

April 8, 2018

I John 1

Prayer: Dear God, In the afterglow of Easter, let us live as Easter people.

Redeemed by you and reconciled with each other. We pray in the name you wore while among us. Amen.

The News from Holy Week

I've never quite gotten past the old adage that a preacher ought to have a Bible in one hand, a newspaper in the other.

During Holy Week, my schedule was disrupted, and I ended up paying a little more attention to the news than I usually do. And I noticed there were a slew of stories that commented on our attempts to live our lives together in society. Stories that our Christian witness should impact – but doesn't always.

The most important to my mind was one that began this way:

“Imani Holt was just 10 when she saw a neighbor fatally shot by a triggerman riding a bicycle. The African-American girl from a gritty section of Baltimore was so traumatized by the drug-fueled bloodshed (that) she refused to leave her family's apartment for weeks.

“In the eight years since, Holt has seen the chaotic aftermath of two more deadly shootings and has lost seven high school classmates to the daily drip of gun violence.”

The daily drip of violence. That phrase was echoed in the story’s headline.

The account was what we call an enterprise story, a story that is not simply a reaction or reporting on a specific news event, but a more in-depth look at an issue. And this enterprise story was about how black teenagers are reacting to the gun debate that exploded into the national consciousness after the shooting of 17 students in Parkland, Florida.

The Baltimore students are glad that the voices of the Florida teens have brought worldwide marches and attention to the inadequacy of our gun laws.

“But, we go through shootings all the time,” said Imani Holt. “It’s just that our shootings happen day by day ...” so regularly that “the world says it’s really not that important.”

Affluence buys choices. If my children witnessed a single shooting, much less three, we would’ve had the choice to pack up and move across town to a different school, a safer neighborhood. They wouldn’t have lost seven classmates before we were gone.

A pastor in New Orleans, who has buried a toddler and three brothers all killed in shootings, warned that the cumulative trauma for children who witness these events is going to come out one way or another. Depression. Failure in school. Rage.

Even the students from Parkland, Florida, who are so bravely speaking out, recognize the dichotomy. In a speech during the marches two weeks ago, Parkland survivor Jaclyn Corin said they knew they were getting attention because they were from an affluent city.

“Because of that,” she said, “we share the stage today and forever with those who have always stared down the barrel of a gun.”

There is no reading of the New Testament that says that it is all right for some of our children to be raised in relative safety, while some face danger every time they step outside their doors. For this is Imani Holt’s reality:

“You just want to go to sleep, wake up and see the same people you saw yesterday,” she said. Instead, “one day you see somebody, the next day they’re gone.”

In these weeks following Easter, we turn from the actions of Jesus on the cross to the early church he left behind. In many ways, especially in this area of the

country, you would think that churches have influence. A lot of people sure go to them anyway.

But when we look at gun violence and the imbalance of neighborhood safety and rampant poverty and lack of affordable housing, we realize that the church isn't influencing society nearly enough.

Our Scripture passage this morning is from the epistle of I John. It is intentionally used in the wake of Easter, as an answer to Easter. *A so what?* to the events of last Sunday.

Scholars are all over the place about whether this writer John is the same as the gospel writer John who wrote about Mary Magdalene standing at the tomb of the risen Jesus. As we are going to see, there is definitely some agreement in the way both writings look at light and dark.

This could've been the same author, writing later, not from the perspective of the cross and the tomb, but as the early church struggled to its feet. Reading from I John 1:

¹We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— ²this life was

revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— ³we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

This John is not messing around. In his mind, we dare not call ourselves followers of Christ if we fail to walk with God in the light.

His is a simple point of logic: God is light. So anyone who walks with him will reflect that light. Anyone who walks in the darkness isn't walking with him at all. He's simply lying.

If this language sounds familiar, it's because it's very much like the prologue of John's gospel. **“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.”** (John 1: 9-10)

Even in this introduction to the being of Christ, which echoes and boomerangs all the way back to the creation story, gospel writer John knew there would be those who *never* knew the light. **“The world did not know him.”**

Now this *epistle writer* John -- maybe the same person, maybe not -- shares the same theology. There will be those who walk in the light and those who walk in the darkness.

This is an important distinction, especially in a ministry like this. Is drug addiction an illness, a disease? Or is it a choice made in the dark?

What is desperation as a result of injustice? And what is simple criminality?

You're not going to believe this, but I got scammed at our Easter morning service. A man said his daughter had inadvertently put their last \$20 bill in the offering pouch, and it was their gas money.

I was a little suspicious, but I thought it might have actually happened that way. So I gave him \$20. Then he went into the dining hall and stole someone's cell phone.

Sometimes we have to be honest about the criminal behavior we see. He was walking in darkness.

Another news story that struck me during Holy Week was about St. Paul's Chapel in New York. You may remember it as The Little Chapel that Stood on lower Broadway after 9-11.

In the wake of the attacks, I did a story for *The Greenville News* about Father Lyndon Harris because he happened to be from Gaffney, South Carolina. He had arrived in New York in March of 2001 to be the Episcopal priest at the little stone church that is part of the Trinity campus.

He had been there just six months when the planes crashed into the World Trade Center. While buildings and trees were smashed all around it, while white dust coated its cemetery, St. Paul's Chapel was left standing.

It became a center for firemen, policemen and other rescue workers to eat and sleep, receive massages, talk to counselors, grieve and regroup for the harrowing cleanup work at Ground Zero. This went on for months and months, with the church appearing in newspapers and on television networks around the world as an example of what the church can be.

When Father Harris left Trinity the next year, he told *The New York Times*, "The St. Paul's experience just about killed me, but it was one of the rarest privileges I've ever had, to catch a glimpse of the kingdom, to see the church as what it can be. It will haunt me for the rest of my life, to try to bring that experience to bear on other facets of the church."

Sixteen years later, Trinity and St. Paul's were back in the news during Holy Week – for installing metal detectors. The church where George Washington worshiped, where Alexander Hamilton is buried, where the workers at Ground Zero received nourishment and counsel and relief, installed metal detectors.

They will be there, said Trinity's current vicar, "until this world becomes a safer place."

I certainly don't fault the clergy of The Little Chapel that Stood for doing whatever they think necessary to protect their parishioners and visitors. But what an

excruciating statement about the darkness of our society, even inside the church walls.

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

Still, Holy Week did culminate in Easter, which demands a recognition of the strengths of this institution that Christ built. And while I don't think the church has succeeded in the realm of social justice, and indeed has often lagged behind secular society, it has been phenomenal in the area of helping individuals. Of founding hospitals and schools and hospices. Of digging wells and rebuilding homes and giving hope to those in distress.

And so during Holy Week, I read what we call a human interest story. That's a story not predicated by a hard news event, but by some uplifting situation.

Dr. John B. Martin Jr. had been an internist and cardiologist, a country doctor in nearby Pendleton. When he retired, he bred and trained quarterhorses.

But now Dr. Martin is 88 and living in a retirement village in Clemson. He can no longer carry on a conversation. So as a birthday surprise during Holy Week, his hospice workers brought two horses to visit him.

His joy, wrote reporter Angelia Davis, “spoke through his eyes. When he wasn’t feeding a horse a ... carrot with assistance from caretakers, he waved and smiled at those around him or he hummed ‘Amazing Grace.’ ”

Now I guarantee you there were church-goers at every juncture of that story, and indeed, in the founding of the hospice.

After communion, we will sing “The Church’s One Foundation.” The lyricist talks about the scorn and oppression and schisms, the toil and tribulation and tumult in the church. And then these words:

*Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One,
And mystic communion with those whose rest is won.*

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you,” John wrote in his epistle to the early church. **“God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.”**

May this church reject the darkness that surrounds us and infiltrates us and strive to live in the light with our God.

Amen.

