

Sermon December 16, 2012 “God’s HUGE Work” Luke 1:26-38 Isaiah 12:2-6

As I wrote this sermon, my ears were reverberating with continuing reports concerning Newtown, CT, and Friday’s horrific shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. Twenty children killed, another six adults dead (not counting the shooter’s murdered mother and the shooter, who apparently took his own life). Everybody is stunned by this violence.

I heard about Friday’s shooting after an excursion to a noisy, packed shopping mall that was full of people trying to do what I was doing: prepare for Christmas. All of a sudden, nothing I had thought important before was. Everything had changed. Innocent families were ravaged and nothing made sense.

What a conflicted time! Bells ring and some stations have Christmas music. All my life I’ve heard the song, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” but today it seems sort of ridiculous. Our world does not need a “merry little Christmas,” our world needs some big, HUGE healing by a powerful God!

Just about everywhere we seem to be broken. Our politicians cannot find a way to come to agreement for the good of the country; there has been a proliferation of mass shootings; folks in our own congregation deal with loss of health and with grief; and so many do not have enough to eat and cannot pay rent or other mounting bills. On top of it all, common courtesy seems lacking as people rarely even look each other in the eye. The list of what seems wrong could go on for several pages.

But in spite of Friday’s tragedy, here comes Christmas, which is the proclamation that some 2000+ years ago God so loved the world that God wrapped God’s love in the human form of a baby, a baby who would grow up to become the Savior of us all. Long ago, the birth occurred in a very dark time, when the Holy Land was occupied by harsh Roman rulers, when children were murdered at the whim of King Herod, and when the religious establishment of Israel had become extraordinarily corrupt and largely unconcerned with the needs of the poor. In a very dark time, God acted to offer Light and hope to the world.

Instead of choosing a wealthy, high-status couple to become parents of the Holy Child, God chose a young, unmarried maiden who did not have wealth, a girl engaged to a man, Joseph, who had as a long-ago ancestor King David.

From the Gospel of Luke we heard the announcement by the Angel Gabriel to young Mary that by God’s action she would become pregnant and bear a child who would be known as the Son of God. No little Christmas for Mary! This was HUGE news, enough to overwhelm anybody! Mary, though, seemed to take the angel’s word, “Do not be afraid,” to heart, for she was able, once the angel had told her what would happen, to receive and affirm the message given her as she responded, “Let it be with me according to your word.” Imagine that! Her life was turned upside down in an instant and nothing would ever again be the same.

We are so close to Christmas, and yet in too many ways it may seem that we are further than ever away from God's powerful work or from any Peace on earth. But no matter how we feel or how much bad news we hear, regardless how challenging or dark life may seem to some of us right now, we have something BIG to proclaim and celebrate: God really is with us, God really does love us and every child ever born (alive or dead), and God is even TODAY at work in our world and our lives to bring about something big and something good! It may not be what we think we want or are expecting, but it will be a blessing, and it will give hope to those who feel hopeless and light to those who find themselves groping in darkness. The gift is Emmanuel, "God with us," God walking right with us through every day, every difficulty, each tragedy, every failure, offering us comfort, new life and new possibility.

On Saturday I read new reports online and then found myself drawn to read the comments other readers had added at the bottom of the reports. The comments revealed the deep struggle we're all having with the idea that a young man, apparently privileged and very bright, would mow down all those innocent people. Lots of the comments wanted to blame somebody: Blame the schools, blame the shooter's parents, blame the gun lobbyists, blame God.

We are all struggling to understand why this evil happened. Some answers very well may come to light. We all sort of hope that there can be a clear explanation of what went wrong in the shooter's life, so that we can sort of "draw a line" and tell ourselves that there is a reason and that this won't happen in OUR families or in our lives.... If we can understand it, we may be able to have power over it, to safeguard ourselves against such a thing recurring. But even if there are no solid answers and we never find a way to understand, we can hold to the promise that the God who loves us all and who right now holds the victims and even the killer in healing love, is with us. God will never let us fall out of God's everlasting love and care, no matter what. As we are promised in Romans 8: "*Nothing* can separate us from the love of God as poured out for us in Christ Jesus."

Long ago, in the midst of dark times, God gave us Light through the birth of Jesus. Today, as folks throughout the world reel from our shooting, God is still at work, and we who believe in Emmanuel, God with us, must watch for the ways we are being nudged/invited to be part of this work.

I share a story that may help our eyes to focus on some of God's huge work in our world today: An old man sat on a park bench in a cold city. It was just about night, and he didn't have anywhere to go. His former landlord had finally lost patience when he couldn't pay. He didn't have any friends left; he'd gone to their funerals over the years...Ben's was last week. There was nobody left. He'd lost track of any family long ago...didn't know if they were still alive or not, or where.

So he sat on the bench. And he looked up past the rooftops and alleyways around him, and he said, "Well, Lord, tonight I don't have anything left. If you want me, after all these years of my not really wanting you, you can have me, for whatever it's worth. I don't have anywhere else to turn."

His stomach growled, hurt, actually. People were still walking by, but nobody seemed to notice the old man. He was getting sore, on the bench, but the cold didn't seem so bad any more. He felt a peace about things. "I will die tonight, and then I'll finally get some rest."

Suddenly he heard a scuffle, and looked up to see a group of young men pushing somebody around in the alley. It was a man, looked like a Korean man, getting beaten up. The old man sat there for a minute, and then he said, "What have I got to lose? I am dying tonight, anyway!" So he painfully pushed himself up from the bench and shuffled as fast as he could to the alley. "You hoodlums!! You leave that man alone!!" He surprised even himself with the strength of his voice, and then was even more surprised as the muggers took off. The young Korean man lay on the ground, moaning, badly beaten.

The street seemed deserted. The old man wasn't sure what to do. The young man was badly injured, he could see that. The old man decided he couldn't just leave the boy there. He said to himself, "What the heck, I'm dying tonight, anyway. Might as well do whatever I can." So he bent down and laboriously picked up the beaten man, somehow lifting him to his shoulders. He staggered out to the street, and since nobody seemed to be around, he turned to start the several block walk to the hospital. He made it about half a block before he collapsed. Someone driving by saw him fall, with the man he was carrying on top of him, and called the police.

The man came to in the ER. He opened his eyes and figured out he wasn't dead, then he felt warmth and pain at the same time. A nurse walked into the cubicle. "Oh, you're awake. We'll get your insurance information later, but you should know that you saved the life of that young man you were trying to carry! He's going to be all right!"

The old man did not die that night. Instead, he found life. The young man he saved that night became like a son to him, and saw to it that the old man never lacked for food, shelter, or family for the rest of his days.

The old man, in the days and years after, always looked back to that night when he had told God that God could have him. He realized that God had taken him up on the offer, but God had something bigger than his death in his plan. "You can have me, Lord, for what it's worth" was turned into something of great worth in God's hands. He said, "That Christmas God gave me a new life, and every day since I have tried to remember to offer myself back to God in thanksgiving. Some day, God will let me die. Until then, God is letting me LIVE! That's BIG!!" (Source of this story unknown)

Good news for all of us: We don't have to create or buy a "merry little Christmas" for ourselves! Instead, each of us may offer ourselves to God, even when the world seems scary or dark, and discover the HUGE work God is inviting us to be part of, as we dare to let the Light of Christ our Savior enter in and shine through our living. May it be with us according to God's Word. Finally, we will discover HUGE blessing. Thank God. Amen.