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Advent 3C
Peace, Seattle
December 16, 2012
Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:16-18

GRIEF OVERTAKES REJOICING

In the face of events that took place Friday at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, events so horrible that they are beyond our ability to process, much less understand, we find ourselves shocked, numb and at a loss for words. In the midst of a tragedy of such magnitude there can be no understanding, no explanation.

Today is known as "Gaudate" or "Rejoice" Sunday in our tradition, so named because of these opening words from Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice."

The texts appointed for this 3rd Sunday mark a turning point of the Advent season—when we move through the backstretch into the final curve before next week's homecoming. Joy and hope in the midst of pain is their theme.

But the terrible things that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School on Friday morning have turned this day of rejoicing into a day of mourning.

In Newtown, and in homes throughout the country and beyond, the stark reality that so many beautiful young children had their lives stolen from them breaks our hearts and kindles our anger.

And so it's another text, one which the church ordinarily reserves for December 28th— the Feast of the Holy Innocents—that cries out to be heard this day.

From the prophet Jeremiah, the 31st chapter:

> *A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel, weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted…because they are no more.* (Jeremiah 31:15)

You remember the story in Matthew's gospel. It's the stuff of nightmares, and so hard to stomach that it's in the adults-only section of the Christmas bookstore.

King Herod, paranoid and power-hungry, hears of the birth of another King and takes drastic measures to insure there will be no threat to his reign from any quarter: he launches a campaign against the children of Bethlehem.

This story, which comes swiftly on the heels of Christmas, is one of the darkest texts of scripture, the room whose door we never want to open, so we hurry past it whenever we can. We cling to the Magi with their gifts but leave Herod's murderous rage out of sight and out of mind.

But after Friday the door to this text from Jeremiah, which Matthew quotes, is opened to us; and we hear and feel the soul-searing cries, right to the very marrow of our bones:

- Great waves of grief; mothers and fathers wailing in bitter lamentation; inconsolable over the loss of their children so young, so innocent and beautiful, with so much of life ahead of them.
- And we weep with them.

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In Luke's story of Jesus' birth, which we'll hear detailed in the days to come, no danger yet looms. It's shepherds—not soldiers—who make haste to Bethlehem to find the babe.

But in Matthew's story, Herod is a cold, hard reminder of this world's malevolent ability to turn us upside down and shake us to the core.

From the very beginning, the life of Jesus is characterized by a mixture of joy and sorrow, the revelation of God's deep compassion and the terrible price that attends it.

Matthew's nativity reminds us that Emmanuel comes into a world in which violent, desperate acts threaten to define who we are, to rob us of hope, and, finally, to destroy us.

The evil forces of this world with their instruments of violence are not going to lay down their arms and walk away. No. Evil—which by its very nature is nonsensical—will keep on resisting Emmanuel with every fiber of its being.

The tragedy at Newtown reminds us that Christmas is about God entering even the most bleak and devastating landscapes of this world. Jesus does not remain above the human fray. Instead, he enters into it fully, in order, ultimately, to put an end to death's power over us, and to remain an emblem of God's unbending determination to stick with us come hell or high water…or catastrophe.

What kind of God-with-us do we need at such a time as this?

- The kind who embraces the sorry human condition without flinching, without turning away.
- The kind who sheds tears alongside grieving parents, and joins their sighs too deep for words.
- The kind whose love binds us to the families of Newtown, even though we're 3,000 miles away.
- The kind who inspires us to fight, work, and pray for meaningful change so that more innocent lives will not be lost.

The massacre of innocents that took place on Friday reminds us in the most stark and terrible way that even though God triumphed over death's dark forces when he raised Jesus from the tomb, still, we await and long for the final redemption promised us, when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

> At a time such as this the darkness of evil seems powerful indeed...We struggle to imagine a future beyond this agony...and yet we also gather to affirm the sovereignty of life over death. We come here—joining communities of faith across the nation and around the world—to testify that the light of love cannot be extinguished. Amid all our pain, we confess that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.[1]

Let us pray.
God with us, your heart embraces all the broken victims of this world, and all the unjust suffering of the innocent. Teach us compassion, and in equal measure, grant us the inner resolve and the political will to transform our relationships and our laws, so that gun violence will plague our nation no more. In the name of the Prince of Peace. Amen.

[1] Based on words from ELCA Campus Pastor Bill King, speaking at convocation at Virginia Tech in the aftermath of the April 2007 shooting that left 32 dead.