

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent
December 5, 2021 Yr C
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

2021 has seen more than 700 mass shootings in the United States – 747 to be exact. A “mass shooting” is defined as an incident in which four or more people, excluding the perpetrator(s), are shot in one location at roughly the same time.

“And once again the word of God came to God’s people. Repent. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Valleys shall be filled. Mountains and hills shall be made low. The crooked shall be made straight. The rough ways shall be made smooth.”

What do the words of this prophet mean in the context of the Oxford High School shooting last week, which left 4 children dead, and 8 others injured? What would repentance for this tragedy look like?

I always wonder if our society actually wants to stop gun violence? I’d like to think so, but it doesn’t seem like we do. We get all hot and bothered about gun violence and then chicken out. All talk, no action.

If past performance is any indication, the buzz cycle around the Oxford High School shooting will go something like this:

- Politicians will argue and debate, plead, and blame;
- Gun control advocates will advocate;
- Second amendment defenders will defend;
- People will gather for vigils and moments of silence;
- Thoughts and prayers will be offered;
- Some will point out the need for more and better mental health care;
- Others will focus on the shooter’s parents and their child-rearing skills;
- People will be surprised and wonder that it happened again;
- Police officers will be thanked and praised;
- Social media trolls will post their opinions;
- Preachers will preach;
- The dead will be buried, the wounded will be treated, and the grieving will grieve.

There’s nothing new about any of that. That was the same response given to the previous 746 mass shootings that came before it. I’m not saying these responses are wrong or that they don’t matter, but let’s not kid ourselves. In no way can they be considered actions of repentance. They just fill up airtime. They do not prepare the way, fill the valleys, lower the mountains and hills, straighten the crooked, or smooth the rough. They change nothing. Meanwhile we sit on the edge of our seats wondering who will be number 748.

And just a reminder that, as much as it likes to, Bristol cannot always hide behind its veneer persona of “Small Town America, aren’t we great!” We, too, had an active shooter situation just over a week ago on High Street. You can breathe a sigh of relief and thank God, for now, that Bristol was not number 748.

The kind of repentance John calls for on God’s behest calls for significant change. It calls for a change of heart, a change of mind, a change in how we speak truth to power and a change in our actions. We have to experience a change in our life’s direction, a change in this country’s direction, and a change in our priorities and values to claim true repentance. And it’s not a one-time event. We are called constantly to be repenting, because it is when we are in that posture, when we truly face the nakedness of what we have let this world become, that we can start to face accountability and accept responsibility.

So, what does repentance look like for you in light of the 747th mass shooting of the year? What will you change about yourself and your life? What will you do differently? How will it affect your choices, values, and priorities? Will your response help prepare the way of the Lord?

If you’re thinking “What did I do? I wasn’t there. I didn’t buy the gun. I did not pull the trigger. What do I need to repent for?”, well, you’re not off the hook that easily. The kind of repentance that John the Baptist calls for is not limited to the guilty or culpable. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explained it well when we wrote:

“The prophets remind us of the moral state of a people: Few are guilty, but all are responsible.”

All are responsible. You and I included. We are responsible to God, to each other, to the Oxford High School children, to the world. We are responsible to the dead, the wounded, and the grieving.

We cannot hide our heads in the sand, nor are we able to hide from God behind our family name, or skin color, or our ill-conceived reputations that we try too hard to build and hold on to. In the long run, none of those things matter. True repentance can change the world for the better, but we need to truly understand the grace and the gifts God has given us in order to make that happen. The existential psychologist Rollo May says that the neurosis of our time is that we hide our gifts. We are afraid to be all that we are, we are trepidatious in acknowledging the full potential of who we are and what we’re called to be. Because if we accept it, we might just have to stand up and bear witness to it. So we end up living a half-life. And the price paid for the half-lived life is bitter.

So, speak up, speak out, take action. Repent. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Valleys shall be filled. Mountains and hills shall be made low. The crooked shall be made straight. The rough ways shall be made smooth. *Amen.*