

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
December 23, 2012

WAITING AND WONDERING

Come, Emmanuel, now is the time of our need. Come and bind up our confidence, so shaken beneath uncertain skies, and lift us up to walk with you, where paths make sense and seem to lead us home. Come remind us of our early dreams, the ones once followed like stars, and give us the will to live them, to be the light for others. Come sing to us the ancient songs of our season, the sounds that set our spirits to soar above shadows, that we may breathe the clean air of heaven. Come, Emmanuel, for now is the time when we are needed, needed as never before.
(Bishop Steven Charleston)

Despite the fact the world was predicted to end on Friday, December 21, I am very glad to see all of you this morning. Noted this week: I do not fear that the world will end. I am terrified that it will remain the same.

This is the 4th and final Sunday of Advent, the season when Christians are waiting for the one who is to come, Emmanuel, God with us. Since the Newtown killings and now two days before Christmas many are wondering through public conversation, through social networks and blogs, in mainstream media: where was God on that dreadful morning? Will things remain the same? If you came this morning to hear a safe and benign quasi Christmas sermon, I will apologize right now because you won't really get one. You'll have to come back tomorrow for that.

Nine days since the brutal slayings at Sandy Hook Elementary School I am vacillating between anguish and anger despite this being the season of good tidings, comfort and joy. The images of small caskets and stories of beautiful little lives this past week have been too much for me to bear. The illogical and misguided leadership of the NRA in a press conference two days ago calling for armed guards at all schools rendered me speechless I find it so irresponsible.

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I am an Episcopal priest, a long and devoted though sometimes bewildered believer. But as another clergy colleague, Episcopal Diocese of Washington Bishop Marianne Edgar Budde said in her Christmas message: “The Newtown children and their teachers were not the only ones killed by gun violence this year. We feel their deaths at a deeper collective level somehow, as if at last we can acknowledge that by our passivity, we have allowed too many such deaths to occur. In the aftermath of the violence that unfolded at Sandy Hook we would be made of stone if our faith in a loving God did not falter. Where was God? How could God let this happen? “

“The more compelling questions aren’t where God was but rather where we were. St. Teresa of Avila once wrote, Christ has no body on earth but ours. Ours are the feet with which he walks, ours the hands with which he blesses, ours the eyes with which look on this world with compassion. Surely those who gave their lives for the children’s sake were running with the feet of compassion and those who grieve are crying God’s tears as well as their own. But what about the rest of us? Where are we now?”

The Episcopal National Cathedral, located in Washington DC, tolled its bells 28 times on Friday, once for each victim, including the mother of the killer and the gunman himself. The Very Rev. Gary Hall, dean of the cathedral, was bold to say, “Everyone in this city seems to be in terror of the gun lobby. But I believe the gun lobby is no match for the cross lobby.” Clergy members representing mainline and evangelical Protestants and Catholics, as well as Jews and Muslims led off this campaign in front of the Cathedral timed to mark the moment when the young gunman opened fire on that fateful morning at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Dean Hall said in an interview that he and Bishop Budde were calling on their congregants to support four specific steps: bans on assault weapons and high capacity magazines, tightening rules for sales at gun shows and re-examining care for the mentally ill.

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They are not waiting and wondering. They, along with other religious leaders are both sensing and creating what might be a watershed moment. Many clergy report that there is a real need, a real hunger for there to be some response that is not only prayers and expressions of sadness, but a call to action, which came from those who normally do not care much about public policy action and are more interested in spiritual responses. Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism said this “is not likely an issue that will have a sustained campaign in the absence of political leadership. But if political leaders act, the religious community will be strongly engaged.” Mark DeMoss, a prominent evangelical Christian who recently served as an adviser to the Romney campaign, stepped forward to say that measures to address gun control, mental health treatment and violence in the media should all be on the table. The Rev. Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals said that this group had never taken a position on gun control but might now take a harder look. He pointed out that a rarely read part of the Christmas story is king Herod’s slaughter of the innocents. Mary and Joseph fled. It’s part of the story, and they took decisive action. Anderson says this is now part of our story and we need to take decisive action.

Reading and hearing today’s gospel again I wonder: WWMD. What Would Mary Do? I do wonder. Verses 46-55 are the timeless and much beloved Song of the Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise. The woman called to be the bearer of God, mother of God, Theokotos in Greek. The concept of wonder can’t be downsized into any combination of words whether our question is: I wonder where God was or is in all of this? This gospel of Luke may define it better than any dictionary or parsing of original language as he tells the story of the angel Gabriel paying a visit to the peasant Mary. And who was she really? “Mary found herself pregnant and not yet married in an ancient culture in which coercive control of female sexuality was a primary measure of masculine honor,” writes Old Testament scholar Carolyn Sharp.

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“Mary faced an uncertain future at best and devastating retribution from her community at worst. So I don’t envision Mary as the radiant woman peacefully composing the Magnificat in Marie Ellenreider’s 1833 painting, but as a girl who sings defiantly to her God through her tears, fists clenched against an unknown future. Perhaps the Marys’ in all of our crèches, much like the one here, look so serene because this Magnificat was sung nine months earlier and over nine months Mary pondered all of these things in her heart. Maybe Mary knew better than anyone that she was living in the calm before the storm. But over those nine months I suspect that culture did not suddenly start valuing the contributions of women and softening its harsh expectations of female sexuality. The world did not start seeing poverty as something to be overturned and ended, but a condition to be avoided at all costs. “ One author suggests that “if he were an artist, his crèche might have a serene Mary but her fists would be clenched beneath her tattered birthing robes.”

Does it ever make you wonder why Christian churches, Protestant and Catholic, try so hard to take the sting out of this story? I’m sure many of you would have preferred the opening of this sermon address something other than the sting of the senseless slaughter of school children. You’ve brought a friend or visiting relatives this morning. It’s almost Christmas, Rev. Sanders, for crying out loud. Cheer up. Lest we forget, I do say many in Newtown, CT and beyond are still crying out loud and will be for a long time to come.

Nevertheless, the wonder not to be missed here in the story of Mary is that she did not enlist. She was no fool; she was not waving her hand wildly and saying pick me please as Theokotos, mother of God. Instead, the narrative tells us she listens to an angel and asks a perfectly reasonable question. The only one she asks. How can this be? Barbara Brown Taylor, author and preacher says there are other questions she

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would have asked. “Will Joseph stick around? Will my parents still love me? Will my friends stand by me or will I get dragged into town and stoned for sleeping around? Will there be someone to help when the time comes? Will I know what to do?”

I do love this Magnificat. But the greatest wonder for me in it – and its preceding life changing announcement – is not biological. Was Mary really a virgin? If so, how is this pregnancy even possible? Seems pretty far-fetched to me. Rather, the greatest wonder is that when apparently chosen by God to bear the love of the Holy One, the child, Emmanuel, God with us into the world, despite all good reasons to rant, to rail, to revolt, to raise a clenched fist – of all things Mary says yes. Mary embraces this holy disruption. “Here I am – let it be with me according to your word.” That is a wonder beyond wonders. Furthermore, I don’t want to lose the angel Gabriel too fast - most crèches have a single angel – though doubtful that it is Gabriel as he was likely long gone I suppose by the time of the Bethlehem birth – here below in our crèche is a big angel you can’t miss. Just for a minute I will pretend that it’s Gabriel making the same announcement that was made earlier to Mary: Fear not. Angels as depicted in the Bible know that fear can choke the life out of wonder. It is frightening, sometimes tragically so, to pay attention to a God who seems ultimately neither present nor absent in such gut wrenching horrors as Newtown, though perhaps hidden. To accept the fact that if there is a God, there is some aspect of that God reserved from human understanding. Not even theology, the study of God, can explain it. Is there any room in the human soul for the God unknown? Writer Diana Butler Bass says, “God was beyond Newtown, the God of lament, of anguish, the God hidden away. The hidden God will not completely satisfy and can never get to questions of motive.”

So where are we now? What about the rest of us? The recent actions of religious leaders, those of my own denomination and others, have made me realize that “fear

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not” still instructs us to live into God’s vision for our world. Holy disruptions still happen. That none of us, either in the ancient story of Mary, the holy mother, nor in the reverberations of Newtown, CT can drown or become passively indifferent in that fear alone.

What does it mean to us, in this Christmas season to live that way, still unafraid to hold onto the good news of God for dear life, unafraid to tell the world that the God we presume to believe in has no patience with hunger and human desperation, with innocent children being gunned down in classrooms, with healing accessible to only those who can afford it, with bending over backwards policies to protect the rich and bring our nation yet again to a fiscal cliff while crafting pious lip service to the poor, with public and congressional power purchased by those who can write the biggest checks, (exhibit A: The National Rifle Association), with religion remote from the streets, content to remain inside our churches, synagogues and mosques? Where are we now?

What do we say to people like Gov. Mike Huckabee who says that God has left the building, including the innocence of schoolyards because of human sin? We reject God so God abandons us. Other religious ideologues are calling for us to repent and welcome both God and guns back to public schools. Diana Butler Bass and others have pointed out “that God may not have been in the broken soul of the shooter, the bullets, the wailing and the fear, but human sin and evil do not cause God to abandon our schools, towns, cultures or world. To remove prayer from public school curriculums does not mean that God has forsaken schools or school children. And God does not abandon us on account of Democrats, gay people or secularization.” If God is no bigger or beyond any of this small simple mindedness than I would rather have nothing to do with that kind of God.

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Wonder must grasp and move us beyond all of this and more. We are so limited, so fallible, so flawed in our human finiteness. We come here this morning, and tomorrow on Christmas Eve to sing these lyrics to popular carols: they looked up and saw a star shining in the east beyond them far and to the earth it gave great light; the holy one the living god is always full of grace, our Savior comes to all who weep to wipe their tears away; angels we have heard on high; shepherds why this jubilee, why your joyous strains prolong? Say what may the tidings be which inspire your heavenly song? O come all ye faithful, come and behold him.

How might they sink more deeply into us, inspire us, change us? Will it be any different this year? Do we believe them enough to give us some confidence to carry us in this season of what we want into a season of what we might imagine God wants? What will we say yes to? I do wonder.

In times of deep darkness, we not only need light—we need to BE light for one another. That's a message we must take to heart as we find ourselves lost once again in the all-too-familiar darkness of America's culture of violence.

Come, Emmanuel, now is the time of our need. Come and bind up our confidence, so shaken beneath uncertain skies, and lift us up to walk with you, where paths make sense and seem to lead us home. Come remind us of our early dreams, the ones once followed like stars, and give us the will to live them, to be the light for others. Come sing to us the ancient songs of our season, the sounds that set our spirits to soar above shadows, that we may breathe the clean air of heaven. Come, Emmanuel, for now is the time when we are needed, needed as never before.