



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Terror of Charleston (and Voldemort)

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 21, 2015

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost —Based on Mark 4:35-41

In J.K. Rowling's epic fantasy saga of "Harry Potter," which follows the life and times of various young wizards as they grow up, there is a wizard who rose to power named Voldemort, the villain of the stories. Voldemort believed that wizards should be kept separate from non-wizards, us Muggles. He used the so-called Dark Arts to establish essentially a racist state among the secret society of wizards. The powerful spells he used, curses actually, included the *Imperius* Curse, which enslaved someone to the caster's desires. The other, the *Cruciatius* Curse, caused excruciating pain with the flick of a wand. And the final Curse he used to take over, was dreaded *Avada Kevadra*, the Killing Curse. This wizard used this particular curse on Harry Potter's own parents, who were part of the resistance movement against Voldemort.

But one of Voldemort's greatest tools of domination was the Terror. This meant he could have limitless power, because it didn't require him to be present to bend people to his dark will. The terror he instilled was such that grown wizards were afraid to say his name. This terror lasted even after he was dead, for fear of drawing the attention of Voldemort's lingering allies. They would refer to him as "You-Know-Who," and in a whisper.

One of the few wizards who dared to speak Voldemort's name was the wise and revered Dumbledore. When the young Harry Potter avoids speaking the name, Dumbledore rebukes him. "Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself." And so, Harry takes to being one of the few wizards brave enough to say Voldemort's name, which empowers him to be ready for that final confrontation with Voldemort himself.

I wouldn't blame you for thinking me a little tone deaf for talking about children's stories and hocus-pocus at a time like this. At the same time, after the murders in Charleston, I think it would be hard to blame someone for wanting to retreat into fantasy. We can understand how much easier it would be to cocoon ourselves in these worlds we've made for ourselves: immersive video games, binge watching sessions on Netflix, or we could shop our way into fantasies of style. There are so many cocoons that are so much more comforting than the world as it is. And if we are not careful, this place could become a cocoon, entombing us in otherworldly beauty. Yet, like the best fantasy, the best religion gives us the tools to understand and approach the parched world as it is so that we may be equipped to cultivate the best world possible. Or in the language of the prophet Isaiah, the whole point of being here is to "Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." We are not to put our heads in the sand, but we are called to somehow build a road on that sand, even as it shifts around us in whirlwinds of violence.

And, is it just me, or does the storm seem more intense these days? I know that some scholars, like Steven Pinker, insist that in the main, the world is becoming a less violent place, if you look at the numbers. But now, so much of the darkness and brutality of this nation is being newly illuminated by all of the cameras in our pockets and then transmitted to the same screens in our pockets and then ever more swiftly, fast as light, the pain makes its way to pierce our hearts. And so much of the darkness of this nation, hateful ideologies, twisted histories, impressionable people with no checks or balances, all are empowered and amplified by easy access to the power of death itself in a gun, another portable device. Mass shootings are now on the rise in our nation. We've seen them in theatres, schools, and most recently a church.

This latest whirlwind we are enduring is an act of domestic terror in Charleston. It has me heartbroken and transfixed, not only because it happened in the region of the world that raised me up, but also because of the deep spiritual magnitude and intimacy of the wounds inflicted. This man picked up where other racist states and manifestos have left off. He drove from his home in Columbia to the coastal city and murdered nine people at the prominent Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. It seems the man was drawn to their African-American heritage, and wanted to strike at the tender heart of their common life, an act of physical horror, but also political and spiritual terror. A grim quirk of this mass shooting is that he was actually welcomed into their midst. He joined their weekly bible study, a sacred time of deep communion with God. And as it closed, he attacked with his gun and words of racial hatred. And after the carnage, he left one of them alive to tell the tale.

I heard one pundit call the tragedy "unspeakable." And yet, not to speak of it, I believe, is to give these events and the influences behind them more power, kept unexamined in our hidden and forgotten places. But these terrors have a history. These terrors have their reasons. And these terrors are connected to us, our past and present. Our terrors have names, whether or not we acknowledge them. Sometimes I think we avoid dwelling on these incidents because of some of the same reasons that Rowling's wizards don't say Voldemort's name: we are afraid that if we speak of it, that that same darkness might find its way to our door. And yet, we need to learn how to speak of these things with each other, so that they may be brought into the light, named, and so that we might prepare.

The iconography of our Children's Chapel here at St. Bart's is so bold to suggest that intimidating terrors should be introduced to the youngest among us. I've marveled at the vivid depictions of saints being murdered by those who sought to defeat what God was doing in them: Joan of Arc at the stake, the slaughter of the infant Holy Innocents to kill any potential messiah, and there's St. Stephen being stoned to death. And yet, his eyes are towards heaven, and his last words breathe forgiveness to his murderers.

What would be like if we taught that message of faith as soon as we could? Maybe not our youngest children, but perhaps our psychologists among us could tell us the best time to start. And then we'd be sure to remind ourselves every week of the power of mercy in the face of the evil that is out there, the deep power of the words we sing: "*Kyrie Eleison*," (Lord have mercy). It is beyond a doubt that the good people of Emanuel AME Church have been walking in the path of God's mercy for decades. For without hesitation, certain family members of the murdered had words of forgiveness for Dylann Roof at his arraignment. The son of Myra Thompson, Anthony Thompson, said through his grief to his mother's killer: "I would like him to know that I forgive you and my family forgives you. We would like you to take this opportunity to repent." Another family member acknowledged that every part of her body was in pain. And yet she forgave him, following in the way of St. Stephen and the saints.

On the radio, I heard the President call the forgiveness of the victim's families "unimaginable." This may be an idiom, but it just isn't that helpful. What they did is part of a web of life that is not only imaginable, but has been lived out successfully for untold centuries, since at least the patriarch Joseph. You can see in the stone of this church the moment when he forgave his brothers who had nearly killed him. Placing the "Unimaginable" label on something so real and historical ends up blinding us to the Way of True Life that is accessible to anyone.

And like calling the murders "unspeakable," it places these very real things, things that could help us, in a world of shadows. We have to learn how to speak about evil, yes, but it doesn't end there in despair. Our honesty is a doorway, not a corner. Like the saints before us, we are charged with not only imagining but living out the very real and well worn path of mercy and forgiveness that will lead us out of the dark.

Can we get to the point where our surprise is not so pronounced? The people of Emanuel weren't caught off guard. They were deeply wounded, yes. But they were ready. After generations of enduring the legacy of slavery and racism, and somehow continuing to pray and live and love, they were ready. They had been scouring the Scriptures and their hearts for the life of God under an ever-present post-slavery terror and the often-deadly indignities that come with that legacy. Our fellow Christians know that these violent storms of hate from their neighbor must be endured with mercy and forgiveness, not amplified by more revenge and violence. Rather than using some curse to find a way forward, even further into the dark, they resolutely chose to bless their way into the future. And so they forgave the perpetrator.

Heaven forbid something of this magnitude would ever happen to us. But if so, I hope that we might be prepared. Prepared to continue the new life that some have called “unimaginable.” Prepared to soak our anguish in mercy; to mend our broken hearts with grace; and be encouraged, like the panicked disciples in that wave-tossed boat with Jesus, to trust God to guide us through these storms of violence and hate, to the calm on the other side of it. So that we are not ultimately panicked or scattered or terrorized by what hits us.

Jesus wasn't trying to belittle the disciple's fear of being capsized on the Sea of Galilee. And, by the way, I don't think that the point of the story is that Jesus is a wizard with a good wind and water spell. He was drawing upon the so-called “deeper magic,” that C. S. Lewis wrote about in his Narnia books. Jesus was trying to demonstrate a peace and calm that St. Bartholomew and all of them could have no matter whether they capsized or not. Jesus was also trying to give courage that could endure the storms of hate and violence that would be coming their way in Jerusalem and then beyond, where their courage and trust would convert so many more multitudes from the comforts of hate to the firm foundation of the aches and pains of love. The Christian movement is one that had to overcome state terror and mob intimidation and murder for so very long. The saints endured in hope. And thanks to their courage, we are here together this morning, longing to receive their wisdom. It seems the bible study group and their family in Charleston already had the wisdom of the saints.

And so we continue to say our prayers. We continue to name evil, to talk about our greatest challenges, so that we can begin to grasp the sort of day-by-day mercy that it would take to overcome it all. We pray in preparation for our times of trial. We marvel at those saints who were ready. We speak of them. We learn from them. We sing of the Lord's forgiveness, *Kyrie Eleison*, so that it may be our own, when we need it. So that we may be a blessing amongst the curses.

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