

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Advent III, December 16, 2012, dedicated to the memory of the 20 children and six adults slain at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. to the new members who join our church today, and always to the glory of God!

“The Shepherd: Filled With Spirit and Fire”

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18

(Part III in VI of the Advent Series “Christ is Coming”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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There is a single theme that dominates the texts of scripture today: JOY. It is JOY over what God has done and will do. It is not a giddy, senseless type of joy, unaware of the harsh realities of our human condition. The joy we encounter in Zephaniah, Luke and Philippians 4:4-7, is a joy that is anchored in God’s love and kindled amid the circumstances in which joy is least expected.

Zephaniah contains some of the gloomiest passages in all of Hebrew Scriptures. Zephaniah could easily be described as depressed, driven to desperate despair over the hard conditions of his nation’s life in the years following the reign of evil King Manasseh. Almost inexplicably, the night clouds clear and the day breaks with his imperative, *“Rejoice and exult with all your heart!”* (3:14). The reason from sheer darkness to holy light is *“God is in your midst, you shall fear disaster no more!”* (3:15).

Philippians is Paul's letter of joy. Philippians 4:4-7, carries the theme of joy forward as Paul points to joy as the presence of God – a presence that should reorient our lives as believers. Because women and men of faith have reason to rejoice, we are to live gently, hold our anxieties at bay, and pray and give thanks to the Lord. Without trying to sound like a simpleton, Paul is pointing to our reality which finds God in the midst of the horrible; sees hope in the midst of hurt and acknowledges at all points that “*God is near.*” (Philippians 4:5).

Luke 3:7-18 doesn't appear to be very joyful on the face of it as it summarizes the preaching of John the Baptist. But even as John describes the end of time, he answers peoples' questions – “What shall we do?” with a clear answer - reorder your lives so that justice, compassion, and honesty guide you to “*escape the wrath that is to come.*” (Luke 3:7). Since Christ is coming, get with your reevaluating and reordering life now! All in all, this is “good news,” says John, the prophet and baptizer!

Joy from the prophet of doom, joy from the Apostle Paul, joy from the baptizing prophet of who announces fire, spirit and the very coming of Christ.

Joy is at the heart of Jesus' teachings. When he was offering his final sermon to the disciples in John's Gospel, knowing full well that he was facing death on the cross, Jesus said, “*So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and we will rejoice, and no one can take our joy from us.*”

Those very words of Jesus echoed through my mind as the sun was setting Friday afternoon. As Monsgr. Robert Weiss, pastor of St. Rose of Lima Church in Newtown, was speaking with the press, having spent seven hours with the families of the 20 murdered children, and seven slain adults, he said, “*For twenty families who lost their children today, their joy is no longer here.*” Their joy is no longer here.

The “joy” of whom Fr. Weiss was speaking were children - the lively, beautiful first graders of Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown. They were first graders – full of delight, energy and enthusiasm to life.

Who were they? Who was the “joy no longer here”? Their names were: **Charlotte Bacon**, 6; **Daniel Barden**, 7; **Olivia Engel**, 6; **Josephine Gay**, who turned 7, four days ago; **Ana M. Marquez-Greene**, 6; **Dylan Hockley**, 6; **Madeleine F. Hsu**, 6; **Catherine V. Hubbard**, 6; **Chase Kowalski**, 7; **Jesse Lewis**, 6; **James Mattioli**, 6; **Grace McDonnell**, turned 7, 12 days ago; **Emilie Parker**, 6; **Jack Pinto**, 6; **Noah Pozner**, 6; **Caroline Previdi**, 6; **Jessica Rekos**, 6; **Avielle Richman**, 6; **Benjamin Wheeler**, 6; **Allison N. Wyatt**, 6.

And their **teachers**: **Rachel Davino**, 29; **Anne Marie Murphy**, 52; **Lauren Rousseau**, 30; **Victoria Soto**, 27; and their **School Psychologist**, **Mary Sherlach**, 56; and their **School Principal**, **Dawn Hochsprung**, 47.

Stories of heroism among those killed and among the teachers who were able to shelter over 500 more students in this K-4 elementary school have been coming to light since Friday morning. Victoria Soto tried to divert the shooter from the children hiding in the closet. She died facing the gunman while trying to save her children. Both principal Dawn Hochsprung and psychologist Mary Sherlach laid down their lives as they battled the shooter. These educators sacrificed their lives protecting children in a nation whose polices clearly protect guns more than children.

In the aftermath of the shootings at Sandy Hook elementary, once again the cry rose up from conservatives that it is not the time to speak about gun control. In a year where mass shootings have happened several times in schools, and in malls, in movie theatres and at alarming rates on city streets across the country and now in first grade classrooms in a quaint 340 year old New England town, if now is not the time to talk about public safety laws which protect our families and keep them safe, when will the time be?

Marion Wright Edelman founder and executive director of the Children’s Defense Fund and conscience to our nation for decades wrote yesterday in an epistle entitled, ***Dear God! When Will It Stop?*** (I pick up her letter in the third paragraph):

“How young do the victims have to be and how many children need to die before we stop the proliferation of guns in our nation and

the killing of innocents? The most recent statistics reveal 2,694 children and teens were killed by gunfire in 2010; 1,773 of them were victims of homicide and 67 of these were elementary school-age children. If those children and teens were still alive they would fill 108 classrooms of 25 each. Since 1979 when gun death data were first collected by age, a shocking 119,079 children and teens have been killed by gun violence. That is more child and youth deaths in America than American battle deaths in World War I (53,402) or in Vietnam (47,434) or in the Korean War (33,739) or in the Iraq War (3,517). Where is our anti-war movement to protect children from pervasive gun violence here at home?

“The latest terrible tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School is no fluke. It is a result of the senseless, immoral neglect of all of us as a nation to protect children instead of guns and to speak out against the pervasive culture of violence and proliferation of guns in our nation. It is up to us to stop these preventable tragedies.”

Dr. Edelman continues:

“We have so much work to do to build safe communities for our children and need leaders at all levels of government who will stand up against the NRA and for every child’s right to live and learn free of gun violence. But that will not happen until mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles, and neighbors and faith leaders and everybody who believes that children have a right to grow up safely stand up together and make a mighty ruckus as long as necessary to break the gun lobby’s veto on common sense gun policy. Our laws and not the NRA must control who can obtain firearms.

“It is way past time to demand enactment of federal gun safety measures, including:

- * Ending the gun show loophole that allows private dealers to sell guns without a license and avoid required background checks;*
- * Reinstating the assault weapons ban that expired in 2004;*
- * And requiring consumer safety standards for all guns.*

“Why in the world do we regulate teddy bears and toy guns and

not real guns that have snuffed out tens of thousands of child lives? Why are leaders capitulating to the powerful gun lobby over the rights of children and all people to life and safety?

“I hope these shocking Connecticut child sacrifices in this holy season will force enough of us at last to stand up, speak out, and organize with urgency and persistence until the President, Members of Congress, Governors and State Legislators put child safety ahead of political expediency. And we must aspire and act together to become the world leader in protecting children against gun violence rather than leading the world in child victims of guns. Every child’s life is sacred and it is long past time that we protect all our children.

“Albert Camus, Nobel laureate, speaking at a Dominican monastery in 1948 said: ‘Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of tortured children.’ He described our responsibility as human beings “if not to reduce evil, at least not to add to it” and “to refuse to consent to conditions which torture innocents.’ It is time for a critical mass of Americans to refuse to consent to the killing of children by gun violence.

In a service of worship here at First Church two weeks ago tonight, we read the names of 85 people, mostly under the age of 25, who were gunned down on the streets or in their homes in 2012. The number has risen to 89. In this sanctuary were mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, teachers, our own Rev. Mary Ann Goetz as a school nurse, who have lost loved ones and students through the years because of gun violence – some of the 119,079 children and teens who have lost their lives in the past 43 years. Before this day is over, another 34 people will die from gun violence.

In his little book, *Why We Can’t Wait*, published right after the four girls were killed in the Sunday morning bombing at 16th St. Baptist Church, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. chronicled the centuries of wrong endured by African-Americans facing slavery. He said that those who have not experienced the horrors of race prejudice and hatred are always the ones crying out to slow down, to ignore racism, or stop pushing civil rights so far and so fast. Dr.

King makes the case that we can't wait any longer – after 350 years of race prejudice – for an end to the trauma of it all. The same must be said for public safety laws which protect our families and keep them safe. As we did for seat belts, cigarettes and most significantly, Civil Rights we can wait no longer to change the way we monitor and control guns in our land. It is way past time to act on gun laws in this land!

Today it is time to mourn. But it also time to lead. In this room full of leaders, we are capable of stepping up and speaking out – just as our abolitionist forebearers did 160 years ago.

What will take for our nation's political leaders to stand with law enforcement officials, and public educators, and people of faith against the gun lobby to change the way we handle our citizen's weaponry across this land? And what will it take for you and me to stand with law enforcement officials who have been crying out to us for years to change public policy in our nation? I believe the death of first-graders: **Charlotte, Daniel, Olivia, Josephine, Ana, Dylan, Madeleine, Catherine, Chase, Jesse, James, Grace, Emilie, Jack, Noah, Caroline, Jessica, Avielle, Benjamin, and Allison and their teachers Rachel, Anne Marie, Lauren, Victoria, Mary and Dawn** is the final straw. They can't speak, but we can. And we can't wait any longer. These 26 joyful people whose lives have been taken away are all the evidence anyone of us needs to end the madness now.

A friend of mine said the other night that we must not live in fear. We must live in what we know. Think of all the things you know. You know when right is right. You know yourself, your children, your faith, your God. You know what you can are able to do and say. So, step out of fear and be courageous in saying and doing what you know is right. There you will find joy!

Shortly before his execution by the Nazis, Christian pastor, theologian and author Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

“Joy belongs not only to those who have been called home, but also to the living, and no one shall take it from us. We are one with them in this joy, but never in sorrow. How shall we be able to help

those who have become joyless and fearful unless we ourselves are supported by courage and joy? I don't mean by this something fabricated or compelled, but something given, free. Joy dwells with God. It descends from him and seizes spirit, soul, and body... There is a joy which knows nothing of sorrow, need and anxiety of the heart....They joy of God has been through poverty of the crib and the distress of the cross, therefore God's joy is...irrefutable. It does not deny the distress where it is, but finds God in the midst of it, indeed precisely there; it does not contest the most grievous sin, but finds forgiveness in just this way; it looks death in the face and finds life in death itself." (True Patriotism, D. Bonheoffer, Williams Collins, 1965, p. 189).

This is true joy. It comes from God. It returns to God. In the end, the true shepherd who will guide us through all the shadows in the valley of death is our God. As followers of God, and the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, may we find a way out of the madness into the fullness of God's joy. Amen.

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