

Until Never Again Means Never Again

Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.[a] 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” 12 God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” 17 God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Mark 1:9-15

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved;[a] with you I am well pleased.”

The Temptation of Jesus

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news[b] of God,[c] 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;[d] repent, and believe in the good news

Though we sit here on a mild winter morning on the first Sunday in the season of Lent in the comfort of a climate controlled room on padded chairs

when I hear the words “Repent and believe in the Good News” my mind flashes back several years to a sweltering summer night revival, a church crammed full of people on lines of folding chairs, the smell of soap mixed with the flowery perfume and the tang of sweat, fans whirling and hands waving trying to break through the oppressive heat, a preacher climbs the steps into the pulpit his words getting progressively louder until he’s yelling into the microphone “Repent,

Repent, Repent.” I can honestly tell you I don’t know what happened next at that revival because I ran out of the building. That preachers words sounded nothing like Good News to me.

Well it’s my turn in the pulpit now. I stand before you today 27 years old, as a member of the millennial generation, a generation someone once described to me as the school shooting generation. I have not, we have not known education without the fear of violence. People my age were elementary school during the columbine massacre. We were in highschool during the shooting at Virginia Tech. We were just graduating college or starting graduate school during Sandy Hook.

I was in middle school when I was locked in the gym locker room while my school was searched for a gun a student brought to school. The gun wasn’t fired, but it was there. “the dictionaries are in the library” was my school’s response- the message they would announce in an overhead page to initiate a lock down- to train us - students and teachers to hide in case of an intruder, in case someone had a gun. I share my personal experience not to make this about myself, but as a testimony to the reality of gun violence in our schools. It was a day that changed my life but it was barely more than a blip on the local news.

Now my generation has graduated, but the violence hasn’t.

This week I wanted to run and hide again, to press myself up against the cool tiles in the dark locker room, to close my eyes and wish that it wasn’t happening- so that I wouldn’t have to hear the news that seventeen people died -children and teachers and coaches- they were slain by bullets at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida on February 14th, 2018. Valentines Day. Ash Wednesday. A school day. I don’t know how you responded to the news, maybe you ran and hid from the sound of the tv declaring a death count, maybe you hugged your valentine extra tight. or maybe you wept tears as you heard the words “from dust you were made and to dust you shall return.”

As a country we’ve established our platitudes - we’re sending our thoughts and prayers, for a season we say we’re Vegas Strong. or Today we’re all Hokies. We change our profile pictures on social media, we might even share an article or two. We tweet hashtag never again.

But In spite of the outpouring of thoughts and prayers after each school shooting, in spite of the tweets, in spite of our tears and vigils-another shooting seems almost inevitable. In this calendar year of 2018 in 18 separate instances a gun has been fired -whether it be a single bullet or multiple shots- on the campus of a school sometime in the day or night, purposely or accidentally. I know that sentence was hard to follow, but I craft that sentence to convey that we’re now in the midst of a public discussion about what qualifies as a school shooting, and what injury and death toll qualifies as a mass shooting. These debates continue as though a single individual’s death doesn’t matter, as though each body ripped apart by bullets doesn’t have have sufficient mass to be called a mass shooting.

As a culture we're setting standards for how and when we grieve, setting definitions and terminology and talking circles to avoid actual change saying its not the right time.

But this morning's text call us to actual change. In the Gospel of Mark -Jesus wades into the Jordan river, and takes a holy bath, a ritual cleansing to mark change in his life. As he emerges from the water the clouds split and the spirit of God descends like dove upon Jesus. With a sense of urgency that is woven throughout the Gospel of Mark Jesus goes immediately into the wilderness. There among the wild beasts he stares the reality of evil in the world eye to eye. A world that privileges the desires of the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the vulnerable. A world that values keeping the status quo over individual lives. A world that teaches that the response to violence is violence.

We can imagine that Jesus like us in the face of evil is tempted to believe that hate is more powerful than love, that systems of power can't be challenged, that we lack the power to change the world around us.

But Jesus emerges from the desert proclaiming the Kingdom of God has come near- like the ripping of the sky during his baptism, Jesus declares that the kingdom of God is breaking into the world. Jesus' invitation is to repent -its from the Greek word metanoia- meaning "change of mind." Jesus invites us to **think, believe, and act differently** than the world around us.

Theologian C. Clifton Black describes this Kingdom of God "not as a place but a power. It is God's dynamic potency to put right all that is wrong in this world."

We catch a glimpse of the beauty of the kingdom of God after the story of the flood in Genesis. Even in a world that was ruled by patriarchal systems, God makes a covenant with every living creature,

Theologian Wil Gafney's words help to paint a more complete picture of this covenant - it is between God and all flesh is between God and every girl, woman, boy, man, and intersex person, every lesbian, gay man, bisexual and transgender person, every atheist, agnostic and religious person, every Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, Wiccan and pagan person, every person of ability and perceived limitations, every person of any nationality, ethnicity or racial construction or category, and even includes those who defy and explode categories.

For the kingdom of God is not defined by world, but by the God who loves us all.

God says that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. For Divisions are not of the kingdom of God, destruction is not of the kingdom of God, violence is not of the kingdom of God.

This week Artist, Writer, and Methodist Minister Jan Richardson's words spoke to my soul and painted anew the living out of the Kingdom of God. She describes the kingdom of God as a blessing. Here now these words.

A Blessing in a Time of Violence

Which is to say
this blessing
is always.

Which is to say
there is no place
this blessing
does not long
to cry out
in lament,
to weep its words
in sorrow,
to scream its lines
in sacred rage.

Which is to say
there is no day
this blessing ceases
to whisper
into the ear
of the dying,
the despairing,
the terrified.

Which is to say
there is no moment
this blessing refuses
to sing itself
into the heart
of the hated
and the hateful,
the victim
and the victimizer,
with every last
ounce of hope
it has.

Which is to say

there is none
that can stop it,
none that can
halt its course,
none that will
still its cadence,
none that will
delay its rising,
none that can keep it
from springing forth
from the mouths of us
who hope,
from the hands of us
who act,
from the hearts of us
who love,
from the feet of us
who will not cease
our stubborn, aching
marching, marching

until this blessing
has spoken
its final word,
until this blessing
has breathed
its benediction
in every place,
in every tongue:

Peace.
Peace.
Peace.

In our culture filled with violence, where school shootings and mass shootings are a part of our reality, how should we, folks who want to live out the Kingdom of God, respond?

I invite you to hear Jesus' words again, not in the voice of an angry revival preacher but in the words of frightened students, of grieving parents, of petrified teachers. The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.

This blessing, the message of the kingdom of God is for every generation. Not only during the season of lent, but in every day of our lives we're invited to be part of living out God's kingdom

here on earth, day by day, to live according to God's power instead of corrupt systems, To love all peoples and all of God's creation,

let us grieve and mourn, let us find ways to show we care. Let us be Vegas Strong, led us stand and declare that today and everyday we're still hokies, let us join the survivors of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas Highschool in tweeting hashtag never again and mean it in the core of our being.

Let us pour out thoughts and prayers that our hearts may be broken, that the message of God's love may be on our lips, that our hands may be part of healing and change.

Let us worship God instead of guns, and value the lives of God's creation over constitutional law. Let us not just speak in platitudes, but use our voices to cry out against injustice. Let us use our voices to preach, pray, teach, march, vote, and lead. And let us not give up hope that one day through the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God we will actually arrive at "never again."

Amen.