

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: November 15, 2015
Sermon Title: Paris
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

I was so proud of myself. It was Friday afternoon about 1:30. I asked Alida to listen to my sermon. She said it was fine, better than fine, really good. So I was all set. Friday afternoon at 1:30, and the sermon was done! By 5:30, I felt like that old R.E.M. song, "It's the End Of The World As We Know It." The slaughter of the innocents in Paris brought the evil and horror of Islamic terrorism into even clearer, blunter perspective. The world of Friday at 1:30 was gone. That sermon may be fine for another day, but not today. It was titled, "Christians and Pizza." It was light, airy, even funny at points in a sort of sarcastic way, with a really good analogy about pizza. But not for today.

Instead, we are plunged into the too-familiar shock of 9/11, Newtown, the Boston Marathon, events that strike at the heart of who we are, what we believe, and how we go forward. By 6:30 on Friday night we sent out this "Pastoral Letter and Prayer" to our church:

Paris: Slaughter of the Innocent

We refuse to be numb.
We refuse to let this terror be the new normal.
"Blessed are they that mourn," Jesus said.
So let us be blessed in our mourning.

One part of the Christmas story, a part we mostly prefer to ignore, is the terror unleashed by King Herod upon the families of Bethlehem. Herod wanted to kill the "Prince of Peace" in his infancy, and so ordered the second "slaughter of the innocent." The first? When the oppressive Pharaoh did the same after the birth of Moses, whose life was dedicated to freedom.

In every slaughter of the innocent, the enemies of freedom and peace prove themselves to be God hating and life hating. This is the personification of evil.

At Sunday worship we will bare our souls in faith and sorrow. We will call on our God, we will turn to our Scriptures, we will stand together.

We need to be together. The future, our future, requires the best of us, the greatest of us.

Let us pray.

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.

Holy God, these ancient words speak for the emptiness of our words.

We need your help.

Our own ways, our own thoughts, our own strategies, our own answers, our own words fail us.

And so we say:

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.

In your mercy, heal the wounded in body and spirit,

take away the spirit of fear,

defeat the presence of evil,

and resurrect within each of us our faith in the Prince of Peace.

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Amen.

The first lines, "We refuse to be numb, we refuse to let this terror be the new normal," were a direct result of my own shame. Sitting on the couch, watching the TV reports, seeing the death toll rise, planning a new service for today, looking through the hymnbook for better hymns, writing that pastoral letter, I was ashamed to realize I am numb, I have allowed the age of terror to be my new normal.

Three weeks ago, Islamic terrorists slaughtered 224 people on a Russian airplane flying out of Egypt. I didn't blink. I didn't change anything about last Sunday's service. I didn't even mention the Russians in my prayer. On Thursday, Islamic terrorists slaughtered 41 people in Beirut, Lebanon. That didn't register. I had no plans to alter today's service. I doubt I would have remembered to include them in our prayers. I am numb. I am resigned to the new normal.

So first I had to stop myself. I had to wake up to the reality of this great evil, I had to recognize it, pray about it, and realize the ramifications for all of us. Today is not the day to dwell on it, but the ramifications will be earth shattering, life altering, world changing.

Alida and I have four children. Three are overseas right now, two in India, one in Shanghai, one outside Washington, D.C. Here's the new reality: I have no idea who's in the safest place, who's in the most danger. I don't even know what the best reaction is: freak out? Or go about our business?

My daughter and her family live in Bangalore, India. A couple of years ago, my son-in-law went to a cricket match. As he entered the stadium, a terrorist bomb blew up the entrance. He was hit in the face by debris but continued on into the stadium. The cricket match was played. He had a great time. Maybe there is a place for a "stiff-upper-lip/life-goes-on" approach, even to horror . . . I don't know.

I got up early on Saturday, clicked around the radio stations to catch up on the Paris news. I discovered the world was already back on its axis: NPR had the "Car Talk" guys on. The two big talk-radio stations had their usual Saturday morning hawkers selling vitamin supplements to cure cancer. Sports radio was covering the Knicks' loss to LeBron James; the rock 'n' roll stations had Journey, Springsteen, and Prince. The news stations had Trump's attack on Ben Carson. Paris was somewhere way in the background.

I remember when my mother died, I couldn't understand why the world didn't stop. My world had stopped; why hadn't everyone else's? Why were people still going to work, shopping, playing games? So there is a thin line between the world stopping to face the anguish and "keep on keepin' on." Today, we need to face the anguish.

Scripture Litany

Leader: For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

People: *A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose.*

Leader: A time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.
(Ecclesiastes 3)

People: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

Leader: Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

People: *Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*"
(Matthew 5)

ALL: **Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O, death, is your victory? Where, O, death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

There you have it, don't you? Old Testament, New Testament; the stark realities of life, the extraordinary hopes of faith; yin and yang.

*A time to be born
A time to die
A time to love
A time to hate
A time for peace
A time for war*

And then, Jesus's "Blesseds." Boy, we don't want to hear those, do we? "Blessed are the meek? Blessed are the pure in heart? Blessed are the peacemakers?" We'd rather have the Scriptures of David killing Goliath, Samson wiping out the entire government of the Philistines, the Red Sea swallowing up the Egyptian army. Instead, our Scriptures ended with St. Paul's brash proclamation of resurrection, of eternal life. "O, death, where is thy sting; O, grave, where is thy victory?" Paul is taunting death, mocking the terrorists' conceit. "Bring it on," he says, "you say, 'God is great' while you kill? We say the greatness of God is in life, the life God gives us, the life God promises us."

After Alida sent out our Pastoral Letter and Prayer, we went to our church's wine and cheese party sponsored by our Fellowship Committee. It was a reminder of Ecclesiastes's wisdom, "There is a time to weep *and* a time to laugh." (Eccl. 3:4) And later in that same chapter, Ecclesiastes declares:

"There is nothing better for a person than to be happy . . . to eat, drink, and take joy in all their life: this is the gift of God." (Eccl. 3:12-13) And so we ate and drank and laughed, taking joy in all our life.

About halfway through, we gathered everybody around just to share from the wellspring of our church faith and our church love. I told them about my scrapped pizza sermon and mentioned that it was actually a sermon about love. In John's Gospel, Jesus makes an impassioned plea to his disciples. "Love, love, love, and love some more." (John 15:9-17, paraphrased) "God loves me," John tells them, "I love you, so here's my command: you love. Just like me. Just like God. Love, period." And then I told the folks at the party Jesus didn't tell us to "love" because he's some aging, '60s, wimpy hippie! He explains himself carefully, "Love so that your joy may be complete."

All I've really done today is take the pizza out of my sermon, but the love stays. Our message today, broken-hearted, to us, to the people of France, and beyond is this: War is upon us, evil is around us, but love stays "that our joy may still be complete."

Let us sing together, "If You Will Trust in God to Guide You," No. 565.

*If you will trust in God to guide you
and hope in God through all your ways,
God will give strength, whate'er betide you,
and bear you through the evil days.
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
builds on the rock that will not move.*

*God will embrace your pain and weeping,
your helpless anger and distress.
If you are in God's care and keeping,
in sorrow will God love you less?
For Christ who took for you a cross,
will bring you save through every loss.*

*Sing, pray, and keep God's ways unswerving;
so do your own part faithfully,
and trust God's word; though undeserving,
you'll find God's promise true to be.
God never will forsake in need
the soul that trusts in God indeed.*

Closing Music: "La Marseillaise"