

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It's hard to know any more how to make sense of the world we live in. 17 Students and teachers gunned down on Wednesday by a 19-year-old with an assault rifle. It keeps happening. We keep letting it happen. It has become routine. I remember being horrified by the Columbine shooting 19 years ago. It was unthinkable that anyone would do that. But when I first heard of the shooting this past Wednesday, my reaction was, "Oh, *another* one." And yet four more people were killed in this attack than were killed at Columbine. It has become routine, and we are no longer surprised when these things happen.

And this is the only country where it happens like this. Again and again. Yes, other first-world countries like ours have had mass shootings. Every once in a while. But nothing on the scale of the United States. And when it does happen they are able to take meaningful legislative action that has measurable results. But we seem unable to do that here. After each of the shootings here, we say, "never again," and within a few weeks we forget all about it. Until the next shooting. Why can't we stop this? Is there any hope?

We're in Lent now, the season of taking stock, the season for truth-telling, as I said on Wednesday, for confronting who we really are. Who are we as a nation? We are polarized. We have become quick-tempered and nasty. We are dismissive and contemptuous of those who are different from us. We are self-righteous and accusatory. And we are addicted to violence and the threat of violence, both at the local and national levels. Even nuclear war seems to be back on the table these days. How crazy is that?

Our first reading this morning is God's covenant with Noah after the flood. God has just rescued Noah and his family, together with a boatload of animals, from a flood that has killed everyone else. Why did God bring that flood, according to the Genesis story? Genesis 6:13: "God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them." Violence was the problem that led to the flood. And then, when the flood was over, and before God promises never to flood the earth again, God reminds Noah and his family that that each human being bears the divine image, and declares that God will "require a reckoning" for any shedding of human blood.

I wish that was the end of the story, but of course it isn't. The flood doesn't end human on human violence. This threads is lost for a while in the following chapters and books, though of course it makes an appearance in the law of Moses, most famously in the commandment not to murder. But where it really comes back with a vengeance is in the writings of the prophets. The prophets describe the peoples' unfaithfulness to God as being shown particularly by their injustice and violence. And it is that unfaithfulness that gets them conquered and exiled.

And then comes Jesus, the answer to God's promise to save God's people. Jesus is the "anointed one" – that's what Christ means – the king. But he will not be like any king that they have known before. Human kings rule by force. By violence. By "lording it over their subjects." Kings oppress and take advantage. They rule selfishly. They live extravagantly by depriving their subjects of basic necessities. Jesus will not be that kind of king. He will not rule as we rule. He will not perpetuate the cycle of violence and oppression. When one of his disciples tries to prevent his arrest by force he tells him to put his sword away. "All who take the sword will perish by the sword," he tells him. (Mt. 26:52) Here is the Son of God, God incarnate, who would rather die than use violence against those who bear the image of God. And he call his own disciples to do likewise – to take up their own crosses.

Today's Gospel reading contains Mark's version of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It's only two verses long. The lectionary folks have padded it with his baptism beforehand and the beginning of his public ministry afterwards. What's interesting in Mark's version is that the Spirit "casts Jesus out" into the wilderness. Our translation says "drove him out", but this is exactly the same verb used when Jesus casts out demons and unclean spirits. The Spirit casts Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. To me that means he struggled with this, maybe like he struggled in the garden of Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal. Mark doesn't give us any more details. But Matthew and Luke do. They tell us that the devil tried to get him to use his divine power to ease his suffering. "Use your power, use your connection to your Father, and use my way of leading by power and intimidation, and the world will be yours!"

This same temptation comes back to him on the cross in the mouths of the bystanders who taunt him. "Save yourself if you're the Messiah!" "Use your power." "Come down from the cross." But he will not. He will not take up arms, he will not assemble an army, as any respectable Messiah would be expected to do. No wonder the crowd laughed at him. Some Messiah he is, allowing himself to be brutally and painfully executed by the government without so much as a fight! What they don't know, and can't fathom, is that he will reign and be victorious not by saving himself *from* death but by going through it: looking death in the face, allowing it to do its worst, and then refusing to stay dead: rising to life on Easter morning never to die again. And it is down this difficult, scary road that he calls us to follow him, because it is the only true way to the genuine, authentic, and abundant life that God created us for.

Like Jesus we too face the temptation to use our power, our connections, and the ways of the world to our own advantage and the advantage of our loved ones. We are tempted to be ruled by fear, fear of losing our livelihood and property, fear of losing control, fear of pain and death. It's a constant battle. No wonder Jesus advised us to pray to God to "save us from the time of trial," that is, to not succumb to temptation.

Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton quoted Matthew chapter 2 in her letter responding to Wednesday's shooting, specifically Matthew's quoting of Jeremiah in response to Herod's slaughter of the children of Bethlehem: the voice of loud lamentation, of Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be consoled. It's a perfect quote for where we are at this moment. Weeping. Lamentation. Refusing easy platitudes in the wake of such senseless brutality.

There are no simple solutions to the problem of violence that we face. In fact, I think it's safe to say that we're not going to ever solve it 100%. We are caught up now in the consequences of our sinfulness, of our shortsightedness, of our corruption and complicity. We are in captivity to sin and cannot free ourselves. But for Christ's sake God will not leave us in that captivity. And trusting in God's mercy and God's faithfulness we are enabled to respond with practical steps taken for the sake of our neighbors. I have my own ideas about what those steps are, and I will endeavor to take them. I will try not to succumb to fear. I will not resort to violence to combat violence. I will vote. I will contact my elected representatives to advocate for laws that I think make sense based not just upon my opinions and emotions – I don't trust those – but upon what experts tell us will be effective, and what has been proven to work in other countries. And I will be willing to sacrifice time and money. You may have different ideas about what best serves the neighbor and the common good, and what you will be willing to sacrifice as a response to the gospel. But one thing is certain. Repentance is needed: a change of heart, a change of attitude, and a change of business as usual. May God be with us in our repenting and in our action. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.