

Isaiah 50: 4-9a “Who is to Blame?” Rev. Janet Chapman 4/13/25

So legend has it that right after the Civil War, a host of people became teachers because they thought teaching was an easy way to make a living. Times have certainly changed, haven't they? In his autobiography, Booker T. Washington told about one such fellow. This man went from village to village teaching and being paid for it. In one town, the people asked if he taught that the earth was flat or round? The teacher replied that he was prepared to teach either way, the earth could be flat or round, depending upon the preference of the majority of the community. It was known as “truth by survey,” something which happens in our community all too frequently.

Before we beat ourselves up about it, we get to Palm Sunday and encounter another crowd who had a similar problem. Jesus comes into Jerusalem for Passover, a primary religious observance for the Jews, and crowds are gathered shoulder to shoulder questioning just who is this mysterious man who has come into town, riding a colt? Some claim he's the king from David's lineage which Jewish prophecy claimed would destroy Roman authority once and for all. Others argue he is nothing more than a rogue rabbi claiming to be God. Gentiles who didn't understand the Jewish concept of a promised Messiah wandered if he might be a magician of sorts, coming to entertain them. By the end of the week, this fickle crowd who chants out hosannas of praise, dropping coats and palms on the road before Jesus, takes on a crowd mentality and cries out for his crucifixion, for it is clear he is out of control. Survey says he's a fraud and must die, but who is to blame for this tragic turn of events?

On the Saturday before Thanksgiving 2021, Jennifer Crumbley pushed through the glass door at the Accurate Range gun practice site. She carried with her a Sauer SIG 9mm semi-automatic pistol that her husband, James, had purchased the previous day near their home of Oxford, Michigan. The Crumbleys' 15-year-old son, Ethan, had come along. He stood awkwardly by, glancing distractedly at the semi-automatic rifles for rent on the wall. After consulting with him, Jehn paid cash for half an hour of range time, 100 rounds of 9mm ammunition, and 2 paper targets. Ethan faced the long, narrow gallery first, stepped slightly back from the small metal counter, lifted the pistol, aimed and fired, and as he

became accustomed to the motion, fired 14 times in quick succession. Then he proceeded to show his mom how to do the same. When she was done, Ethan gently placed the pistol and magazine back into the padded case, and Jehn carried the case through the lobby and out to the parking lot. That evening, she posted a photo on Instagram showing a paper target riddled with holes and caption, “Mom and son testing out his new Christmas present – my first time and I hit the bullseye.” She also posted the family’s Christmas tree, as yet untrimmed. On the other hand, Ethan texted his one and only friend about his loneliness and depression. Later in the week, he reached out to his parents about voices he was hearing telling him to do horrible things. His dad told him to suck it up and his mom laughed it off. The next day he wrote his friend, “I’m mentally and physically dying, and my parents won’t even respond.” He begged them to take him to a doctor, anyone who could help him understand why he felt like he did, why the voices wouldn’t leave him alone. The mom ignored the text, even when Ethan asked her if she had any response, and the dad just sloughed it off saying you’ll be fine. On Nov. 30th, school counselors called the parents to the school to show them drawings he had made with images of his new pistol alongside a figure with bullet wounds and phrases like “blood everywhere” and “help me, the thoughts won’t stop.” The parents left Ethan there at school and went back to work, believing him to just be depressed over the death of his grandmother, a family pet, and the moving of a good friend. Most of you know the rest, he came out of the bathroom later that day firing his first of 32 shots which killed 4 teens and wounded a couple dozen others. One year ago this week, the Michigan justice system did something never done before and convicted the parents of involuntary manslaughter, due to repeated acts that only encouraged destruction of self and others.

Who is to blame? Pick one, pick any one of them involved in Ethan’s tragic life and you have still not solved the crime, which is as complicated as any murder mystery ever written. The accessibility to internal thoughts by both the teen and the parents via social media only complicated the matter. Sure, Ethan is the one who did it, but who else is to blame? The school counselor who deemed him not to be a threat to himself or others, the gun manufacturer who made the pistol so easy to use, the gun range site who made it a

game to hit the target so many times... how about those violent video games Ethan loved so much or those war-monger movies where the star goes into a situation fighting all those impossible odds, but then comes out some kind of hero? Such questions can spark feelings that the whole of creation is to blame, as if the real enemy – past, present, and future – is everything in this world that is set against God.

As we look to Jesus' final week on earth, we ask who is to blame? Tragedy and suffering are always easier to swallow if there is someone to blame. Like Judas and the mob, our feeble response to our disappointment is often to betray those who have let us down. Like the high priests Annas and Caiphas, our weakness deep inside prompts us to deal with our fear by condemning those who threaten us. Like Pilate, our fragile ego wants to deal with public pressure by throwing up our hands, and like the soldiers, our tattered conscience wants to deal with the call to personal responsibility by just following orders.

To all those parts of us who seek to blame someone else, the prophet Isaiah speaks. Isaiah is the number one prophet from which Jesus draws his references throughout his teaching ministry. It all begins with Jesus picking up the scroll of Isaiah in the temple right after returning from the wilderness. After a 40 day season of wilderness journeys, he strolls back into church, as today's text infers, with an educated tongue, knowing how to respond to the weary, with a word that will awaken everyone to listen as educated people do, he reads Isaiah chapter 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me..." Listen carefully, for we are being given a glimpse into Jesus' job description, his mission on earth. Therefore, we get a pretty good idea what we should be doing if we take seriously Jesus as our model. Jesus continues, "He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners, and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The prophet Isaiah doesn't spend a great deal of time blaming others for the suffering in the world, but instead offers words of comfort, solace, and direction. The specific text read in today's worship comes from what are called the Servant Songs, Isaiah 42-53, which could easily have been written for Jesus as much as for the 6th century BCE prophet. They speak of the personal significance of human pain and suffering, specifically how pain teaches something

counterintuitive as Richard Rohr notes. Pain teaches us that we must go down before we even know what up is. We must have Good Friday before we can dare to have Easter. Suffering of some sort seems to be the only thing strong enough to destabilize our arrogance and ignorance. Rohr suggests that suffering very simply is “whenever we are not in control.” The truth is if we can’t find some meaning in suffering, then humanity is in major trouble. It is the practice of faith that shows us what to do with the absurd, the tragic, the nonsensical and unjust. Thus, if we don’t transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit our pain, much like the Crumbleys.

Who is to blame for the pain and suffering of this holiest of weeks? Maybe that’s the wrong question – maybe the question is actually who chose this path from palms and praises to agony and a cross? I guess it was probably inevitable – Jesus’ death was as easy to foresee as that of a lamb grazing among wolves, except it was more deliberate than that. It wasn’t that Jesus was incapable of defending himself; he could have stopped his teaching, applied “truth by survey,” compromised his sermons, or rallied the troops to fight for his cause. He could have faded into the woodwork, blended into the crowd like any other Galilean. It wasn’t that he couldn’t save himself but that he wouldn’t save himself, because that is not who he was; it wasn’t the way to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release, to liberate the oppressed, to bring sight to the blind, to usher in the year of God’s favor. If anything, Jesus was put to death for being completely who he was and for refusing to be any less than who he was, which so offended the whole fallen creation that it conspired to wipe him off the face of the earth. Who chose this path? There is a strong possibility it was Jesus himself who turned his body over to the attackers, and he would do it again, to reveal God’s great love for us and the transformative power of servanthood. Who dares to argue with such a Servant of God’s? Only those who fear not being in control.