
What Then Shall We Do?

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A sermon by the Reverend Canon Elizabeth Knowlton

Advent 3C

Luke 3:7-18

The name of the museum, literally translated means "a place and a name." I entered it with little expectation. I was in my early twenties and I had no awareness that in a few short hours the terrain around me would look forever changed. I arrived after having spent a month in Jordan, and images of refugee camps with beautiful children singing "we shall overcome," had colored my view of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as it looked in the fall of 1988. I had been in Israel for less than two weeks, and still, only at the halfway point of my program of study, believed there must be a solution. One I would be able to support and articulate in just a few short weeks. An answer that would allow me to grasp how different people, steeped in suffering, could live together. That they could create a new vision without violence or conflict. The answer had to be there, somewhere. It was merely my job to find it.

So, I arrived at Yad Vashem, the national Holocaust museum in Israel with my naiveté firmly intact. As I walked through the hallways, I was struck by the simplicity of the exhibits. The countless number of black and white photos. The stark explanations of unspeakable horror. Words like "the final solution" were all the more chilling because they were so understated in their presentation. Many in my group made their way quickly through the place, eager to avoid the confrontation with so much horror, seemingly without easy explanation.

But for whatever reason, I decided to linger. I decided to go step by step through Yad Vashem and to try in the smallest of ways to honor the millions of lives that had been lost in the Sho'ah--the great Calamity as it is remembered by the Jewish people. By the time I emerged on the vista of Mount Herzl, I could only stumble forward, blinded by tears, and find a bench to sit on and sob uncontrollably. I thought I had known of the power of evil before, but in the innocent faces of so many people, especially the children, I was completely undone. The faces of those children, were the same faces I had seen in Jordan. The same faces that were smiling this past week in Newtown, CT. The same smiles and hope for life. I lost in that instant any belief in a simple solution to the conflict in the Middle East, or so many other inexplicable and tragic circumstances that come into our world.

But in the heart wrenching moment of awareness, I had never felt more human or connected with the pain and suffering of the world. As the sunlight on my face gradually dried my tears, I was sobered, perhaps even disconcerted, but I felt the presence of the holy. There were no answers, but there was the beginning of a journey. A journey to a new way of experiencing life.

"As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

"So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people."

There is rarely a time I look forward to hearing from John the Baptist. To hear his calling us to account in vitriolic passion always feels like I have been caught as a red-handed teenager returning past curfew in the dark of night.

It is not the soft first Advent-like invitation I prefer which invites me to draw nearer to God. To quiet myself so I may joyfully prepare to receive the birth of the beautiful and precious baby Jesus. But while I rarely want to hear from John the Baptist, there are times when I can admit I need his passion and his anger to break through my hardened heart or wake me from a deadened sleep. It might not seem like good news, but it can be needed news.

But not this morning. I suspect there is not one among us who has arrived today with images from Newtown, CT seared upon our souls who is asleep. Our hearts are broken wide open. We have already had our wake up call, and it looks much more like the slaughter of the Holy Innocents than a pre-baptismal call to straighten up and fly right. We wonder how it is that again Herod has come into our midst and robbed us of things too precious to speak of? We arrive this morning, more aware than ever of our own vulnerability, our inability at times to make any sense of our world, and perplexed by the power of what we have witnessed.

We grieve and lament along with those who have lost so much, and we wonder to ourselves, like the crowd, "What then shall we do?"

"What then shall we do?"

You see, last week we might have been impressed by the responsiveness of the crowds to John the Baptist. Even the soldiers and tax collectors are open to hear advice. But, not this morning. This morning we are standing what feels like a good bit down the road. We look to the devastation around us and wonder whether the baby has made it safely to Egypt or not. And if he has, what about those who did not have angels to warn them?

"What then shall we do?"

I resonate with this question from the crowd. It is a question that needs answering. And you need only to turn on the television or check your email to compile an already exhaustive list. I suspect by this afternoon there will be countless sermons on line that will answer this question. The experts are assembled and they have important things to say. But in this season of Advent, I wonder if we are invited to wait, just a bit longer.

I find myself cautious about those who have already emerged with solutions. Those who have moved in less than 48 hours from shock and horror, to policy recommendations or easy answers. While a piece of me wishes it were that simple, there is another part that cannot fully embrace that position. There is a piece of me that cannot forget my tears on Yad Vashem, or the countless tears cried in response to suffering in the past.

"What then shall we do?"

As I struggle with the pain and suffering, I have no doubt that there will emerge from these events needed action. But I also believe that it is too early to assume we know what that is, or that is ours purely to construct. Those who have been most hurt need to have a voice in those solutions, and their shock and grief must be honored before we move to the next phase. We owe them their time to lament and to be disconsolate. When Joseph flees with Mary and the babe to the safety of Egypt, we hear the words of Jeremiah alongside of the flight. We hear from Jeremiah that "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

"Refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

And I believe that while it may be the more difficult task, one invitation I know has already been issued is to take on discipline of suffering with those who have lost the unimaginable. To let our compassion be offered not only to alleviate their pain, but to allow our compassion to transform us. Because if we fail to allow that transformation to be wrought in us,

we are in danger of becoming Herod. Who upon hearing this same call from John had a very different response.

The next line in scripture tells us, ""But Herod, the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison." The first step was to imprison John, and we know the rest of the story.

"What then shall we do?"

If this morning, we can release the shouting version of John the Baptist, there is something here for us. When the crowd ask what they should do, John the Baptist responds with something that sounds a lot more about who we should be, than what we should do. Yes, there are specific actions contained within them, but they are also daily disciplines that make up a life a faith. Share with those who need it. Be righteous in your business dealings. Do not abuse the power that has been given to you. It is not because the larger responses will not be called for, they will. But it is to ensure that the larger responses are grounded in a transformed life and faith. Because if we do not take the time to let these events transform us, there is a very real danger that we can only hear the rebuke and miss the invitation to new life.

And to John's list I would add, find someone to cry with. Allow Rachel's lament to be yours. Because her lament is not the last word from the prophet any more than the call to transformation is the end to our response. The prophet Jeremiah eventually asks us to dry our tears. To take up the calling and to respond. And we will.

But meanwhile we await a birth.

Meanwhile we await a second coming.

Lord Jesus, quickly come.

Amen