

## 7 Easter, Year C

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Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21

John 17:20-26

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The great theologian Karl Barth  
is *said* to have said  
that a preacher should always preach  
with the Bible in one hand  
and the newspaper in the other.

That is good advice  
not just for preachers,  
but for all Christians.

We who love the Lord Jesus,  
we who are in this world but not of it,  
we who are citizens of this kingdom *and* the next:  
we have to face both sides.

With backbone and clarity  
we must understand  
the world in which we live.  
We Christians do not get  
to bury our heads in the sand,  
nor do we get to keep them in the clouds.

On the other hand,  
we can never, ever, ever forget  
that we Christians are called  
to interpret *everything* we see  
through the great story of scripture,  
through the convictions of our faith,  
through the hope of our calling,  
and through the lens of God's love.

You and I are dual citizens,  
and like two passports  
to two very different kingdoms,  
we hold the Bible in one hand,  
and the newspaper in the other.

\* \* \*

I say all of this because  
this is yet another week

in which the contrast  
between our two kingdoms  
has grown even more brutally stark.

What does the newspaper say?

The newspaper says it is time once again  
to update our statistics.

Before the last victim was buried  
after a racially motivated mass shooting  
of ten people in Buffalo,  
1,700 miles away in Uvalde, Texas  
nineteen children and two teachers  
were murdered by a single gunman at school.

Thirty-one people—  
from grade-schoolers to great-grandmothers—  
all in eight days.

Alongside that new record,  
we have continued incompetence in our leadership,  
fears about our rights,  
confusion about our laws,  
and no emerging consensus  
about where to go from here.

And what's absolutely frustrating and horrifying  
is that almost all of this is stuff I have said word for word  
in another sermon five years ago,  
and another one five years before that.

On the Sunday after Sandy Hook  
I remember telling you  
we *needed* to talk about it  
because we needed to be careful  
not to get used to this . . .  
not to get good at letting this feel normal.

That was ten years ago.  
How are we doing with that?

So that's what our newspaper tells us.

Meanwhile, in our Bible today,  
the Psalm tells us to rejoice and be glad  
because the Lord is King;  
he confounds those who worship carved images;

he loves those who hate evil,  
preserves the lives of his saints,  
and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.

In Revelation Jesus says  
he is the Alpha and the Omega,  
and that he is coming soon.

In the Gospel he promises and prays  
that one day we all will be one  
as he and the Father are one.

So how do we read all of this together?  
With the Bible in one hand  
and the newspaper in the other,  
what truth are we supposed to hear?

\* \* \*

Well, let's start with the Bible.

Over the last couple weeks  
as folks have begun to tell me goodbye,  
one of the greatest impacts  
I've been told I've had on many of you  
is the way I have taught you  
to understand scripture.

Specifically,  
I have long tried to teach you  
to look for God and to look for grace—  
both in scripture and in life—  
meaning that even when things are at their worst,  
God is always there,  
God always has a plan,  
and God is always working things toward the good.  
That's true even when humans are at their worst  
and it seems like the good will never get here.

That is exactly what we hear  
in our readings today.

Jesus *is* King.  
Jesus *is* coming.  
Jesus *will* one day make us one  
as he and the Father are one.

All of that is true.  
If it's not,  
we might as well  
give up and go home.

But the one concern I've always had—  
the one caveat to preaching grace—  
is that if you're not careful,  
you can hear all of that and believe  
that *you bear no responsibility* in this world.

If Jesus really is King . . .  
if God really has a plan . . .  
if we really *don't* have to do anything  
to earn God's love or our salvation . . .  
then does that mean  
nothing matters?

Does it mean we *don't*  
have to fight against sin and evil?

Does it mean we *don't*  
have choices to make  
about our rights and our wrongs?

Does it mean we *don't* bear responsibility  
for ourselves and for others,  
especially the weakest among us?

No!! By no means!

It's like when I had my first job as a teenager.  
My brother was my boss,  
and whenever I slacked off  
he'd yell across the restaurant,  
"Come on, Lonz!  
You workin' *for* me or *against* me?"

So yes, Jesus is King, and God has a plan,  
but sometimes he must be looking down here and yelling,  
"Come on, Lonz!  
Come on, St. Anne's!  
Come on, Christians!  
Come on, leaders!  
Come on, world!  
You workin' *for* me or *against* me?"

It is precisely because we *do* know there is a God . . .  
it is precisely because we *do* know that we are loved . . .  
it is precisely because we *do* know  
what the coming Kingdom will look like  
when all will be one as the Father and Son are one . . .  
it is precisely because we *do* know these things  
that we make no peace with violence,  
we fight against sin and evil,  
we willingly beat our swords into plowshares,  
and do all we can—  
**actually try**—  
to make this world look more like the next.

Either we're working for the coming Kingdom,  
or we're working against it.

\* \* \*

So if that's what the Bible tells us,  
then how are we supposed to respond  
to the latest news?

I wish I had all the answers,  
but I can at least tell you three things  
we *don't* get to say.

First, we don't get to say  
that those who perpetrate mass murder  
are just evil people  
and that nothing could have been done to stop them.

Don't get me wrong.  
I believe in evil.  
I believe in evil people.  
I didn't used to,  
but the world broke me of that years ago.  
I have seen it face to face.

But when our only explanation—  
our only workable plan—  
is simply to label others as evil and move on,  
it absolves all the rest of us of any responsibility  
and prevents us from legitimately asking,  
“Yes, but is there not *some* way  
we should address this evil?  
Is there not *something*  
we should be doing?”

We don't get to slap the label of "evil" on people and go to bed as though nothing happened. Christians are supposed to be more responsive and responsible than that.

Second, we Christians do not get to say, "Yes, well, as tragic as all of this is, you must understand that mass shootings really are a statistical anomaly."

***In the heart of Jesus the Christ of God, no one is a statistical anomaly.***

Ruth Whitfield of Buffalo  
was not a statistical anomaly.  
She was someone's mother.  
She had nine grandchildren.  
She had ten great grandchildren.

Roberta Drury was not a statistical anomaly.  
Margus Morrison was not a statistical anomaly.  
Andre Mackneil,  
Aaron Salter,  
Geraldine Talley,  
Celestine Chaney,  
Heyward Patterson,  
Katherine Massey,  
and Pearl Young—  
all of Buffalo—  
were not statistical anomalies.

Neither were  
Nevaeh Bravo,  
Jacklyn Cazares,  
Makenna Elrod,  
Jose Flores,  
Eliahna Garcia,  
Irma Garcia,  
Uziah Garcia,  
Amerie jo Garza,  
Xavier Lopez,  
Jayve Luevanos,  
Tess Mata,  
Maranda Mathis,  
Eva Mireles,  
Alithia Ramirez,

Annabell Rodriguez,  
Maite Rodriguez,  
Alexandria Rubio,  
Layla Salazar,  
Jailah Silguero,  
Elihana Torres,  
or Rojelio Torres.  
All of these were from Uvalde.  
All of these were loved  
by their mamas,  
their daddys,  
their siblings,  
their teachers,  
their pastors,  
their churches,  
and—most of all—God.  
These were children of God.  
These were not statistical anomalies.

And finally,  
we Christians do not get to say  
that because we have  
a fundamental right to bear arms  
in the present kingdom,  
there is nothing we can or should  
consider,  
discuss,  
try,  
or do  
to change how that works.

We *do* have that fundamental right.  
Many people fought hard  
for that fundamental right and for many others,  
for which we should always be grateful.

But never forget that for the Christian,  
the second *amendment* of *this* kingdom  
must always be subservient to  
the second *commandment* of the *Greater Kingdom*.

Too many people have put  
too much faith in graven images  
to keep them safe and secure,  
when God has been clear  
that *he* is our protector and King,  
and he will confound us all

every single time we put our trust  
in carved images and false gods.

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From Karl Barth to Jesus,  
we Christians have been reminded  
throughout the ages  
that we are, in fact, dual citizens.  
Like passports in our pockets,  
we carry the Bible in one hand  
and the newspaper in the other.

We will not always agree  
on how to interpret them both,  
but I hope we can agree on this:  
that somehow our Jesus  
is working all things in *this world*  
to become more and more  
like the image of *his world*.

And somehow,  
for reasons I'll never understand,  
he intends to use *us*  
to get much of it done.

The Lord is King;  
he confounds those who worship carved images;  
he loves those who hate evil,  
preserves the lives of his saints,  
and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.

He is the Alpha and the Omega  
and is coming soon,  
and one day we all will be one  
as he and the Father are one.

In the meantime,  
perhaps the fundamental question  
of this age is this:

Are we working *for* him  
or *against* him?

Amen.