

Why?

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, December 16, 2012 (after Newtown)

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I was all set to preach on the passage we read this morning from Paul's letter to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say rejoice." After all, it's from the first word from this reading, "rejoice," "*gaudete*" in Latin, that we get the traditional name for this Third Sunday of Advent. We light the rose candle of our Advent wreath because here in the middle of the solemn preparation of Advent, we are meant to rejoice in the coming of our Lord. We are meant to rejoice as we await the coming of Jesus Christ as the babe in Bethlehem. We are meant to rejoice as we await Christ's coming again in power and great glory. We are meant to rejoice as we bear witness to his daily coming into our lives.

I was all set, as I said, to preach on this passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians. But then a madman walked into a Connecticut kindergarten, looking like death dressed all in black and armed with a rifle and a pair of handguns, and all of a sudden, "*gaudete*" seemed a little beside the point. By Friday evening, we all knew more about what had happened than we ever *wanted* to know. But even then, even *now*, we really don't know the answer to the one question on the lips of every wailing child, every grieving parent, every news anchor and every commentator and every political pundit. Even now we don't know the answer to the one question that haunts every soul that hears about the children of Newtown: "Why?"

And I'm stuck. Because I've got to admit that I don't *know* why.

I suppose, in some ways, I *should* know. I've been learning how to talk about God since before I could talk. I suppose I *should* know. I've been to seminary and I've been ordained by the Church to be able to talk about God. I suppose I *should* know. After all, what in the world do you pay me for, anyway? I suppose I could at least *pretend* to know. But in the middle of all of this, I have to confess that I simply don't *know* why.

I don't know why twenty children that simply showed up for school Friday morning will never see or be seen by their families again. I don't know why those that rushed to help those little ones were themselves engulfed in the carnage. I don't know why a twenty-year-old man, little more than a boy himself, really, would have enough hate in his heart, enough brokenness in his soul, to turn his sights and his wrath on a classroom of children and teachers he'd never even met.

I don't know why there's seemingly random suffering. I don't know why there's pain. I don't know why death always comes too soon to those we love. I don't know why faithful, loving people fall victim to accident or disease while some who spit hatred and injustice seem to live on in comfort and ease. I don't know why our pain is just as intense whether our loss is sudden, or our loved one suffers achingly long. I don't know why we are willing to hurt total strangers – or why we do the same to the ones with whom we are most intimate.

I don't know why some of us can hold our children or our grandchildren tight as we try to make sense of a world of madmen and guns and hatred and violence. I don't know why others hear this news and ache for the feel of children grown away from them in hatred or cold indifference, children loved but taken too soon from their arms, children of dreams never born. I don't know why some have had to send their children off to work or beg to keep the family alive. I don't know why some have sent their children off to war for this madman or that few acres.

I don't know why pain. I don't know why suffering. I don't know why loss. When it comes right down to it, cradle Christian, Bible-reading, seminary trained professional though I am, there are a whole *lotta* whys... that I just don't know.

But, dear friends, there are a *few* things that I *do* know!

I *know* that the world we live in is *not* the world that God created. Scripture tells us that in the beginning, when God called something, *everything* out of the nothing, he looked at it and he pronounced it “good.” From darkness, he called light. From chaos, he brought order. From mere dust, he spoke life and breathed into the human heart the image of his own being. But whether or not you believe Genesis to be literal fact – as a matter of fact, whether or not you believe *anything* about Scripture – you and I have to admit that the goodness that God created is *not* the world in which we live. After Friday morning, even the most Pollyanna among us would have to admit that the world we live in is not the “good” world that God called into existence at the dawn of time. The world in which madmen shoot and babies die was *not* shaped by God’s hands – it was shaped by human pride. Whether or not you accept the story of the “fall” as literal fact, it’s easy enough to see even with our jaded eyes that through *our* hatreds and *our* prejudices, through *our* pride and *our* selfishness, through our paltry thieving and our petty back-biting and our failure to love as we ourselves have been loved, we have bent and twisted the goodness of God’s creation into a pathetic parody of what the Creator actually had in mind.

I *know* that the God I find in Scriptures is not some aloof, uncaring puppet-master. I know that he is the one who defines himself as the woman searching for even the tiniest fragment of what belongs to her. I know that he is the one who calls himself the shepherd who leaves all he has to search out the one sheep that is constantly straying away. I know that he is the one who waits as a longing father for the return of his lost child. I *know* that the God who lived for us and died for us and *rose* for us, loves each and every one of us too much to *cause* our pain. I *know* that he loves us too much to contribute to our suffering. I *know* that he loves us too much to twist our lives or use our sorrow to manipulate us into more righteous behavior. And I know just as certainly that he wants *our* love too much to steal from us our freedom to love him and one another, the same freedom that lets us time and time again turn our backs on each other – and on him.

I *know* that, because he has already seen all there is of human frailty and failings, in his love for me, Jesus Christ is able to bear even my pain, even my grief, even my rage. I know that, because he has endured the deepest of the sorrows of this world, he can and does share *my* sorrows. I know that even in the face of things I will probably *never* understand, even now, the Lord of All can hear and can receive my frustration and my confusion and my pain. When my tears and yours join with those who have lost so very much, with all those who weep for what our world has become, I *know* that they are joined as well by the tears of the Almighty God of Creation!

And, my friends, let me tell you, that though I may not know much, I *know* that murder and terror will *not* stand. I may not know much, but I *know* that grief and suffering and death will *not* be the final word. Because, though I may not know *much*, with Isaiah I *know* that, “Surely, it is *God* who saves me!” I may not know much, but when all is said and done, I *know* that “I will trust in him – and I will *not* be afraid.”

I may not know much about *why*, but I *do* know *who*!

This morning in the wake of things I do not know, I am not yet ready to sing Paul’s “*gaudete*.” No doubt like many of you, I am still wondering how we can keep our own children safe. I am still wondering what we can or *should* tell the little ones we love about the *brokenness* of this world. And, of course, I am still wondering why. Why Newtown? Why innocent children? Why *this* violence? Why now?

To be sure, there are a great many things that I don’t know. But through it all, I do know with St. Paul, that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.”

And perhaps that really is enough to know.