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St. Luke's Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
5th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7C) – 18 & 19 June 2016
I Kings 19:1-15a; Luke 8:26-39

Last Sunday, in the wee hours of the morning, while most of us slept, a man in Orlando made a choice, a cruel and despicable choice, that ended the lives of 49 persons, maimed 53 more, and left an indelible stain on minds and hearts of many thousands, whose child, sibling, friend, spouse, or life partner suffered unspeakable torment over a period of hours. Even those whose bodies somehow avoided being defiled by bullets will seek healing for the rest of their lives, scarred by the emotional trauma of a memory that can never be forgotten.

For every compassionate person around the world, this attack strikes at a raw open wound. Just the latest in a series of outrages against basic human decency, outrages motivated by bigotry and religious intolerance, it leaves us wondering when and where it will happen next, because none of us are foolish enough to expect that the slaughters of the innocent will stop anytime soon. Anger and sadness fill our hearts to the bursting point. The painful strain makes us yearn for a way to erase the horrific images, to mute the ugly sounds, and the busyness of life offers an accomplice ready to conspire with us in forgetting. But God will never forget, so neither should we.

Instead, as followers of Jesus Christ, we need to respond faithfully by serving as witnesses to God's incomparable justice and mercy. This discipline demands discernment and sacrifice. It requires patience and persistence and the purging of hatred, no matter how deserved it might be, for God in His infinite patience and perseverance does not give as we deserve. Therefore, we have no right to indulge in judgment and condemnation. Besides, the world

already has plenty of that. What do you think fuels the fire of these murderous rampages, if not judgment and condemnation? Adding our own causes harm and brings help to no one.

A good place to start in our faithful response might be to revise our vocabulary. Words shape our reality. They define our perceptions. You may have noticed that I have not yet said the word “terrorist,” and that will be the last time I utter that term today. I prefer enemy, because anyone who enjoys torturing and killing people indiscriminately is my enemy. The other label I dislike, because my enemy likes it. They want to be identified with that label, because it validates them. To inspire terror is their greatest desire, because that awful combination of fear and dread strips people of their reason, pushes them to extremity, and causes them to abandon their highest principles in the quest for safety. To our enemy, killing people is merely a means to an end. Their end is to kill our values and virtues using the tool of terror, but they cannot do that if we refuse to cooperate, and if we unwittingly cooperate, then measure by measure we will become just as brutal, just as vicious, as the people we deplore.

Knowing full well that my children’s school or this very Church might be the next target, I refuse to be terrorized by evil men who have hijacked a noble religion and turned it for their own purposes into a cult that worships death and oppression. I refuse because in the storm on the sea, when the disciples thought they’d drown, the Lord said, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” [Mark 4:40] Elsewhere, John wrote, “Perfect love casts out fear.” [I John 4:18] Peter wrote, “Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated.” [I Peter 3:14] In times of weakness, I fail in this endeavor, so I am no example to follow, but we have an example in Jesus Christ, who despite the violence of his enemies never allowed fear to control him or to take from him the truth of the power of God’s love. That’s the example we are all called to follow, but it’s

tough for us imagine being in the same league with Jesus, so let's pause for a moment to remember a less exalted person.

A long time ago, a man feared for his life so much that he fled into the wilderness, not from the prospect of some vague possibility that somebody somewhere might someday try to kill him. No, he left to escape a clear and present danger. He had angered the consort to the king by killing all the false prophets of her false god. Beyond being a personal affront, this weakened her position in the royal court, so Jezebel sent a messenger to deliver the news, "You're a dead man." So Elijah ran.

At one point, Elijah grew so desperate, "He asked that he might die," but God sent an angel to comfort and sustain him with food and water, which gave Elijah strength to travel another forty days to a holy mountain called Horeb. Upon arrival, God asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" As if God didn't already know. Elijah explained his predicament, but strangely did not ask for protection or vengeance. God's response, "I'm on my way."

"A great wind," blew through, "so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces." Forget category-5 hurricanes. Forget tornados that toss trees and tractors around like toys. They've got nothing on this wind. You'd think that Elijah would have flown off that mountain like a leaf, but he didn't. Maybe his faith, rooted in a just and trustworthy God, kept him grounded, but whatever the case, certainly that mighty wind was the sign of God's presence, but "the Lord was not in the wind."

"After the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire." Now earthquake, wind, and fire are universal religious symbols for God's presence. Think about the Exodus, when a strong wind divided the waters to make an escape route for the Hebrews. Think about Pentecost, when tongues of fire

rested on the Apostles' heads, announcing the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Think about the earthquake that struck when Jesus died on the cross, tearing the veil of the Temple in two.

Yet on the mountain with Elijah, all three were present, "and the Lord was not," until "a sound of sheer silence." Imagine how peaceful, a silence devoid of prattling experts and screeching demagogues prophesying falsely that the end is nigh. What a relief that blessed silence would be if only we could somehow find 15 minutes out of the 1,440 we're given each day to be still in the presence of God.

And God asked again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" and after listening to Elijah's answer, "the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way.'" No promise of protection, not even an acknowledgement of Elijah's well-founded fears, really. Just, "Why are you here? Get back to work." And you know what? Jezebel never did manage to kill Elijah. In fact, he never died. Instead, God took him bodily into heaven on a fiery chariot, and for this reason, many Jewish people viewed Jesus as Elijah returned, which brings us back to Jesus.

"A man in the city who had demons met him." Great way to be greeted straight off the boat, with a madman screaming, "Leave me alone!" But Jesus wasn't having any of that. He demanded to know the name of the evil spirit that possessed this man, that drove him to live in the tombs of others, and the demon replied, "Legion," the name of a Roman military formation that consisted of 1,000 men.

Once you know a demon's name, you have power over it, and knowing precisely who Jesus was, in a way that ironically no one else did at the time, "They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss." Demons asking Jesus for mercy, like that was going to happen. But there was a herd of pigs nearby, "and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission."

That never ceases to amaze me, why Jesus would grant the request of demons, but he did, and once they took control of the pigs, they rushed into water and drowned. Nobody knows why. Nobody knows what happened to the demons afterwards. Maybe, without a living being to dwell in, they went to the abyss. Maybe they went around homeless, looking for new opportunities. But there's a plausible explanation for why they went into the water.

Demons, by their very nature, cannot understand the concept of mercy. It is a godly reality, wholly incompatible and obnoxious to them. In a way, they didn't know what they were asking from Jesus, and when he granted them this small mercy, the demons couldn't stand it. Once they'd experienced it, they preferred the abyss or wandering around homeless, anything but mercy.

That man in Orlando, who according to eyewitnesses laughed as he pulled the trigger again and again and again; this man, who seems to have hated mercy more than anything else, he was possessed by a demon. Now to be quite clear, it doesn't absolve him of moral responsibility. At the same time, to be quite clear, the demon that possessed him was not named Allah or Muhammed.

If a fundamentalist Christian, full of judgment and self-righteous superiority, which many of them possess in abundance, walked into a mosque and shot 102 people, and the rest of the world said, "All Christians are responsible. All of them want to do what he did," we'd feel resentful, and rightly so, because the accusation wouldn't be true, even though there are numerous violent passages in both Testaments of the Bible that could be twisted around and used as an excuse for killing non-Christians.

We don't need more hatred and blame and suspicion. We don't need to fear the peaceful, of whatever creed or nation, who despise the common enemy and weep with compassion for

those struck by the enemy's rage. No, what we need is more mercy. Now I'm not asking you to go place flowers on that man's grave or even pray for the repose of his soul. Frankly, I think he's probably beyond the help of our intercession anyway. But every time we show mercy, it hurts our demonic enemy more than any bomb or bullet could. He's left his legacy of violence and judgment and cruelty. It's time for us to work harder on leaving ours, a legacy of mercy and of peace and of love, so that next Sunday, when we talk about last Sunday and the week that followed, we might have a different story to tell, a story that conforms to the beautiful hymn, "Faith of our Fathers!"

Faith of our fathers! Living still in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword:
O how our hearts beat high with you, when-e'er we hear that glorious word:

Faith of our fathers! Faith and prayer shall win all nations unto thee:
And through the truth that comes from God, mankind shall then indeed be free.

Faith of our fathers! We will love both friend and foe in all our strife:
And preach thee, too, as love knows how, by kindly deeds and virtuous life.

Faith of our fathers, holy faith! We will be true to thee till death.

Amen.