

C Easter 6 5.22.22

John 14:23-29; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

Focus Statement: Jesus gives us his peace.

Seven years ago, when a white nationalist interrupted a Bible study at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing nine, I addressed it in my sermon the following Sunday. Six years ago, when I learned about the shooting at the Pulse Nightclub on my way in on a Sunday morning, I was super glad we had a guest preacher that day, and I preached on it the following Sunday. Five years ago, in 2018, when white supremacists rallied through Charlottesville, I again left my sermon alone for the first Sunday, digging into it the following Sunday. Notice there's a bit of a theme developing.

Here's where it falls apart. Last weekend, when a friend who is a pastor in East Buffalo marked herself safe from the Tops Supermarket shooting, and I was sure the church in Southern California that was part of a mass shooting wasn't one I knew, and there was the shooting outside the Milwaukee Bucks game, and Chicago had another weekend of being Chicago. And right here in Battle Creek, mercifully no one was killed at the Welcome Woods Campground, but one person was injured at outside the Vegas Strip, which I drive past every day on my way to church, one person was injured in a shooting in Kalamazoo, two people were killed in Grand Rapids. I didn't watch the news last night, so I can't give a current update, but last week was enough. It's been a week. It's been a week and at first, I didn't think I would preach about any of it. Not as a conscious decision, mind you, but just because I didn't really think about it. Because weeks like this have become the norm. Gun violence, racist extremism, mass shootings have become so commonplace, that the news devastated me, sure, but it didn't shock me. I didn't have the same blow to the gut that I

remember feeling at Mother Emanuel, or Pulse, or Charlottesville, or Stoneman-Douglass, Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg, the Walmart in El Paso, Oxford High School, the list keeps growing.

It wasn't the shooting that was a blow to my gut this time, it was the realization that I didn't immediately think, "how am I going to address this on Sunday." Instead, it was just another act of violence, just another thing to add to the growing list of concerns. After all, if I preached on every mass shooting in this country, I would preach the same sermon just about every Sunday, because that is how often these things seem to be happening. It was not the act itself; it was realizing I had started to become numb to such events, that took my breath away this week.

What do we do with that? What do we do with the realization that these things have become common? That what used to fester in the dark recesses of society have become mainstream? That you can livestream a mass shooting? One place we can look for answers to where God is amid all this darkness is Revelation.

Folk get a little squeamish sometimes when we talk about Revelation, so let me first be really clear about what Revelation is not. Revelation is not a decoder ring for predicting the future. It will not explain presidential politics or predict the geopolitical situation. Nor will it tell you how or when the world will end. Not only can you not use it that way, it does not want to be used that way, it was not meant to be used that way. What Revelation is is a defiant hope for the present. Revelation sits right down with us in the middle of the muck

of civilization and says to a tired, scared, people, “Yeah, this looks bad, this is bad. I’m not going to sugar coat anything for you. But here’s the thing, as bad as all of this is, God has this, and God has you.” That was what Revelation was written for, that is what it has done for the last two-thousand or so years since it was written.

The Book of Revelation is a series of visions traditionally attributed to someone named John who was exiled to the island of Patmos as punishment for his faith during a period of anti-Christian persecution under the Roman Empire towards the end of the first century. It was, to say the least, a chaotic time. Revelation starts with letters to seven churches to encourage them to stand strong against all the uncertainty they were facing. These letters contain both comfort and challenge, here are things you’re doing well and here are some things that are going not so good.

It moves from addressing the churches into this series of cycles, repeated images of terror and destruction, praise, and presence of God. There are seven of these cycles, not because this will happen seven times, but because seven is a number representing eternity in scripture. The idea is this is the pattern of human history, there are seasons of destruction, seasons of praise. Like the letters themselves, these cycles are meant to comfort those in chaos with this promise of God’s presence, and, the flip side, to challenge those in comfort with the perils of complacency.

Revelation finds its conclusion in the section we read today, this beautiful vision of God’s ultimate purpose in redeeming the world. In it, we see a city at peace with itself, with all

the people in it, and, interestingly, with nature. We don't, or maybe you do, but I certainly don't, tend to think of cities co-existing with nature. There is nature and there are cities, and both are fine, both serve purposes, but they are not the same. But in the city of God urban and rural meet. "The river of the water of life, bright as crystal" flows "through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life... and the leave of the tree are for the healing of the nations." This city is simultaneously urban and Eden, and within it dwell all of creation. One commentator I read wrote, "The variety of flora and fauna, of minerals and elements, of races, genders, and personalities shows an inquisitive thoroughness, blessing diversity." This is a city that is open to all, "Its gates will never be shut by day—and there is no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations."

Revelation gives us the vision; Jesus gives us the direction. Our Gospel reading for this morning is once again from the Farewell Discourse, Jesus' last words to his disciples on the night of his betrayal. We jumped into the reading after one of the disciples asking Jesus this question, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" The disciples, remember, were looking for a Messianic figure, they were looking for Jesus to come riding into Jerusalem like a conquering hero, toppling the Roman government, kicking out the power-hungry Pharisees, and establishing a new order with him at the head. That was the sign they were looking for—they were looking for regime change. But here's what was true then, what's true now. I could give you any number of examples from any number of countries, regime change just about never brings about lasting change. I say, "just about," because the exception proves the rule. Examples are few and far between

where replacing one government with another brought about lasting change. Becoming the new head of state of Judea was not what Jesus was striving for, Jesus was striving for eternal change, for the kind of change that changes not a people or a nation, but all people, all nations, the world itself. The sign Jesus was bringing was much quieter, subtler, and in the end much more powerful and long lasting, a change based in love.

Dear people of God, the way we get to the vision in Revelation is through Jesus' vision of love. This is a slow process, painstakingly slow. It is small steps forward and glaring steps back. It is seeing the world fall apart, and believing beyond belief that somehow, some way, God is still at work bringing about the vision of a city of life. Above all it is about never giving up on this resurrection promise that while death is inevitable, God is never destroyed by dying, because there is always resurrection and new life. And above all, as we heard in our Gospel reading for today, we do not journey alone. The God who once came to us in Jesus, who was sent by God, now sends us an Advocate in the Holy Spirit, who's sole job is to teach us everything and remind us of all Jesus has said.

God's playing the long game, dear people. I wish God wasn't, I wish God worked on my timeline. But God knows what I cannot, that all good things, all eternal things, take time. The peace of God is not the world's peace. The world's peace is quick and fleeting and not really all that peaceful. God's peace is eternal. And it is God's peace we walk toward.

Thanks be to God. Amen.