

Combat Evil: Do Good, Advent 3A, 15 December 2013

(Rob Gieselmann)

John the Baptist was a rock star. People followed him everywhere he went, in the suburbs, the wheatfields, and even into no-man's land. Had there been Temple paparazzi at the time, or news reporters – they would have hounded John. We hear you just baptized 8,000 people, John. What does it feel like to reach platinum? Is it true, the rumors we hear, about your mom? That she visited your aunt, Mary, last week? What did they talk about, John.

Jesus, too – and the reporters might have sounded a little like John's disciples: Are you really the one? Or should the people wait for another? Fifteen minutes of fame, and who knows, maybe Jesus and John actually played into being famous – Or, maybe they preferred obscurity. ..Hiding, traveling incognito. Indeed, not everybody wants their fifteen minutes.

The people of Newtown, CT – eschew the fame – This past week, they formally uninvited the paparazzi and the world press, begging this week – of all weeks – to be left alone. ..This first anniversary of the Sandy Hook school shootings. These kindly people asked to be allowed to grieve privately.

*Avulet is the longer Jewish period of grief – it lasts a year, in recognition that people don't just bounce back, should not be expected to bounce back. Most experts will tell you that - following the loss of a child or a spouse, twelve months is not long enough. It is merely a good start – Grief, you see, is a filmy shroud of cloth that casts a pall across all of life. Grief is not assuaged by such trifles as time. Please, leave us alone. Now, which is not the same as saying, don't care for us – or, don't pray for us. And I suspect if you and I could sit shiva with Newtown, the gesture would be welcomed. - But not the carnival of public gawking.

Last year after the shootings, I spoke about evil. Evil is not the arithmetic sum of bad choices that a person makes, the bad life or psychology of Adam Lanza. Instead, evil is a very real, very tangible force of darkness – This dark force is at war against God, if you can believe it, and against life and love and hope. What is happening in Syria is evil. - In the Central African Republic.

Everybody faces tough times during life. Tough times are not evil. They are - tough times. You were teased as a child, your family is dysfunctional, or perhaps you lost your job or got divorced, The tough times you experience in life are your servants – they do you good, if you let them. They carve your soul as art like blowing desert sands carve stones.

Evil is not hard times. Evil is not bad choices. The force of evil orchestrated Nazi Germany, South African apartheid, and the murderous prejudice of southern slavery. And we pray, Deliver us from evil – exactly - because we sense there is this force that, given half a chance, would undo you. That is the force that slithered through Sandy Hook like a snake – one year ago yesterday. And I don't know,... how do you recover from that? Twelve months. And twelve months is not nearly enough time.

So – what does all of this have to do with baptism? Simple. Being a Christian means you have pledged your heart and soul to combat evil. At baptism, the Christian renounces the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy – and then affirmatively promises to persevere in resisting evil ...These are very real promises, with very real meaning.

Well - how does the Christian combat evil? As I said last year, after Sandy Hook first happened, First you pray. But second, you do good. Herod had imprisoned John the Baptist and was about to behead him. It was the end of John's ministry, and John must have wondered, was the fame worth it? Had his life

accomplished anything? He'd known all along that his work was Part I of a tandem ministry, but where was Part II? Are you the one? ...he sent his disciples to ask Jesus. Or must I wait yet longer? And how many times have you wanted to know, Must I wait yet longer? And in the terms of evil, that is the question of the ages – must we wait for peace? Must we wait for evil's defeat?

Perhaps you recall Edmund Burke's classic statement, the only way for evil to win is for good people to do nothing. And that is what Jesus told John's disciples to relay to John – not Yes, I'm the one, but rather – look at what I'm doing. As my friend Mary Ransom always said, What you do speaks so loud I can't hear what you say. What Jesus did spoke for itself: the blind saw and the deaf heard – Likewise, what you do as a Christian speaks for itself.

So how do you combat evil? You stand against apartheid in South Africa, you stand against racial prejudice in the Bay Area, you stand in favor of equality among all people, regardless of gender, or sexual orientation. And remembering Newtown, you fight the proliferation of semiautomatic rifles and pistols. But there is more. In your life, where you are, where you live – You heal people. You touch each person you encounter who has metaphoric leprosy – you hold the dying in your arms, and you provide a safe haven to the outcast. That is the life of the Christian. That is the life to which Oliver's parents are committing him this morning – not an easy life, but a meaningful life. - An extraordinary life.

I know you've heard that old quote from Annie Dillard – I think Richard Schaper used it a few months ago: wearing straw or velvet hats in church is ridiculous – you should wear a crash helmet. The ushers should hand out life preservers and signal flares, and they should lash us to our pews. And at this season, let me add: Christmas isn't Christmas because of lights and tinsel and kitschy elevator music. Christmas isn't Christmas because it is happy, and certainly not because it is sappy. Christmas is Christmas because it marks the division in history in which God announced to all creation: evil will not win.

Bella and David, as Oliver grows, teach him that good overcomes evil, and grace heals estrangement. Tell him that evil can be resisted, and it is his job to do so. Teach him how to heal others with his touch, and to lead others into sight. Tell him his life isn't meant to be easy – nobody's is. It is meant to be meaningful.