“Channel Surfing”

Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1:15-23

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May 29, 2022

This week has been a hard one, hasn’t it?

On Tuesday morning, John and I, along with elders Christy Davis and Tom Compton, gathered at Massanutten Pres. for our first presbytery meeting in-person in two years. It was a wonderful feeling to be in the same room as our colleagues, to worship together, to sing together, to pray together, and yes, to conduct the business of the presbytery in a decent and orderly way together. It truly felt like we were starting to turn the page and go back to some semblance of “normal.”

And then Tuesday afternoon happened and I remembered that a part of our “normal” pre-pandemic involved seemingly daily mass shootings in our schools.

I watched the death toll keep rising in Uvalde on Tuesday. 19 beloved children of God. Two deeply committed educators. One truly tormented young man. The numbers kept going higher and higher as I felt a range of emotions: horror, shock, grief, anger. A lot of grief. And a lot of anger.

Angry because…this doesn’t ever seem to stop. It just keeps coming. From all over the nation. Urban and rural. Coastal states and all the ones in the middle. Elementary schools. Middle schools. High schools. Colleges and universities. Even churches have seen their share of mass shootings. It seems that the only thing that will stop mass shootings is a global pandemic that forces folks to stay home. It’s more than enough to make a person angry.

And so I took my anger to God. I prayed. I prayed short prayers as the initial shock hit me - “Help us, Lord.  Save them, Lord.” I prayed longer prayers, imploring God to heal us of our sinful ways. And finally, when the words refused to come, I trusted the Holy Spirit to take over with sighs too deep for words. I took my anger to God, knowing that God could handle my anger, and that God was probably angry and grieving, too.

I looked at social media and saw a lot of Christians - also taking their anger to God. Seminary classmates, presbytery colleagues, family members, ministers I’ve admired from a distance, all responding angrily to the events. Demanding that we do something, that we change as a nation. There were lots of prayers, lots of quotations from scripture, and a whole lot of, “Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers.” There was a lot of righteous Christian anger on Tuesday.

But we are not the only ones who are angry.

Some of you may know that I frequent a local establishment for trivia nights as well as for some sermon writing. The people who work there know what I do and regularly ask me about my work. When they see me writing a sermon, they will ask me what I’m writing about. Sometimes they offer suggestions for sermon illustrations, most of which involve some sort of Star Wars plot point to which I smile and say, “thank you for your suggestion.”

At trivia night this week, I asked one of the servers how she was doing. She told me she was angry. She listed all the things there was to be angry about: climate change, income inequality, unfair access to health care, and yet another mass shooting at an elementary school. “I’m just feeling like the world is hopeless,” she said. “What’s there to be happy about anymore?”  She spoke about how society in general doesn’t seem to care about these issues — at least not enough to do anything about it – because they just keep happening.

I looked at her and nodded. Because…I got it. I feel that same hopeless feeling myself sometimes. And in that moment, I felt especially hopeless. Because I felt like she was looking at me, expecting me to say something comforting. To try to find hope in this situation, like I sometimes do when we’re having those types of conversations when we try to make sense of this world.

But on Wednesday, I couldn’t. I just nodded and said, “I hear you. I hear you.”

Similarly, my best friend texted me Wednesday night. She’s a middle school teacher and mother of two young girls. She asked me, “Do you have to preach on Sunday?” “Yup,” I said. “I don’t know how you do it,” she said.  “I’m cycling rapidly between rage and despair.”  “I hear ya,” I said to her. “I hear ya.”

Neither of these women I spoke with would consider themselves necessarily “churched.” They’ve had their own experiences with Christianity, for better or for worse.  And so they have questions about how my faith, our faith, fits in during times like this, and they’re watching us to see how we will respond.

We are being watched, friends. In the midst of this crisis and others like it, we are being watched by those who see us continuing to lift our prayers to God every time horrible thing after horrible thing happens. They are watching to see what our prayers can do.

And so we come with that knowledge to worship today: that there are some deeply broken areas of our nation and that there are folks who are skeptical of the “thoughts and prayers” that they see regularly issued by Christians when these events continue to happen.

So what do we do with that knowledge? As always, we can turn to scripture. While today is not the actual day that the ascension of Jesus technically occurred, it’s still an appropriate text for us to study for today for these times. The text tells us that the ascension happened 40 days after Easter. For 40 days, Jesus had been with the disciples after the resurrection, continuing to heal folks and to teach the disciples about the kingdom of God. He had been preparing them for when they will be physically on their own; he’d been making sure they’re equipped to continue striving for the kingdom of God.

When the time comes, Jesus reminds them that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will guide them on their journey, and then Jesus is lifted up to heaven.  The text tells us that he was lifted up, and a cloud “took him out of their sight.”

As is usually the case, the disciples don’t totally get it. They stand there, looking up toward heaven, perhaps wondering if they stand there long enough, Jesus will return and continue to be their leader on Earth. And so two men in white robes appear, similar to the two men in white robes who appeared to the women at the tomb on Easter morning. The men ask the disciples, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Basically, the men are asking the disciples, “What are you waiting for? Do you not remember the mission Jesus has sent you on? Do you not remember how much work is ahead of you? Get moving! Get going! Go and get ready to receive the Holy Spirit so you can spread the good news! Pack a bag! Brush up on Scripture! Make sure you remember all that Jesus taught you so you’re ready to go!”

It’s this part of today’s story that I thought a lot about when I tried to make sense of what happened this week and what God is calling me to do about it. I thought about the two men in white looking at me and saying, “Sarah of Staunton, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? It’s all well and good to pray to God during horrific times like these, but don’t you know that you have the Holy Spirit to help you put your prayer into action? Get going, Sarah! Get busy!”

This strange scene of the ascension of Christ and the disciples’ response is not an old story that lives forever within the pages of Acts, but one that we would do well to place ourselves within, to examine the moments in which we find ourselves waiting for God to intervene instead of asking where God is guiding us to action.

As one commentary writer explained, “The opening of the book of Acts is a two-layered transition.  The top layer is a transition from the Gospel of Luke to the Acts of the Apostles.  Underneath this layer is a far more important transition. In it, we are moved from passively waiting for Jesus to come and fix things in the end times to actively participating in the work of the Holy Spirit*now*. If we sit staring into heaven looking for Jesus, then we cannot be God’s witnesses ‘to the ends of the earth.’”[[1]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRao6B8fVVgcGUgrBDmCTI1gPrvCJyYn8UZVFetGB9S48YYnDrwFpYNUFYhQOXOYDh_2xO9GNzRK-Nc/pub?urp=gmail_link#ftnt1)

*That* is our call in times like these. A call to action. That’s what I believe folks are watching us for – to see what our “thoughts and prayers” can do, to see if our prayers lead to any real change, to see if we will *do* anything about the sins of mass shootings.

I want to be clear that I do believe that prayer is important and that prayer works. I’ve seen it. I trust it. But I also believe that part of prayer is listening to the Spirit’s guidance to change something within ourselves.  I believe that part of prayer is trusting that the act of prayer will not change God, but change *us*.

In his 2011 Ascension Day homily, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams helps us understand the line we walk as Christians in a modern world, especially when folks are skeptical of our thoughts and prayers, of where God can be in all of this. He writes:

“So if the world looks and feels like a world without God, the Christian doesn’t try to say, ‘It’s not as bad as all that,’ or seek to point to clear signs of God’s presence that makes everything all right.  The Christian will acknowledge that the situation is harsh, even apparently unhopeful — but will dare to say that they are willing to bring hope by what they offer in terms of compassion and service. And their own willingness and capacity for that is nourished by the prayer that the Spirit of Jesus has made possible for them.

The friends of Jesus are called, in other words, to offer *themselves* as signs of God in the world — to live in such a way that the underlying all-pervading energy of God begins to come through them and make a difference.  If we are challenged as to where God is in the world, our answer must be to ask ourselves how we live, pray, and *act* so as to bring to light the energy at the heart of all things — to bring the face of Jesus to life in *our* faces, and to do this by turning again and again to the deep well of trust and prayer that the Spirit opens for us.”[[2]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRao6B8fVVgcGUgrBDmCTI1gPrvCJyYn8UZVFetGB9S48YYnDrwFpYNUFYhQOXOYDh_2xO9GNzRK-Nc/pub?urp=gmail_link#ftnt2)

Friends, if you have found yourself turning to prayer over the last week, you are not alone. I know that our many prayers, in whatever forms they took, reached God, and that the Holy Spirit is already at work within us to change us and to help us change our world. But I also know that if we ever expect these horrific events to stop in our nation, we must also trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding us to action, to labor alongside Christ as we continue the work to which Christ called the disciples.

Many of you are probably familiar with the “Peace Prayer of St. Francis” which says,

Lord, make me a channel of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

It’s a beautiful prayer that reminds us of our active roles in this world – that we are to sow love where there is hatred, to be peaceful repairers of the breach. It’s a prayer that is more than appropriate for the times in which we live.

But for those of you who might be searching for something a little different especially in light of another tragedy evoking the standard “thoughts and prayers” sentiments from celebrity and politicians alike, those of you who are feeling restless, I offer what is sometimes referred to as, “The Reverse St. Francis Prayer”:

Lord, make me a channel of disturbance.

Where there is apathy, let me provoke;

Where there is compliance, let me bring questioning;

Where there is silence, may I be a voice.

Where there is too much comfort and too little action, grant disruption;

Where there are doors closed and hearts locked,

Grant the willingness to listen.

When laws dictate and pain is overlooked…

When tradition speaks louder than need…

Grant that I may seek rather to do justice than to talk about it;

Disturb us, O Lord.

To be with, as well as for, the alienated;

To love the unlovable as well as the lovely;

Lord, make me a channel of disturbance.

Friends, whether you choose to be a channel of the Holy Spirit’s peace or of the Holy Spirit’s disturbance or maybe a little bit of both in light of yet another mass shooting in our nation, may we all be willing to be not only a people of prayer, but a people of action, trusting that we are doing the hard, but good work God called not only the disciples to 2000 years ago, but which God has called every single one of us to today.

All praise be to God. Amen.

[[1]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRao6B8fVVgcGUgrBDmCTI1gPrvCJyYn8UZVFetGB9S48YYnDrwFpYNUFYhQOXOYDh_2xO9GNzRK-Nc/pub?urp=gmail_link#ftnt_ref1) David Forney; Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 2.

[[2]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRao6B8fVVgcGUgrBDmCTI1gPrvCJyYn8UZVFetGB9S48YYnDrwFpYNUFYhQOXOYDh_2xO9GNzRK-Nc/pub?urp=gmail_link#ftnt_ref2) Http://Rowan Williams.Archbishop of Canterbury.org/articles.pho/2053/ascension-day-Eucharist-at-st-Martin-in-the-fields