

The Massacre of the Innocents

Matthew 2:16-18 (ESV)

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. **17** Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

18 “A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”

Introduction

I usually begin praying on Monday for the Lord to lead me to what He wants me to preach on the following Sunday. There were two passages of Scripture which shaped my thinking and praying for what I would preach this week. The first passage to catch my attention came through our Tuesday morning staff meeting as Patty Fleming read from Isaiah 35.

Isaiah 35:3-4 (ESV)

3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say to those who have an anxious heart,
“Be strong; fear not!
Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you.”

Then the second passage came from the Wednesday morning Bible study that I lead.

Hebrews 12:12-13 (ESV)

12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, **13** and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

These two verses formed a burden in my heart as I prayed for the Lord’s direction regarding the sermon. I understood the burden of these two passages to be that I was **to strive to provide encouragement and hope to those who may be spiritually weak or experiencing some doubt about their faith in God.** So I prepared a sermon in accordance with the direction I sensed the Lord was leading me in.

Then about 21:00 Friday night I learned of the tragedy that occurred in Newtown, CT. By Saturday morning, after learning more of the extent of what took place, I was convinced that the sermon I had planned to preach was not the one I should preach today. Lord willing, I will preach the sermon I had planned to preach, next week.

I firmly believe that the burden, however, is still the same—that *I am to strive to provide encouragement and hope to those who are spiritually weak and doubting*—though the question that needs to be answered is not the same as I originally suspected it was.

We Should Be Silent

These are tender moments in life. There is part of me that does not want to say anything. A large part of me just yearns to be silent. Sometimes in the middle of grief that is exactly what we need to be—silent. Often it is the case that in our hasty desire to help we are guilty of saying too much and not having sense enough to know when it is good to keep our mouths shut and simply be with those who are grieving. There are times when we should be silent.

We Should Speak

However, there are also times when we should speak. And presently there is no shortage of reporters and commentators who are filling newspapers and airwaves with much talk about what happened in Newtown, CT on Friday. President Obama was correct when on Friday [he said in his national address](#) that we need to take “meaningful action in order to prevent more tragedies like this.” He is right, but what meaningful actions should be taken? We do we *really* need to do to prevent such tragedies? There are some things that can be done, but I’m not sure we really want to do what must be done.

Times of tragedy have the ability to get our attention unlike any other times in our lives. I believe this is one of those occasions in which we cannot be silent. So what should we say during days like these? What will you say to your coworkers tomorrow when this comes up? What will you say to your neighbors? How can we not waste this tragedy, but instead talk about meaningful truth that will bring help and healing to a hurting world?

I’d like to suggest a few things for you to consider talking about this week with the people in your particular mission field—your place of employment or the place you spend most of your time. If you just want to listen and not take notes, then if you are interested, later I can give you a copy of this manuscript. And if what I have to say is not worthy of further reflection, then you will not have wasted any paper and ink.

1) We Live In a Fallen World

The first truth we as Christians need to believe and affirm and speak about is the truth that ***this world in which we live is a fallen world dominated by sin and Satan.*** Murder is the first recorded sin after the fall of Adam and Eve which was instigated by the subtle lies of Satan. The Bible teaches that we live in a world trapped under the dominion of sin and Satan.

God’s word says that all of creation “*waits with eager longing*”¹ for the day when “*it will be set free from its “bondage to decay.”*”² When death entered this world through the sin of Adam & Eve, it did not merely affect humanity, but it became inseparably woven into the physical fabric of all creation. Thus all of creation itself “groans” until all that has fallen will be made new again. Because of the deaths of the children about which we have learned, we too groan for the families affected. They groan and we groan with them.

¹ Rom 8:19.

² Roma 8:21.

And so we find ourselves living in a world dominated by sin and Satan. John wrote, “*the whole world lies in the power of the evil one*” (1 Jn 5:19). Twice in the Gospel of John Jesus referred to Satan as the “ruler of this world” (Jn 12:31; 14:30). Paul refers to Satan as “the god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4). The Bible is clear, Satan’s power is prominent in this world and it is also clear that all he does is sin. If this is the case, then should we be surprised when his subjects who live under his dominion act like him and commit sin? Murder is one of tools in the violent hands of Satan which he uses to ravage the world. Adam Lanza was certainly not serving God on Friday morning. He was serving Satan whether he believed in Satan or not.

Why in moments of grief are we so quick to blame God for the evil in the world rather than Satan? Pundits are invited to talk shows to discuss where God is in the middle of evil, but I have never seen anyone invited to talk about where Satan is. We easily get angry with God, but no one is upset with Satan. Satan’s power in this world is massive and yet to his great delight, **he is massively ignored.**

This world is not the way it ought to be. We live in a fallen world that is dominated by Satan. This is not a safe place and it never will be truly safe until Jesus comes the second time and crushes Satan and death under his feet. The only safe place in the universe is being in Jesus. So remind people this is a fallen world and that it is dominated by sin and by Satan.

2) All Men Are Sinners

The second truth to talk about is that **not only is the whole world affected by sin, so is the whole of humanity.** No person on this planet is exempt from the power of sin. All of humanity is helplessly entrapped in slavery to sin.

In Solomon’s prayer of dedication of the Temple he prayed and said, “*there is no one who does not sin*” (1 Kg 8:46). David tells us in **Psalms 51:5** that sin attaches to our soul from the first moment of conception. “*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.*” Furthermore, he writes in **Psalms 14:3**, “*...there is none who does good, not even one.*” Paul later teaches that sin is the universal condition of all of humanity, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Rom 3:23).

If all men are sinners by nature, then should we be surprised when men commit heinous sin? By the way all sin is heinous, not just some sins. Remember that from the beginning God issued the death penalty even for the sin of stealing a piece of fruit.

When sin is the dominate characteristic of human nature, then it should not surprise us when men act in accordance with it. We are not basically good. We are basically evil, but through our conscience and the laws of the land, our sinful nature is mostly restrained. If we had no conscience and if there were no laws, then we would see these kinds of heart-wrenching headlines every day.

Every human heart has the capacity to commit unthinkable moral evil. Don’t forget the fact that once upon a time this world was so evil that God decided to nearly purge this planet from the presence of humans with a global flood. **Genesis 6:5** tells us that He did this because, “*The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*”

Adam Lanza is not a monster. He is Everyman apart from God and there, but for the restraining grace of God, go I. So talk about the universal sinfulness of mankind.

3) Condemning Evil Is Right

A third truth to consider talking about is the fact **it is good and right and just to condemn evil**. What Adam Lanza did was evil and he deserved to be condemned. God's word is clear,

Genesis 9:6 (ESV)

*6 Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.*

Murder is not only an attack on a particular person, it is an attack on God because God created mankind in His image. **God takes murder personally**. After taking the lives of 20 children and six adults, Lanza took his own life. Most likely he did this to escape having to stand before a human court. What is sad is that he probably believed the lie that most of the contemporary world today believes and that is after you die, there is simply nothing. The lights simply go out and you feel nothing. And so death is wrongfully viewed as an easy way to escape condemnation or suffering. [Is it not this belief that leads us to so easily pass laws in favor of assisted suicide and euthanasia?] We do not believe that we will stand before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. We do not believe judgment follows death. God's word teaches otherwise.

Hebrews 9:27 (ESV)

7 And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,

2 Corinthians 5:10 (ESV)

10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

If we fail to warn the world that judgment awaits us after we die, then will not the Lord take note of this and hold us accountable? I wonder if Adam Lanza would have behaved differently if he had believed differently? Would he have done things differently if he believed he would face the living Christ as his judge after he died? And consider for a moment who it is in this case who suffers for our silence on this truth—it is our children who suffer. *Adam Lanza may have escaped the court of human justice, but there is no escaping the court of divine justice.*

4) A Sinful World Needs A Suffering Savior

When you are at work tomorrow, **talk about a suffering Savior**. This sinful world can only be redeemed by a suffering Savior. Jesus came as a suffering Savior not as a conquering king. [When he comes again, he will be the conquering king.] *He suffered so he could offer us compassion.*

Jesus knows what suffering is like (Heb 4:15). He endured the injustices of this world. He personally bore the sin and brokenness of this world. A broken world can only be fully repaired by a broken Savior. Jesus is not unfamiliar with suffering. He was *“a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”* (Is 53:3). He wept agonizing, blood vessel-bursting tears. Jesus knows the experience of grief.

Sin is real and suffering is real. Jesus entered into both. Though he never sinned, he became sin on our behalf (2 Cor 5:21; Rom 8:3) in order to redeem us from the eternal punishment of sin. He suffered in order to purchase the right to free from eternal suffering all those who would put their faith and trust in him. Jesus is a compassionate, suffering Savior, not comic-book hero.

5) The Answer: New Hearts

A fifth truth to talk about is that ***the answer to this problem is not new laws, but new hearts.*** Don't allow the conversation tomorrow to stop with merely the band-aid solution of new gun laws. Murder flows out of the human heart and the murderer will use whatever is close at hand whether it is the Glock 9mm in the night stand or broken tree branch in the woods. If we want meaningful actions that will make a real difference, then we must talk about the root of our disease and not merely about the symptoms. We must talk about the corruption that lies within the human heart.

Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)

9 *The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it?*

Jesus understands it.

Matthew 15:19 (ESV)

19 *For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.*

Jesus' brother, James, also understood things pretty well.

James 4:2 (ESV)

2 *You desire and do not have, so you murder.*

Desire is the action of the heart. ***Our greatest need is not gun control, but desire control.*** We need new hearts with new desires if we are to put a stop to these kinds of tragedies. We need new hearts that have no sinful desires. Only new hearts will stop murderers. Something went very wrong in Adam Lanza's heart. No one yet knows why he did what he did, but I'll tell you why he did it. The Bible explains it very clearly. He desired what he could not have and so he murdered.

He desired something he could not have, or did not have, and so he became angry about it, angry enough to kill people. *Anger is the first step down the pathway to murder.* This is exactly what murderers do. They get angry at their boss or girlfriend or mom or dad or whoever because they did not give them what they wanted and so they murder. Anger leads to hatred and then that hatred spills over onto everyone else around them. So they think, "If I can't have what I want, then why should anyone else," and then multiple murders happen because, so the twisted logic goes, "If I'm going down, why not take as many as I can with me? If I'm unhappy, then why shouldn't others be unhappy also?"

Anger is exactly what led king Herod to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem. Look at Matthew 2:16.

Matthew 2:16 (ESV)

16 *Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.*

When Herod did not get what he desired, namely for the wise-men to return and tell him where Jesus was, he became ***furious***. And in his uncontrolled rage, he ordered the death of all male children

under two years of age. It is estimated that this would have been somewhere around twenty³ little boys. That's exactly how many children were killed in Newtown, CT.

[One fact does still astound me. The entire nation is upset over this, and it is right to be upset over the deaths of 20 children murdered in a school, but is anyone really upset over the news that **everyday** in this country 3,000 children are murdered in the womb?]

“You desire and do not have and so you murder.” The desires of hearts dominated by sin are not free to do anything other than be held captive by Satan⁴ to do his will. Such hearts despise the law of God.⁵ And this is why the gospel is such good news, because what we need most, Jesus gives—new hearts.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 (ESV)

26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. **27** And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Jesus earned the right to give away new hearts—for free. Because he lived a holy life and paid the price for sin, he is now worthy to pour out God's Spirit into the hearts of man. Jesus is able to give spiritual life by giving new hearts which then delight to obey God's law. *“Though we were once slaves of sin, now we have become obedient from the heart”* (Rom 4:17).

So tell people that what is most needed is not new laws, but new hearts and that Jesus is the suffering Savior who has the right to dispense them.

6) God Is Sovereign Over the Sinful Actions of Wicked Men

Another truth to talk about may be the hardest. Talk about the truth **that God is sovereign over the sinful actions of wicked men**. The sovereignty of God over the sin of man is a hard truth but one that is affirmed in Scripture again and again. It is a hard truth but, I believe, one that ultimately provides spiritual rock under your feet to help you stand firm in the evil day.

The massacre of the innocent boys that took place in Bethlehem that night was the fulfillment of what was spoken of by the prophet Jeremiah about 600 years earlier. Matthew quotes Jeremiah 31:15. Matthew explains, in verse 18, that the horrible tragedy enacted by Herod's wicked rage, was not some random act of violence unforeseen by God, who was powerless to prevent it, but instead was part of God's painful, prophetic plan through which He would reveal the Savior of the world. God was sovereign over the sinful actions of wicked Herod.

We see this truth lived out in breath-taking clarity in the life of Jesus. In **Acts 2:23** Peter, who was preaching before all of Israel on the day of Pentecost, said that Jesus was *“delivered up [for crucifixion] according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God”* and yet he was *“killed by the hands of lawless man.”* These men were lawless (and are guilty for it), they had no concern for

³ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mt 2:16. See also Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), Mt 2:13. cf. ESV Study Bible notes at Matthew 2:16.

⁴ 2 Tim 2:26.

⁵ Rom 8:7.

obeying the law and no fear of God and yet God so reigned over them that in their willful rebellion against him, they ended up fulfilling God's own plan. Peter went on to say,

Acts 4:27-28 (ESV)

27 *"for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."*

Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and the Jews all thought they were opposing the plans of Jesus, when in actuality they were fulfilling them.

Joseph's brothers hated him and sold him into slavery, but that was all part of God's plan to get Joseph to Egypt in order to save those same hate-filled brothers. They intended harm against Joseph, but God intended to bring about their salvation (**Gen 50:20**). The painful events of our lives are sovereignly overseen by an all-powerful, all-loving, all-good God (whose name is Yahweh). The miracle is that God, because he is so sovereignly powerful, is then able to bring life out of death and hope out of darkness.

The first time Bethlehem is mentioned in Scripture is in Genesis (35:16-20). It is the place where Jacob's wife, Rachel, died while giving birth to Benjamin. From then on in Scripture, Bethlehem is remembered as the place where Rachel died. But today we do not remember Bethlehem as a place of death, but the place of life and birth of the Savior.

Jeremiah (31:15), writing hundreds of years later, lamented the fact that the sons of Israel were being carried away into exile, and personifies all the weeping mothers of Israel into one mother, Rachel. And yet if we keep reading the next two verses, we get a fuller picture what God is up to.

Isaiah 31:16-17 (ESV)

16 *Thus says the LORD:*

*"Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears,
for there is a reward for your work,
declares the LORD,
and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.*

17 *There is hope for your future,
declares the LORD,
and your children shall come back to their own country.*

God's promise is that one day He would turn the situation around. Though the sons of Israel were sent away into exile because of their sin, yet one day God would be gracious and merciful and bring them back to their country.

We may be tempted to stumble over the "why?" of God's secret, painful plan, but all hope is gutted if we cannot accept the sovereignty of His plan. If we have no confidence that God is supremely sovereign, then we have no assurance that He is powerful enough to actually bring about the hope that he tells us he intends to bring in the future. If God is not sovereign over the sinful acts of wicked men, then we have no hope at all that any of His plans will ever actually come to be!

7) God Graciously Grants Salvation to Little Ones

The last truth that we should talk about is the confidence that God in His grace extends salvation to children who die before they are able to understand who Jesus is and what he has done.

First of all, as we stated earlier, we live in a sinful, fallen world. The world has been in this condition since the day Adam & Eve sinned. We also noted that we are all born with a sinful nature. All descendants of Adam have inherited a nature that is spiritually dead and sinful from the moment of conception (Psalm 51:5; Rom 5:12, 18-19) because we are descendants of Adam. Infants are born with a sinful nature, and therefore, are not free from the corruption of sin.

All humans have inherited sinfulness from Adam. Therefore, no human being deserves to be saved and there is nothing anyone, whether child or adult, can do to earn salvation, thus it is completely owing to God's amazing grace demonstrated through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Yet Paul says, as I quoted earlier, that we will be judged for what we have "*done in the body*" (2 Cor 5:10). We will not be judged on the basis of Adam's sin, but upon the basis of our own sins committed in the body. Understanding that we have inherited Adam's fallen nature, explains our inability to good and our propensity to do evil. The question is have little ones committed such sins that would render them culpable (i.e. guilty) before God? I believe we find the answer in Deuteronomy.

God had already pronounced judgment upon the unbelieving Israelite generation who came out of Egypt, had seen His miracles, and yet had refused to enter the Promised Land. He declared that every single man, except Joshua and Caleb, would die for his disobedience, including Moses. Yet listen to what God says about the little ones.

Deuteronomy 1:39 (ESV)

39 *And as for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there [to the Promised Land]. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess it.*

I believe this indicates that God will not hold guilty children who die before fully understanding sin and the work of Christ, since they have not committed in the body such sins with an understanding of the guilt that such sins bring.

Furthermore, when king David's infant son died, David comforted himself by saying, "*I shall go to him, but he will not return to me*" (2 Sam 12:23). David took comfort in the fact that he would one day see his little son again. Then Jesus also says, "*Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven*" (Mt 19:14).

To summarize:

1. We live in a fallen world that exists under the dominion of sin and Satan.
2. All men are sinners and so we should not be surprised when men act sinfully.
3. It is just and right to condemn sinful evil acts and proclaim the truth that judgment awaits us after we die.
4. Jesus himself died and experienced the grief and suffering that living in this fallen world will most certainly bring. He it is he who brings us hope.

5. The hope of a new heart comes through faith in Jesus. In Christ the old is made new and the dead sinful heart is replaced with a new living heart filled with new desires.
6. God is sovereign over the sinful acts of wicked men. Though Satan is real and possesses massive power, even he is not ultimately sovereign. God alone possesses all sovereign authority which He has handed over to His only Son, Jesus. Jesus said before he ascended into heaven, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*” (Mt 28:18).
7. God graciously extends the atoning blood of Jesus over little children and infants who die.

There are times when we should be silent and there are times when we should speak. May the Lord give us the wisdom to know the difference and fullness of His Holy Spirit when we do speak. May this tragedy not be wasted through fear of man. May we weep with those who weep, touch those who need to be touched, and pray without ceasing.

Keep this passage before you this week and weep with those who weep and offer hope to those who have no hope. This week, point people to Jesus. Faith in him is the only hope we have for meaningful, substantive, life-transforming change. Jesus is our salvation. Trust in him and point others to him.

Isaiah 35:3-4 (ESV)

3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say to those who have an anxious heart,
“Be strong; fear not!
Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you.”