

Sermon: Bearing the Cross

Year A, Proper 27

[Amos 5:18-24; Psalm 70; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13](#)

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When we first heard the news about the shooting during worship at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, we were horrified. We had just been in our own little church in a small town. Maybe not as small as Sutherland Spring, but not that much bigger. Many of us lived here when Brookline was that small. And it was a shooting in a church. During worship. 26 killed and 20 wounded. Three generations from the same family killed. Grandmas killed. Babies killed. It was shocking. They sounded so much like us.

It was shocking in a world where people are killed at a country music festival in Las Vegas. People are killed out for dinner on a Friday night in Paris. People are killed in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado waiting to see a Batman movie. People are killed at Fort Hood, Texas by a psychologist and then five years later more people are killed on that same army base by a logistics specialist. People are killed at a night club in Orlando. People are killed at Bible study in Charlestown at one of the oldest African Methodist Episcopal churches in the U.S. And still we're surprised when we hear about the shooting in Sutherland Springs.

And then the news rolls on, and we learn about the shooter's mother-in-law, about his domestic violence issues, about how the Air Force didn't update the FBI databases, and we stop being surprised. Because now there is an explanation. And the threat seems much further away. Because we can see how the people in Sutherland Springs are not like us.

How do we do that? How do we go from surprised and frightened to accepting and unconcerned? In the space of a few days? Because we live in a world where I can list six mass shootings by the name of the town. I tell you where they happened and you ask yourself, "Which one was that?". We live in a world where we need to hear enough details to distinguish one from another. The world is that broken.

Listening to the Prophet Amos this morning, it seems he lives in a world that is broken. The people of Israel are calling out for the Day of the Lord, calling out for God to start the Great Clean Up God has promised at the end of time. But when we look at the historical record, including the writing of Amos himself, there's not a lot there.¹ No war. No famine. No invasion. A competent king on the throne. Religious rituals being carefully observed. And yet they desire the Day of the Lord. (Amos 5:18)

Amos is a prophet. He sees under the current world, to the true reality, and he knows they're going to be surprised. Anyone can flee from a lion. (Amos 5:19) But who expects to encounter a bear? (Amos 5:19) Or, having run home to safety, having put your hand out panting to catch your breath, have a snake drop out of the thatch or from a crack in the plaster?² Amos sees the Day of the Lord coming and his people are sure going to be surprised. Nothing is broken in Amos' world, and yet everything is.

¹ John C. Holbert, "Proper 27, Exegetical Perspective, Amos 5:18-24" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 269.

² Holbert, 267.

The Thessalonians live in a world that Rome controls. Rome offers its citizens peace and security,³ but at what price? The Christian community is persecuted, ostracized. They find comfort and strength in their faith, in their belief in Jesus Christ. So much so that they are worried about what will happen when Christ returns, which they expected any day. They were worried that anyone who was not then living would not live forever with Christ. They were asking Paul for reassurance that they would be reunited with the people they loved. And you can see why. Rome offered peace and security, but it was the Roman peace. Voices of dissent are silenced, not just by intimidation and threats, like the Thessalonians are experiencing every day. Voice of dissent are silenced permanently, as those who point out the injustice of the Rome are hung to die on a cross.

We are like the people in Amos' time. We have forgotten what is at the heart of our religious rituals. I went all over this church and collected just the crosses that stand on their own. They're everywhere and yet we forget that our faith was born in violence.⁴ The people who knew Jesus expected that their Messiah would vanquish their oppressor, but the Messiah himself was killed like a lamb at the slaughter.⁵ And then God reached into the flow of human history. Everyone expected that his crucified body would remain broken and dead, but instead, death itself was conquered.⁶ Something was made out of nothing, hope was created from despair, life arose from death.⁷ We see the Cross but we forget the violence, so violence in this world takes us by surprise. Every time.

Every time, the violence in this world takes us by surprise. Every time, we call out to God and ask the same question the Thessalonians asked. What about us?⁸ What about the people we love? Have you forgotten us, Jesus? Left us here in this world with only your words and your promises? Left us here alone to face humanity's violence, a violence which grows in scale and efficiency so that a single man can kill or injure 46 people in the space of a few minutes on a Sunday morning as hymns hang in the air? What about us? Like the Thessalonians, we think the end of the world is about us.

The end of the world is not about us. It's about God. About a God who has lived through the violence of this world, who has lived into the violence of this world, and who has rejected it absolutely. God has looked at human history and knows it cannot produce anything astonishingly new, but only proceed from the past and bring about what is possible.⁹ So God reaches into the flow of human history and rejects that violence and death have the final word. God does a wholly new thing in Jesus Christ's resurrection, showing that there is so much more than this world. God's promise in the resurrection of Christ is not that it is possible for one man to rise from the dead, but that all of us will share in this creation out of nothing, this genuinely

³ Ben Witherington III, "Homeland Insecurity: The Spiritual Lust for an Escape Clause." *Ex Auditu* 24 (2008), 165.

⁴ Russell Moore, "Why Church Shootings Don't Intimidate the Church," *Washington Post*, November 6, 2017.

⁵ Noelle M. York-Simmons, "Proper 27, Homiletical Perspective, Amos 5:18-24" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 271.

⁶ York-Simmons, 271.

⁷ York-Simmons, 271.

⁸ Philip A Quanbeck, II, "Preaching Apocalyptic Texts." *Word & World* 25, no. 3 (2005), 325.

⁹ Jennifer M. McBride, "Proper 27, Theological Perspective, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 280 and 282.

new thing, this unexpected surprise that is more than we can ask or imagine.¹⁰ Like the Thessalonians, we think the end of the world is about us. The end of the world, when death and violence fail absolutely, the end of the world tells us about God and God's love. The cross is meant to remind us. But we forget.

Because we forget the Day of the Lord is about God, we think that that's when what we do in this world stops mattering. Amos reminds us that on the Day of the Lord, what we do in this world matters most. What have we done for justice? What have we done for righteousness? What have we done so that we can live in this world fairly and in right relationship with each other and with God?

Like Sutherland Springs, we are a small church. We have community members from across the spectrum. I could take the shooting in Texas and talk about domestic violence and mental health, about making sure that our laws are enforced. Those are all things we would agree on and working to improve them would improve the justice and righteousness in our community. Part of our Outreach budget goes to support two groups who work with women caught in abusive situations. And we can do more. We can always do more.

We're a small church and we have members from across the spectrum and we do not agree on guns. No matter what else we all thought of when we heard of the shooting in Sutherland Springs, we thought about guns. There are people who feel strongly about the presence of guns in our society and they are going to be heard after a shooting that leaves 46 people dead and wounded. As soon as we heard about the shooting in Sutherland Springs, we knew what people would say. And they said it.

But they didn't talk to one another. They talked past and over and at one another. They talked to people who agreed with them and mocked people who did not. They were disdainful of people who didn't agree with them. Or they offered some buffet of data, as if hoping that if they could present enough nuggets of information, the other side would suddenly realize that they were merely ignorant, as if they just needed to better understand the technical features of the latest gadget.

We're a small church and we have members from across the spectrum and we do not agree on guns. But we can do something that the talking head celebrities cannot do. We can talk *to* one another. We know each other well enough to ask each other what we *feel* about guns. No one wants 46 dead or wounded. But we're not going to get justice, we're not going to get right relationship with each other and with God, until we start talking to each other, until we are capable of letting someone we disagree with be vulnerable enough to describe their feelings about an issue as intense as guns.

And not even to create policies that can address some of the conditions that can lead to mass shootings. Just to create a space for people's voices to be heard. We are forgetting how to do that. Our leaders pride themselves in their inability to talk with people who disagree with them. We are a small church and we have members from across the spectrum. We can show how the critical conversations we need to have can happen.

The Day of the Lord, when it comes, is when what we have done in this world will matter most. God calls us to fight for justice and righteousness. God calls us to love our neighbor and love

¹⁰ McBride, 282.

God. Sometimes that is a big, historic protest at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Sometimes that's as small as a conversation over mediocre coffee in a Social Hall on a Sunday morning.

There will always be surprises. Even with the very best policies in the world, there will always be people dying violent deaths. There will always be another lion, another bear, another snake. When those surprises come, when the news rises up and brings horror and violence from far away into our living rooms, our faith tells us that this is a time to wake up, to check on our relationship with God. Our faith tells us it's a time to stop asking, "what about us?" and start asking "what about justice and righteousness?" Our faith tells us to remember the cross, remember its true promise. Violence and death will not have the final answer, because God has done a new thing, brought something into history that was never there before. Our faith tells us that we bear the cross in this world so we can bear this world.