

A Sermon by Alex Evans, Pastor
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA
Sunday, April 22, 2007

Texts: **Jeremiah 8:18-22; Romans 12:9-13**

“Faith and Love in Dangerous and Uncertain Times”

A reporter asked me this morning prior to worship: “What will be the first words that you speak to your congregation on this important Sunday following the tragedy?” I repeated to him the words that we used from Psalm 46 for the Call to Worship: “God is our help and strength, a present help in times of trouble.” This is what we as God’s people always affirm, day in and day out. This is what we affirm today, in the face of violence and evil, death and loss, heartache and hurt in Blacksburg. We affirm the promises and presence of God.

It is an understatement to say that this has been a difficult week. Each one of us in this town has been touched. Some of us have very close and deep ties to the violence and tragedy of the week. But all of us in this town have been significantly affected.

If I had made the statement last Sunday that we live in a dangerous and uncertain world, I suspect that you would have agreed with me. We know in our minds that the world is indeed dangerous and uncertain. Tragedies happen, life can be very fragile, joy can be fleeting. We know these things.

But we mostly live under the assumption that all is generally well, at least within our families and our church family, in our town, and on our campus. We have various and difficult challenges, but life is really not that dangerous and uncertain. No, within our town and beloved community, we are easily lulled into the sense that the world is basically all right; safety and security are assumed; beauty and goodness hold the day.

But this Sunday, I think all of know in a new and deeply sad and personal way that, indeed, we do live in a dangerous and uncertain world. Violence and evil are not just elsewhere and out there. Violence and evil are part of our lives, our town, our campus, our community.

As most of you know, my own involvement in the events of this week has been pretty intense. As chaplain to the Blacksburg Police Department, I have been inside the emergency room with victims of the shooting. I have been with police officers in the moments immediately after the incident and heard the anguish from their trauma and confrontation with violence on campus. I saw reflected in their eyes the loss, devastation, terror, and horror that took place in Norris Hall. I have been with families when they learned for the first time that their loved one was among the victims. This has got to be any parents’ worst nightmare. And then there have been many other things to fill the week, including de-briefings with police, counseling with others, and doing the funeral on Friday in our church for Kevin Granata, one of the professors slain in Norris Hall.

And all of you have a perspective on these events too. Some of you have been even more connected, more deeply affected by the terror, the fear, the loss, the pain. None of us in Blacksburg need convincing today that we live in a dangerous and uncertain world.

The first passage that I picked for this day is from Jeremiah. There is no question that Jeremiah lived in dangerous and uncertain times. He lived around 600 B.C. when God's people were struggling for their very survival. A conquering enemy, through violence and oppression, came smashing every aspect of life and hope for them. So Jeremiah echoes the sentiments of God's people in those days: "Drowning in grief, heart-sick, is there no balm in Gilead? Is God no longer around?"

These could be our words this week. It is a crying out. Why is life so hard? It is not a theoretical question! Why is there such danger and violence? Why has the health and the hope of the people not been restored? These are real questions for real life; they are our questions for our lives in these days.

How could they not be our questions when kids are shot in classrooms that are set aside for learning and growth? How could they not be our questions when medics and police are racing to get wounded students to medical help? How could they not be our questions when a shocked silence falls upon a huge campus like ours as tragedy hits so hard?

But while these are Jeremiah's questions, and while these are also our questions, they do not fall on deaf ears! In fact, we are only adding our recent cries and laments in Blacksburg to thousands and thousands of people across the ages. Indeed, we are in pretty good company. The whole Biblical story is of a people moving through life and history, through ups and downs; it is the story of hardship and hurt, and crying out to God! And it is the story of God passionately and compassionately involved!

One of the main litanies through the Scriptures is this one: "I heard the cries of my people in the suffering in Egypt, and I have come to rescue you." There are many others like that one where God remains with us in times of trouble, and promises never to leave us. Yes, those cries, these deep laments and longings are always heard by our loving God. Indeed, God not only hears our cries, but cries with us, and remains with us, and is at work in and through us, even in the hardest times, the deepest pain, the most perplexing circumstances. We are never left on our own. Regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the evil and heartache, this is God's world; and the God who made the world remains passionately and compassionately involved with us and with the world.¹

I do not know how many times you have been to the Drillfield, in the center of the VT campus, through this week. Normally, the Drillfield is a hustling and bustling place. It is full of people walking to class. It is often full of people sitting and talking, or a group playing Frisbee, or soccer. It is a place where it is very hard to get a parking place. It is the focal point for the University – with administration offices, the War Memorial Gym, the War Memorial Chapel. It is, normally, a place of life and vitality.

On Monday afternoon of this week, the day of the shootings, I went to the Drillfield to go to the temporary command center of the police. The Drillfield was absolutely deserted. It was blocked off and protected by police. The only people around were people in uniform, with guns. No one was in any building – they were deserted. Terror and fear had a grip on the campus. A very black cloud of death was covering the

¹Wright, N.T., Evil and the Justice of God, p. 40

place. A cold wind was blowing through the place. It was winter, both figuratively and literally.

I had to go back to the Drillfield on Tuesday. There was a meeting of police in Burrell Hall that I had been invited to attend. It was still closed off to traffic. The buildings remained empty still. A few people were walking about. But fear and darkness seemed to prevail.

Then on Tuesday night, the Drillfield was opened again – for a candlelight vigil – for singing, and being together, and affirming unity and hope. That was a powerful moment, a glimmer of light, the beginning of some light shining in the darkness that we have known.

And then I was back on the Drillfield yesterday (Saturday) – a gorgeous spring day. There were many signs that the place is experiencing renewal, redemption; we can even call it resurrection, as death was being pushed back and life was emerging anew. There were so many flowers placed all around – signs of hope and life in what was a place of death. There were expressions of care and love from around the world – school kids sending condolences, friends from every continent expressing prayers and support. There were various memorials to those who died, places where people can write their own expressions of sympathy. There were many people walking – mostly in silence, but still walking, living, pressing on. There were many symbols and many people helping to return the place to one of vitality and vibrancy. Then by late in the afternoon, there was a picnic – almost a festival - for the whole community on the Drillfield. And for me, all of this is a picture of God at work, the Christian gospel: death is real, evil and danger are part of life; but by God's grace and faithfulness and power through Jesus Christ, love, hope, joy, and life emerge and prevail. We have a ways to go – but we are, by God's grace and abiding love, going that way.

Undoubtedly, the Drillfield will return to its former luster and liveliness; it may never be quite the same – neither will our lives; but we know about the goodness and hope and promises of God. We know the truth of the gospel in Jesus Christ: goodness is stronger than evil, life is stronger than death, hope is stronger than despair, and love is stronger than hate. All these things were confirmed on Easter. All these things still hold true: even in the face of evil and death, pain and loss this week in our beloved community. God's way prevails.

So in light of the gospel, the other passage for this day becomes so formative. Because God remains passionately and compassionately involved with us and the world, we have work to do: "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ...rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ...practice hospitality." This is the way we are called to live as God's people: to build a better world where compassion and care and community are central. This is what makes for life and hope and peace such that God's reign comes.

Friends, I want to thank you for your faith and fortitude and love in this past week. Through overwhelming challenges, you need to know that the terrific staff of this church rallied and worked and loved and served for God's work. Each one of our staff showed commitment and devotion and love as we carry on in this church. Through the

circumstances of terror and death, so many of you – the congregation - offered yourselves, provided care and support, sacrificed and served, hosted funerals, loved with genuine care and commitment near and far. This is something to celebrate and build on.

And we have also experienced boundless love. We have heard from every corner of the world, from people we know and do not know, all showering this church, this community, this university with love and prayers. This is God at work. This is serving as Jesus served. This is living as the body of Christ. This is life out of death. This is the direction that God calls us to keep going.

One theologian, when his son died tragically and suddenly (which gives him a special bond to all the VT parents who lost children), wrote these words: “I shall look at the world now through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see.”²

I hope what we will all see through our tears is the calling to be more caring and compassionate, more gracious and giving. I hope what we will see through our tears is a way to create community where guns and violence are pushed aside and we live toward God’s *shalom*. I hope what we will see through our tears is a new calling to hold fast to what is good – relationships, support for one another, especially the lonely and outcast. I hope what we will see through our tears is God’s way – doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God - so that the dangerous and uncertain world in which we live becomes more and more the world that God intends – where crying and pain are no more and the new heaven and new earth emerges everywhere. We have much work to do, but by God’s grace and presence, and our faithful commitments, this is the way God calls us to go. May it be so. Alleluia. Amen.

PRAYER: Move in our midst in new and powerful ways today, O God. Give us faith, hope, and love, especially the greatest of these: love. We commit our lives to loving you, loving others, and seeking to make our world a more wholesome, just, and hopeful place, following Christ our Lord. Amen

This sermon was preached as a part of regular morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, April 22, 2007. This is a rough manuscript.

² Nicholas Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son, p. 26