

Moments of Meaning that Hold our Hearts*

John the Baptist and Newtown*

December 15, 2024

Matthew 11:2-10

Advent 3 year C

St. John's, Detroit

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Create in me a clean Heart o God
Renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence.

Please be seated.

Good morning.

John the Baptist is in prison. Last week he was out in the wilderness, "Preparing the way of the Lord." This week we jump ahead, and we find John in jail. It seems that all that preparing and proclaiming, got him in trouble.

Typically, insecure people of power, dislike being compared to a writhing pile of snakes. "You brood of vipers," said John to the Sadducees and Pharisees, "Who warned you to flee? I tell you even now the ax is at the root of every tree that does not bear good fruit." Put pastoral lines like that with a fellow who has no real respect for earthly authority, joined by vast crowds of restless people gathering and well—the fact that John the Baptist is now in jail is not all that surprising.

Here's the interesting part, at least to me. John who was the one, proclaiming the coming of the Lord...John who was the one who baptizes Jesus, John who was there, John who said, "It is you Jesus who should baptize me." John as he sits in prison appears to be having doubts. Second thoughts. He sends word via his disciples to Jesus', "Hey," he says, "Are you the one? Are you really the one or should we wait for another?"

As theologian Mark Yurs says, "What a relief, when the one who is supposed to know the answer doesn't know. Makes the rest of us not feel so bad for not being sure ourselves."

It's like that sometimes, isn't it? We don't necessarily realize what we have when we have it. John had Jesus—right there. Now he wonders. Now he has doubts. Most of us, as we float along in our lives, have no visceral sense of just how transitory everything can be in our world. As we look forward and look back and miss now. It is the now that we will need as the foundation for the future.

Is that day of Jesus' baptism not just seared into John's brain. Or is all a blur: a pixilated collage of images upon which he is now unable now to focus?

Yesterday was the 12th anniversary of the Newtown massacre, the 12th anniversary of the Sandy Hook Elementary School slayings where 20 six- and seven-year-olds, 6 teachers and the shooter's mom, were riddled with bullets and died.

Twelve years later, the leading cause of death for children in Michigan and the United States of America are gunshot wounds. As some of you know, creating a safer gun culture in the state of Michigan is one of my deep abiding passions. I want us to mark the Sandy Hook anniversary, because those little ones and their teachers have left this world, and I don't ever want us to forget. And in my remembering this weekend I came across a remarkable National Public Radio interview, with one of the families who lost a little one. But the interview, isn't about, what I thought it might be.

Reporter, Tovia Smith interviewed Nelba Marquez-Greene. Mother of Ana Grace age 6 who was one of the 28 people who was killed by a bullet shot by a gun on that wretched day. Ana Grace was one of the 20 first graders murdered.

This is what her mom said in that interview,
"As much as December 14th will forever be a day of unfathomable grief, December 13th will forever be one of unending gratitude", said Ana's mom, Nelba. "I will never forget that day," she said.

Instead of rushing to activities and errands and worrying about the dishes and the laundry, even cleaning the mess on the floor, Nelba, (Anna Grace's mom), ignored it all. Even the crèche set—that little Ana had knocked over that morning. Apparently before Ana left for school **the day before the shooting**, she managed to knock the entire nativity scene off the piano and onto the floor. The baby Jesus was still in little pieces all over the floor when Ana came home from Sandy Hook elementary school that day.

Nelba said, "I just ignored it. For some reason that she does not understand, Nelba corralled her son Isaiah, Ana, and her husband Jimmy and insisted that they all go to dinner at the Cheesecake factory. Where they had their final time as a family of four.

Nelba remembers, "It was the greatest gift—we were sitting there taking goofy pictures, making faces. We had a second dessert and like three plates of pasta. I'm so grateful we had that."

(Pause)

Like John the Baptist, we need the moments of now for the future. Not because doom is impending, but because our time together is precious, holy and deserves to be treated with reverence and reveled in. We need moments of meaning etched onto our souls in the present—to carry us through those dark places and dark times in the future: to remember that God who was with us then, is with us now.

John the Baptist asks from his jail cell, "Are you the one, or should we wait for another?" John who baptized Jesus is having his doubts. John was right there, with him. And he is having a hard time remembering.

And Jesus replies, "Tell John the blind are receiving their sight, the lame are walking, the lepers are being cleansed, the deaf are hearing and the dead are being raised..." Tell John so that he can remember and recall, that even in these dark times, when it is getting darker earlier every day, in these days, the Holy One of God is with us. Etch that into your heart, hold onto it, remember that God will will be with us now and always.

Friends, where and when in this overwrought season of anxiety and rushing and doing, prepping and preparing, where are you stealing space and forging time, creating remarkable moments of meaning and holiness, that will hold our hearts and nurture our souls and enable us to carry on.

Where?

Amen.