

FAITH, HOPE, LOVE

HEBREWS 10:11-25
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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Last Sunday was Peace Sunday here at LMC. Our theme was:

Crossing to the Other Side: Living as People of Peace in a Time of Fear and Terror.

I want read a few sentences from the beginning of my sermon last week:

It's hard to imagine a more relevant topic given our cultural moment.

We read of suicide bombings.... We read of acts of unspeakable violence perpetrated by militant groups.

We see images of horror and suffering that make our heads spin and our hearts hurt.

And we see a lot of anger and uncertainty, a lot of suspicion.

Last Sunday when I spoke those words, they seemed a *bit* more remote, a *bit* more abstract, a *bit* more theoretical than they do today.

And then, Friday happened.

I'm speaking, of course, about the attacks on the city of Paris—attacks that claimed 129 lives and injured hundreds more.

Like many of you, no doubt, I spend a good chunk of Friday evening just staring at the screen, trying to absorb the news coverage, trying to make sense out of acts that are, in

the end, of course senseless.

But as human beings we have a need to find meaning in the things we see. And, as Christians, we need to know how awful stories like the ones our world so frequently bears witness to fit into the larger story that God is telling.

So my words this morning are going to be different than I intended for them to be earlier in the week.

Think of this morning's sermon as an unintended Part 2 of last Sunday's Peace Sunday sermon.

Let's look at that theme again.

Crossing to the Other Side: Living as People of Peace in a Time of Fear and Terror.

We talk a lot about what it means to be "people of peace." And we will again this morning.

Let's begin with the second part of that theme statement. What does it mean to live in a "time of terror?"

Well, it's pretty obvious. We live in a time where terrorist attacks happen with some regularity.

Indeed, only a day before the Paris attacks, a bomb went off in Beirut that killed 43 people. A few weeks ago, a bomb went off at a peace rally in Ankara, Turkey that killed 95. A few months ago, a bomb went off in Baghdad that killed anywhere between 60-80 people. In April, militants descended upon a university in northern Kenya and killed 147 people, most of them Christians.

We tend to give a disproportionate amount of attention to attacks in Western targets—Paris, New York, Madrid...—but the reality is that terror is just as awful and affects just as many innocent people in other places, too.

This is the world we live in.

And these attacks lead to fear. Particularly in a media and social-media saturated culture like ours where images and videos and reactions and commentary can be (and *are*) transmitted instantly.

Fear is the point of terrorism. To make us ask questions like...

When will they strike close to me or to those I love? Who is safe? Where is this world going?

Fear is a powerful thing.

Fear and terror are a potent combination that can (and do) have devastating consequences.

We know what will happen now, don't we?

We know that the war machine will ratchet up another few notches.

French president Francois Hollande is already promising "merciless" retaliation on "those barbarians."

ISIS is already promising that this is "just the beginning"—that further attacks on "the capitals of obscenity and prostitution," on the "crusaders" who drop bombs in their lands are coming.

We know that there will be much spilled blood in days to come.

We know that the whispers about "those people" will turn into shouts. *They're dangerous. We can't allow them into our country.*

We know that the Islamophobia that had perhaps remained dormant for a time will rear its ugly head again.

I've seen this already in comments sections on Canadian news sites, in blog posts and social media updates. *Get ready, all you refugee lovers... This is coming to Canada.*

We know that there will be some who see the welcoming of refugees to our nation, to our cities and towns, as a throwing open of the door for terrorism.

Never mind that refugees are the people who are *fleeing* the people who committed these atrocities. For many people, what happened in Paris on Friday night is all the evidence necessary to close our borders and keep “those people” out.

It’s not at all hard to imagine that things will now become even more difficult for those fleeing violence and war and extremism.

This is our world. We live in a time of terror and fear.

So what do we do?

To begin with, I think we come before God and each other honestly, acknowledging that we are afraid, acknowledging that we are uncertain about the future, acknowledging that we are angry.

The biblical word for this is “lament.”

This is the title of the image that has been up on the screen. It’s by an artist named Cornelia Schmitter and is *called* “Lament.”

Lament gives space for and brings before God the full range of human emotion when we are faced with terrible things happening in our world.

Read the Psalms and you will see it all—confusion, sadness, protest, weariness, and, yes, rage.

One blogger that I regularly read is Pete Enns, a professor at Eastern University in St. Davids, PA. Here’s what he said in a blog post after Friday in Paris:

[F]rankly, I have no problem at the moment replacing the Roman Empire in Revelation with ISIS saying, “Have at it, Lamb of God, One like the Son of Man, Alpha and Omega, the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is to Come. Get those guys. Wipe them off the face of the earth.”¹

¹ <http://www.peteenns.com/paris-isis-and-the-christian-responsibility-to-wrestle-with-biblical-violence/>

Me too.

It makes me angry that there are people that I must share this earth with who think they can walk into public spaces and blow themselves up or open fire with automatic weapons, taking as many people as possible with them, because of some perverse cocktail of religion and politics and ideology.

It makes me angry that public places will come, increasingly, to be dominated by “security” personnel, that already oppressive airport security will probably get worse, that ordinary women and men and children around the world have to even *consider* the question, “I wonder if someone’s going to decide to randomly kill a bunch of people today?”

It makes me angry that innocent, vulnerable people will, as always, be forced to bear the brunt of the consequences of this atrocity—that desperate refugees are already being scapegoated for this.

So, yes, sometimes we want to see some divine wrath. I do.

And it’s important to acknowledge this.

But to be a *Christian* requires us to move *beyond* this anger (and the fear that lurks behind it) and *into* the light of Jesus Christ.

To be a *Christian* means that while we may visit the Psalms regularly to give expression to our fear and anger, our home is in the gospels with Jesus.

It means that we take as our default, the rhythm and cadence of Jesus’ words in Matthew 5...

You have heard it said... But I say to you....

You have heard that it was said... ‘You shall not murder... But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

To follow in the way of Jesus means to constantly be operating out of this basic paradigm.

You know how things tend to go, Jesus says. You know the way of the world. But I want you to go in a different way than the way things tend to go.

And so, it falls to us, the church, to walk in this different way, to point to a different possibility, to be the city on a hill, the salt of the earth.

We Christians have been entrusted with an utterly unique and uniquely terrifying, liberating, and hopeful task.

To love our enemies.

This is a job given only to us.

There is overlap between Christianity and other faiths and worldviews in many areas.

Other religious traditions and ideologies and philosophies talk about love of neighbour, about devotion to God, about justice, and peace, about simplicity.

But only Christianity has, at its very core, as its central figure and model for all who follow, One whose response to bad people doing bad things was love his enemies *to the end*, and to die in their place.

To break the cycle of retributive violence. To refuse to respond in kind to his enemies.

To take all of the sin and violence and awful hatred into his own self, to absorb it, judge it, forgive it, and to hold out his wounded hand in embrace for all who would accept the gift of peace and hope and salvation that he offers to those who would lay down their arms, lay down their pride, lay down their very *selves*, and choose to follow him and his way.

Only Christianity says that this One is the truest representation of what God looks like.

There is nothing else so radical in all of religion, in all of human wisdom and philosophy. There is nothing like it in all the world.

So, in closing, I find myself wandering down very familiar trails whenever I preach a sermon after a particularly awful event.

How do we, as followers of Jesus, respond to Paris...

Or the bombings in Beirut or Baghdad...

Or passenger planes being blown out of the sky...

Or the countless school shootings that have taken place in the USA recently...

Or the political turmoil of a refugee crisis and all the ignorant hatred it has spawned and will continue to spawn...

Or any other instance of unspeakable evil committed by human beings who have always loved the darkness more than the light...

After every awful event like Paris on Friday night, we hear the questions, *What do we do? How do we, who name Jesus as Lord, respond?*

Is this the last straw? Has evil reached a unique tipping point? Is this batch of bad news the one after which we just throw up our hands and finally say, "You know what, I think it's just time to respond to hate with hate..."

No.

It's not. It never is. And it never will be.

As Christians, we respond the way we always have. Or, at least the way that we have always been *called* to respond.

We respond by pointing to the crucified one, the great high priest who paid the price for all of human ugliness once and for all on a cross on a hill, who said, "It is finished."

We respond as we are commanded to respond in Hebrews 10:22-24.

Therefore, my friends... since we have a great priest over the house of God,

Let us **approach** with a true heart in full assurance of **faith**, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us **hold fast** to the confession of our **hope** without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

And let us consider how to **provoke** one another to **love** and good deeds,

Three crucial verbs and three crucial nouns that encapsulate all of the life of faith.

We approach God with FAITH: that Jesus has accomplished for us and for the world what we could not and cannot accomplish for ourselves.

We hold fast to HOPE: in the new day that God has promised, the kingdom of God in all its glory, in the reign of Christ over all the nations.

We provoke one another to LOVE: because we believe that if love is the way that God has chosen to respond to the evil in the world, then it is the way that we must respond also.

(That's a decent summary statement for what we do most Sundays here in church, incidentally—we *provoke* each other to love and good deeds!)

We cannot fix the world.

But by the grace of God, we can be people of peace.

Not in the easy, Hallmark-y, popular senses of the word that require little of us, not in the John Lennon-y sense of the word that imagines that if we just got rid of pesky things like religion all would be well...

But in the costly Jesus-y sense of the word.

By being people who are determined to love even the most unlovely, to refuse the attitudes of hatred and anger that keep violence in circulation.

By being people who are determined that no matter how terrible the news of the day might be, we are *always* called to faith, hope, and love.

This is the law that we are to have written on our hearts and minds.

So, in closing, let's return to our basic paradigm, our default as Christians.

You have heard it said... But I say to you...

You have heard it said—in the news, by politicians, by media pundits, by neighbours...

Fear, despair, hatred...

But, in the name of Jesus Christ, I say to you...

Faith, hope, love.

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering. For he who has promised is faithful.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

