

"Keep Herod in Christmas"

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Texts: Micah 5: 2-5a and Matthew 2:1-15

This is a violent story in our scripture, without a doubt. It has echoes of the killing of the firstborn during the days of Moses out of the book of Exodus. And while it is unclear whether this massacre ever happened, even the idea of this kind of violence is disconcerting at the very least. We think to ourselves, "how can people be so violent?" Or "what was wrong with Herod"? Even, "How could a society let that occur?" Then I read last week's paper. Mitch Albom, who writes for the Detroit Free Press penned a column entitled *Echo of Preventable Gunshots in Oxford to be Heard Forever* (Detroit Free Press, Sunday, December 5, 2021, page 1) in which he writes this, "Keep children alive. That is so obviously the top priority of a high school that it should go without saying. This is not the first, second, fifth or 10th school shooting this year. According to the website Everytown for Gun Safety, there have already been 144 incidents of gunfire on school grounds this year alone. Twenty-eight deaths. Eighty-six injuries." Yes, the violence portrayed in our Bible is horrendous, but what about in our own time? The plague of violence in our culture would itself be a sermon, but quite honestly,

I want to peel back the violence and consider what might be some causes of it in our time: grief, pain, isolation, and others. All of this boiling down to what happens when humans do not deal with their emotions, be they grief or feeling of threat.

Brian McLaren tells us that Herod had a reputation for assassinating anyone he considered a threat – including his wife and two of his own sons. “Late in his reign, he began hearing rumors...rumors that the long-awaited liberator prophesied by Isaiah and others had been born. While a pious man might have greeted this news with hope and joy, Herod only saw it as a threat – a threat to political stability and to his own status as king.” Herod – and Pharoah before him – model one way [of preserving their power]: violence. They are not alone. Some suggest that Herod and others like him were mentally unbalanced. Maybe that is true, but I also believe that besides preserving our power and privilege, violence is also used when we cannot or will not deal with our emotions. It can happen at the hands of government leaders, school shooters, or to some degree, with us all. Maybe we haven’t killed anyone, but maybe we have committed violence in an attempt to deal with emotions, grief and rage out of control in ourselves. Pain in any form that is ignored is truly transmitted to others one way or another. Instead, we must transform our pain. That begins with acknowledgement of it.

We live in a society that does everything it can to ignore, cover up, or push away our pain. Or, we think we control it by committing violence against others as a way to feel better, knowing that it never works. Violence has never solved anything, and yet, for some, we'd rather be violent than vulnerable. Rather be seen as some notion of "strong" instead of "weak" or weeping. Clearly this avoidance is simply not working.

We're destroying ourselves simply because we're afraid of our own selves, our own emotions, our own grief, and our own pain. We must break this cycle before many more are destroyed. While we cannot force others to do so, we can choose to engage that which is hurtful and painful within ourselves. One at a time, step by step, we can change a culture. I've turned to Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, among others, to give us some clues as to how to make this happen. Their book, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* gives us some tools to do just that: face directly what is happening around and among us.

Christmastime, ironically, is a perfect time for us to face what is ours to face. Amid all the calls for "Joy to the World," there is true grief for many, maybe even all of us. Some of us lost loved ones in the past year and are struggling with

the first Christmas without them. For others, we lost loved ones some time ago, but each Christmas the pain returns as we remember those closest to us. Some of us are lonely this time of year and the dark, long, cold nights lead to depression or to that “blue” feeling. This is why I’m looking forward to the longest night service at Peace Lutheran, and I pray those who are able will join me. It is important that we acknowledge what we feel. Some of us may feel “blue” and not even know why. So, we bury it, feeling it an inappropriate emotion at such a time of year as this. And yet, as Macy and Johnstone tell us, “Honoring our pain for the world is a way of valuing our awareness, first, that we have noticed, and second, that we care...we need to digest the bad news. That is what rouses us to respond.”

J. William Worden identifies the initial tasks of grieving as first accepting the loss and second feeling the pain of grief. “When we feel this emotion, we know not only that the loss is real but also that it matters to us. That is the digestion phase – where the awareness sinks to a deeper place within us so that we take in what it means. Only then can we find a way forward that is based on an accurate perception of reality” (Macy and Johnstone, 71).

And yet, it’s hard to deal with personal or societal pain when we fear it will overtake us. There is so much to be scared about and pained by in this world.

Some might conclude it's simply better to avoid the pain...numb ourselves. Check out. Ignore it and it will go away. But as Albom's column reminds us, ignoring the problem or kicking it down the road is not solving our problem of violence. I suggest if we deal with our grief, violence may decline. But how?

Macy and Johnstone give us a practice that I want to try right here, right now, right in the middle of worship. You can do this here, or you can do it if you are watching from home. You can do this practice once, or many times, but I believe it can help as we get in touch with that which we ignore at our peril, and instead find life that is on the other side of engagement. Give this a try. Of course, I can't make you try it, but I invite you. It's one way to acknowledge and "digest" our pain, grief, and sadness. This is from Macy and Johnstone's book and the process is called Breathing Through and is adapted from an ancient Buddhist meditation for developing compassion.

Closing your eyes, focus on your breathing. Don't try to breathe in any special way, slow or long. Just watch the breathing as it happens, in and out.

Note the accompanying sensations at the nostrils or in the chest or abdomen. Stay passive and alert, like a cat by a mouse hole...

As you watch the breathing, note that it happens by itself, without your will, without your deciding each time to inhale or exhale. It's as though you're being breathed – being breathed by life. Just as everyone in this room, in this city, on this planet now, is being breathed by life, sustained in a vast living breathing web...

Now visualize your breath as a stream or ribbon of air. See it flow up through your nose, down through your windpipe, and into your lungs. Now take it through the heart. Picture it flowing through your heart and out through an opening there to reconnect with the larger web of life. Let the breath-stream, as it passes through you and through your heart, appear as one loop within that vast web, connecting you with it...

Now open your awareness to the suffering in the world. For now drop all defenses and open to your knowledge of that suffering. Let it come as concretely as you can...images of your fellow beings in pain and need, in fear and isolation, in prisons, hospitals, tenements, refugee camps...no need to strain for these images; they are present to you by virtue of our interexistence. Relax and just let them surface...the countless hardships of our fellow human beings, and of our animal brothers and sisters as well, as they swim the seas and fly the air of this planet...Now breathe in the pain like granules of sand on the stream of air, up through your nose, down through your trachea, lungs and heart, and out again into the world...You are asked to do nothing for now, but let it pass through your heart...Be sure that stream flows through and out again, don't hang on to that pain...Surrender it for now to the healing resources of life's vast web.

"Let all sorrows ripen in me," said Shantideva, the Buddhist saint. We help them ripen by passing them through our hearts...making good, rich compost out of all that grief...so we can learn from it, enhancing our larger, collective knowing...

If no images or feelings arise and there is only blankness, gray and numb, breathe that through. The numbness itself is a very real part of our world.

And if what surfaces for you is not pain for other beings so much as the losses and hurts in your own life, breathe those through, too. Your own difficulties are an integral part of the grief of our world, and arise with it...

Should you fear that with this pain your heart might break, remember that the heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe. Your heart is that large. Trust it. Keep breathing.

Breathe through me, breath of God. And through us all. Enlarging hearts, growing compassion for ourselves and others, and may we dare believe that God feels our pain and comes near to bring comfort. "If we believe that is true, then of

course we must join God and come near, too.” McLaren tells us, “That is why we must keep Herod and the ugliness of his mass murder in the beautiful Christmas story.”

May our grief and pain be transformed, and that of our brothers and sisters as well so that one day our headlines will not be another story of violence.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

