

SERMON
Church of the Holy Communion, Memphis, Tennessee
The Reverend Alexander H. Webb II (“Sandy”)
December 6, 2015

The Second Sunday of Advent (Year C)
Revised Common Lectionary
Luke 3:1-6

“The War on Christmas”

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Breaking news: War has been declared on Christmas.

The media outlets covering this “War on Christmas” report that greeting cards now say “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas.” They report that shopping mall displays now lack sleighs and reindeer. They report that Starbucks’ red coffee cups are not religiously themed.¹ Media pundits and ordinary people speak of the “War on Christmas” with passion and intensity. They speak of the “War on Christmas” as though Jesus could possibly care about greeting cards and coffee cups.

Christmas has become so commercialized, that any departure from our cultural traditions is not only breaking news, but an offense against our faith. Has our faith become so weak that it can be challenged by something so small? Have we become so deaf to the needs of the world that we think these small things should be of any concern to us at all?

In our reading from St. Luke’s Gospel this morning, St. John the Baptist fulfills Isaiah’s ancient prophecy. A lone voice in a great wilderness, John cries out from the reedy banks of the River Jordan: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

In this season of Advent, John shows us how to prepare for Jesus’ arrival: By making his paths straight. John does not say that Jesus will make our paths straight, instead John says that we will make his paths straight. *We* will lift the valleys and tear down the mountains. *We* will smooth the rough places. *We* will build the highway along which the salvation of our God will roll.²

We ready ourselves for Christ’s coming and for his coming again when we do our part to order the world in the way that Christ wants it to be ordered – and we have a lot of work ahead of us.

News becomes personal when it affects someone we love, as the people of San Bernardino, Colorado Springs, Charleston, Smith Mountain Lake, and many parts of Memphis can all attest. Our country’s recent increase in violence was made personal for me last week by an incident that did not make headlines.

¹ Representative example: <http://mediamatters.org/video/2015/11/09/fox-host-the-war-on-christmas-is-off-to-an-earl/206704>

² Cf., Isaiah 40:3-4

One of my cousins wrote this sobering message: “Yesterday my children spent the afternoon in lockdown in their elementary school while the police exchanged gunfire with someone in the street outside. An officer was shot and the person they were pursuing was killed. . . I am extremely troubled by our violent world, brought close to home yesterday and in the murders in California but part of our culture everywhere. What should I be doing as an individual to make things better?”

If you knew my cousin, you would know that she is already doing more than most of us to be the voice for the voiceless, to bring about a more just society. Yet, even she wonders what an individual can do to stem the terrible tide of violence that is washing over us.

I wish that I had an answer to my cousin’s question. I wish that I could tell you specifically what I want you to do as I admonish you to prepare the Lord’s way. I can’t. The problems that we face are bigger than any of us. The vast majority of us are powerless to change the violent nature of our society, or to control the specter of violence that has been visited upon us. But please, *please* don’t stop trying.

We may not be able to control the nature of our society, but we can control the way we live in that society. We have the power to behave with integrity when it is easier to cheat. We have the power to speak the truth when it is easier to lie. We have the power to work for justice in our neighborhoods and in our workplaces when it is easier for us to remain silent. Most importantly, we have the power to seek reconciliation with our neighbors, when it is much, *much* easier to seek revenge.

Choosing to live an honorable life, and insisting that others do the same, is how we make a difference – albeit a small difference – in the world; it is how we raise valleys and bring down mountains; it is how we make rough places plain.

Mass shootings, elementary schools in lockdown, and a general unwillingness even to try and curb this scourge of violence is a true offense against our faith, and is reflective of a society that has drifted far away from its core values. When we leave this building today, each one of us will enter a different slice of our unjust world. Each one of us will face different dilemmas – how we interact with our spouses and our children, how we negotiate transactions, how we make hiring decisions, how we speak the truth, how we honor the strangers ahead of us in line, how we respond to those whose actions or views offend us. The list goes on, but my point is this: A culture of values, nonviolence, and respect begins with us and spreads outward from here.

We need to stop worrying about the so-called “War on Christmas” – we need to let people send whatever greeting cards they like, decorate their stores in whatever way they like, and serve coffee in whatever cups they like. In fact, we need to stop worrying about all the stressors and the pressures and even the much-beloved traditions of this season so that we can focus on the things that really matter: A world that needs changing, and an integrity that needs restoring.

The voice of the one crying out in the wilderness asks us to do only one thing: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

Amen.