is not the most significant truth.

The most significant truth is the love of God. That has to be your starting place. Remember your baptism. That is the controlling narrative, the deepest truth, of the world in which we live.

Bad things are going to keep on happening. If the vision in your heart is of the evil in the world, that will be the controlling narrative of your life. That will determine your experience of the world and your power to effect change in the world. Likewise, if the vision in your heart is of God's love, that will determine your experience of and power in the world. You get to choose

what to hold onto in your heart. In Baptism, you promised to hold onto God, even as God holds on to you.

Because if you hold onto God, your experience of the world, your way of responding to people and situations, *will change the world* for the better! And as you bring healing to the places of brokenness that you encounter, and I bring healing to the places of brokenness I encounter, together we will change the world in big, important ways.

Maybe the healing you do will look like political activism. Maybe it will look like service. Maybe it will look like social justice programs, or a loving word spoken, or a generous tip given to a hard-working server in a restaurant. Maybe it will be picking up garbage or giving someone a ride. Maybe it will look like kindness to someone in your family. Maybe it will mean having mercy on yourself and treating your own body with gentleness. Every little word, thought, and action matters. Because the effectiveness of our work depends not on our strength, but on God's. God will use each of us differently to accomplish God's will in the world. And God needs only the tiniest toe-hold into which to pour God's power to accomplish great things. You and I provide those toe-holds, as we are prompted by the Spirit of God, through a vision of God's love in our hearts that has been tested in the fires of the deserts in our lives.

You'll know your response is the right one when it carries within it the message, spoken or unspoken, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; come believe in the good news of God's love."

Sermon Questions:

1. Where in your life do you find that you are beloved?
2. Where in your life are you tested?
3. How does your understanding of God's kingdom shape the way you live?