

Trusting God with Peace

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Considering the tragedy that occurred in Oxford, Michigan this week, it feels like a difficult time to be lighting the candle peace. How can we light that candle, considering the violence in our world? Or perhaps it is exactly the right time—the time when we need to be praying for peace the most.

Many of you are familiar with the “serenity prayer,” which begins, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” On this second Sunday of Advent, as we contemplate how to find peace, this prayer can guide us. According to our scripture readings for today, there are some ways that we can help bring peace to our broken world, some things that we *can* change. As Baruch tells us, we can clothe ourselves in righteousness, which means that we can make sure that we’re following the teachings of Jesus—especially the teachings of love, forgiveness, mercy, and kindness. One commentator, Dr. Bart Ehrman, suggests that putting on righteousness means that, instead of letting fear guide us, we let love and compassion—especially for the most vulnerable—guide us. That doesn’t mean that it’s not okay to be afraid. It’s logical to be afraid of things that are legitimate threats. What Dr. Ehrman is suggesting, though, is that we don’t let fear overtake us and motivate us.

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What are we afraid of right now? Who are we angry at right now? Are we afraid of gun violence in our schools? Are we angry at people who don't wear masks or people who won't get vaccinated? Are we afraid that our medical system is falling apart? Are we angry at our government, politicians, or the courts? What would it look like if we, if each of us, faced our fears and anger and then let righteousness slowly seep in?

On an individual level, embracing righteousness in the face of our anger and fears is a huge task. But Advent can bring such joy and hope to so many of us that our hearts become softened. So it's a good time to engage in a few practices that can help us become more righteous. I am almost hesitant to recommend advocacy to reform gun laws because that advocacy has had no impact so far. Still, in the face of this week's tragedy and in the face of the 32 shootings on K-12 campuses in the United States, since Aug 1 of this year alone, advocating for stricter gun control laws seems like the least we can do. Remember, that upon seeing his disciple Peter take up arms against the guards coming to take him away, Jesus told him to stop and Jesus, himself, responded to the violence against him with non-violence.

We can also make our little corners of the world a better place through the random acts of kindness I recommended in my children's sermon. And we can intentionally pray, every day, for the people we are angry at and fearful of. I know that seems like such a small thing, especially in the midst of our angry and broken world, but I believe in the power of prayer. Something happens when we pray for someone. They feel the energy, the light, the love, the presence of God and that can lighten their hearts and perhaps help them find peace. As I write this, I think the 15 year old who brought a gun to school and killed several children in Oxford this week. I think of the pictures circulating of him as a little boy—his chubby little face and his happy eyes. I wonder what happened to him to break his spirit, to cause him to want to murder other kids. I am

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sad and angry at him, at the circumstances that led him to such horrible actions, and at our world that makes guns so easy to buy. And so this week, I am praying for him, for his parents who have also been arrested for involuntary manslaughter, for the people making copycat threats all over Michigan and terrifying children and their families, for politicians who make decisions about gun laws, and for everyone in Oxford. I am praying for peace.

Prayer does something to the person praying, too. That same love, energy and light that we send out affects our own spirits, nourishing us and helping us to feel the presence of God. Praying for someone else leads us to be more compassionate, more merciful, and more understanding. And those things tend to remove fear and anger from us, which affects our mood, our thoughts, our daily actions, our attitude towards other people. Prayer can act like a small gift of kindness, changing our own hearts in difficult times. Peace begins with me, and so, I continue to pray.

Still, it's wise to be realistic about this. Can we bring peace to the world by our prayers alone? Probably not. This is where the other part of the serenity prayer comes in: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. Our scripture tells us many stories of people whose hearts had been hardened. You might remember, in particular, the story of the Pharaoh in Egypt whose heart was hardened against freeing his slaves. I think that there are some in this world who might be in that place—people who want political power and will sow misinformation, chaos and violence to get it; people who are so afraid of losing the power that they have, that they stoke up fear and anger in others, sending them to school board meetings, to state and federal capitals to protest violently, to cause fear and anger even in our youth and children. Our prayers might soften some of their hearts, but the unrest and chaos in our world is too big for us alone to solve.

In these cases, we need to trust God with peace and justice. In the face of what happened in Oxford this week, trusting God like

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this may sound like a platitude, so let's look into it a little more. The Gospel of Luke tells us that God has remembered Their covenant with us, looked favorably upon us, and redeemed us. This verb, "looked favorably upon," is also often translated in the Bible as "visited." So another way to understand our Gospel passage is to see that God has visited us, has come to us and will come to us again. This is what we believe and what we celebrate during Advent—the fact that God lived with us as Jesus (which is what the word Emmanuel means), and that Jesus is still always present with us. If that is true, then God is already constantly working in this world to bring about peace. God is already speaking into angry and violent hearts, and working to bring righteousness and a just peace to our world.

How can we believe that? We can start by refocusing our vision. I don't know about you, but I've spent a lot of time this week following the story of Oxford and reading about copycat threats. That can be natural after a tragedy, but when I need to remember that God is working to do good in the world, I turn my vision towards the other things that are happening and even towards something as mundane as statistics. I try to focus on the fact that there are not murders, and certainly not active shooters, at most other schools right now. Despite the anger and fear in this country, other kids have found enough peace in their hearts that they don't take up arms. I look at the outpouring of love and sympathy for the people in Oxford. I look at the helpers here, and around the world, and notice the people who are quietly caring for and loving others. There are many, many more of them, many of more of *you*, than there are of the people who become overtaken with hatred and violence. God IS working in the world.

This is something that we need to trust, not so that we can become complacent, but so that we can live in hope, have the courage to act, and have peace of mind. That is ultimately what the serenity prayer is about, isn't it? That we can have a sense of

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serenity, precisely because we *are* working on the things we can change, and trusting in God and the goodness of others to do the rest.

So let us go into this second week of Advent trusting in God to give us the courage we need to make peace between ourselves and our neighbors when possible, trusting in God to bring peace to the world when we cannot, and trusting in God to bring us the wisdom to know what we can and cannot do, so that our souls may be at peace. Amen.