

Sermon Text for June 21, 2015 from Vicar Lauren Blatt (First lesson was story of David and Goliath)

Cyclopes, Gargantua, Jack's Giant from the beanstalk, Bigfoot, Paul Bunyan, Frankenstein's Monster... These are some of the stories we tell one another about giants. It doesn't matter whether or not these giants exist, and it doesn't matter if Goliath existed--we still tell the stories for entertainment and sometimes at an attempt to teach a lesson or moral. It seems hard to wrap our heads around something like giants walking the earth, but we can understand the themes of the story of David and Goliath.

In our society there are so many giants. Racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty, discrimination, health care or lack thereof, economic downturn, war, disease, drought, famine... and the reality is that we aren't going to change any one of these things in the foreseeable future. They're huge problems that are systemically rooted in our societies throughout our world.

I had written a whole sermon about the global food crisis and how we contribute to food shortages all over our planet, but then De'payne Middletown-Doctor, Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, Clementa Pinckney, TyWanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons Sr., Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thompson were fatally shot in Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina while attending Bible studies and worship.

Why are we enthralled by violence? Why does our daily existence depend on racist structures that are evident to the marginalized but invisible to the powerful? How is it that so many of us engage in the relentless denial of both these realities? Perhaps most importantly: why do so many of us practice a willful ignorance of the pain of our black sisters and brothers?

Like the man with the demon in Mark 5.... The man seems like his problems are his own--his possession is that of his individual self (that somehow he has done something wrong to become possessed), but when Jesus demanded a name from the demon the demon named a social plague: "Legion" referring to the Roman domination of the time. We must name racism. We must call out the name of racism. Charleston's murderer acted alone, but he is possessed by one of our national demons: racism.

But...what are we supposed to do about any of this? It's a giant problem that we are looking up at from the ground armed with only a slingshot and a few stones. The work before us is daunting! By God's grace we are giant slayers! We live in a time when too many giants are still standing.

Because this story has been used so frequently it's lost its bite. It has become commonplace... a thing of fairy tales... yet it's a story that tells a truth that we have forgotten.

Melissa Browning writes, "The thing you should know about giants is this, seeing them is half the battle. The most powerful giants are the ones who are hidden. But once we see them – really see them – once we can call them by name – the stones are ours for the throwing."

Ok, so... What if we reflect on the gospel reading for this morning to look for a sense of hope. In the gospel Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat while his disciples are gripping at the sides of the boat afraid that they might perish. The disciples were doing God's work-- giving up their lives and following Jesus, obeying the seemingly smaller command to crossover to the other side of the sea... and where is Jesus? He's asleep in the boat and finally when the disciples can't take it any longer the disciples wake Jesus up. Instead of solving the problem immediately Jesus challenges the disciples. Jesus says, "Why are you afraid."

I think that's how many people in the black community feel concerning the blatant racism in the United States. The storm is violent and Jesus is sleeping. The racism is violent, life is hard... and God is silent, dare we think asleep. And it's hard to trust God when the people of God are the ones perpetrating horrors.

Jesus awakes and demands the storm to stop, "Peace! Be still!" and immediately the storm stopped. I wish I could tell you why it seems that God is sleeping--here and now. Why it seems like God isn't calling this storm to rest, why it seems like God isn't slaying this giant, why it seems like things are getting worse and not better--I wish I had the answer, but the beautiful thing about Lutheran theology and the gospel of our Lord is that we don't need to come up with an answer. We don't need to come up with a reason why this massacre occurred. We don't need to come up with solutions. We don't need to fix this in the way a white savior might come in and save the day. And like the gospel of Mark faith comes out of desperation.

I think many people's cries are echoing that of the prophet Habakkuk: Saying...

How long must I cry, O Eternal One,
and get no answer from You?

Even when I yell to You, "Violence is all around!"

You do nothing to save those in distress.

Why do You force me to see these atrocities?

Why do You make me watch such wickedness?

Disaster and violence, conflict and controversy are raging all around me.

Your law is powerless to stop this; injustice prevails.

The depraved surround the innocent, and justice is perverted.

We profess a theology of the cross-- A theology that says God shows up in the pain and in the suffering. Proverbs 3:5 reads, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. This hatred is racism. It's not only the problem of the shooter... it's a symptom of a bigger problem; of one that hurts some and helps others. It's a system of oppression, of hatred, of wickedness.

One who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore one prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. Theologians of glory call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross. God continues to show up in the last spot we would reasonably look. On a cross... in the suffering, in the pain and now as unreasonable as it seems in cheap wine and wafers.

I really struggled to figure out what I was going to say in the wake of such tragedy. I feel led by God's Spirit to call the church to repentance for the ongoing sin of racism and acknowledgment of the many ways in which we all benefit from this racist system. God's grace makes us giant slayers and even when we think God is sleeping or not paying attention-- God is with us. God is with us in our suffering. God is leading us home. God is giving us strength to look at the days ahead and to say this should not happen. Race is a construct that doesn't matter to God because God loves all people.

People of God, The Massacre at Emanuel AME should not have happened and like Jesus crying with Lazarus' family when Lazarus dies-- Jesus weeps for the lives that were lost, the lives that are forever scarred by this experience, and Jesus weeps for the state of humanity... for our inability to love, for our inability to trust, and for our constant oppression of others to puff up our chests and make ourselves higher and mightier than we ought.

Even in times like this God comes to us. God opens God's arms to all people offering forgiveness. Even when we've failed. Even when we've let our brothers and sisters die. Even in the wake of oppression and awful violence. God always calls us back offering us grace and love--offering us another chance. Forgiving us over and over again.

We stand with our brothers
We stand with our sisters
We stand with their families
We stand with Susie Jackson,
Rev. Daniel Simmons,
Ethel Lee Lance,
Myra Thompson,
Cynthia Hurd,
Rev. De'Payne Middleton-Doctor,
Rev. Sharonda Singleton,
Rev. Clementa Pickney, and
TyWanza Sanders
We stand to bear their burden in Jesus' name
We cry out to you, oh Lord
Our hearts breaking, eyes weeping, heads spinning
The sin of racism is entrenched and entwined in the history of the American church
The sin of American exceptionalism has tainted the church in America
The sin of stealing a land that belonged to another has been written into our history and into our souls
The violence in our street, the violence we export has come into your house
The hatred in our cities and in our own hearts has crept into your sanctuary
The brokenness in our lives has broken into your temple
The dividing wall of racism has crushed our brothers and sisters
We have allowed racism to change your Son into a blue-eyed, blonde man who helps win sports
championships and protects America
Our silence, our apathy, our comfort has been complicit in this evil
We cry out to you, May your Kingdom come, may it be on earth as it is in heaven
We declare our love as one body, one Lord, one faith, one baptism
We declare they do not grieve alone today

Amen