

23 December 2012
Advent 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Story of Two Little Towns”

Text: Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-56

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The tragedy that happened in Newtown, CT continued to dominate the news this past week, only this week in a different way. Shock has given way to anger and now it is the not unexpected calls for new laws and reforms that are filling the airwaves. Many are saying we need more gun control laws, mental health system reforms, better school security, even curbs on violent video games. Will those things help? Maybe. I don't really know. That's up to our elected officials to sort out and decide and act on.

But this I know: *all those things are not the answer.* Because new and more laws and rules and regulations don't and can't solve our problems. Laws can't change us. They can curb behaviour, they can make things more difficult to do, they may make us feel better for awhile, but they cannot change our hearts or the sin that lives in them. For that's the real problem. Sin. The sin the lives in our hearts and erupts in devastating ways.

The sin that caused Newtown, and Aurora before that, and mall shootings before that, and Columbine before that, and countless tragedies before that.

The sin that caused some to set up scam charities in the names of the children lost so they could make a quick buck off other people's grief and compassion.

The sin that fills our newscasts almost every night with stories like these. Maybe some more tragic and gut-wrenching than others, but all filled with hurt and sadness.

Many have taken to calling the man who did this a monster, but we should be careful not to get “holier than thou.” The same sin that lived in him infects us also. And how often does that sin erupt out of us? Certainly not in as horrific a way, and not on the same scale; but still devastating to others, as we put them in the crosshairs of our angry, biting, hurtful words, as we take advantage of them, as we feed our greed instead of feeding those in need, as we seek to satisfy our lusts no matter the cost. And maybe these smaller ways are even more dangerous - for the

big evil of Newtown is over, but do the lesser evils that come from us go on? Unnoticed by many who maybe look at you on the outside and think you quite pious and holy, not knowing or seeing the monster that lurks within? Whose appetite goes on and who keeps feeding on others?

And laws can't change that. In fact, while many these days are standing up and promising to do everything in their power to protect our children, they are in fact passing laws to support and advance the very opposite - the destruction of millions of our children while still unborn. . . . No, laws can't do it. Laws aren't the answer. We need a change of heart. **We need a Saviour.**

And Mary's song today tells us that we have one! That's why Elizabeth was so excited when Mary arrived - not just because her cousin had come to visit, and not just because of the good news that Mary was with child, but because **the mother of the Lord** had come - the Lord come to save us from our sins. That's also why John leapt for joy in Elizabeth's womb, and it is what Mary's Song is all about. . . .

I don't know how long it took Mary to get to Elizabeth's house, but I wonder if all the way she was thinking not just about what the angel had told her, but about all the Old Testament prophecies that were now being fulfilled. About the One who would come to crush the serpent's head, the promise to Abraham, the virgin that would conceive and bear a son, the One to lighten the darkness of our world of sin, the One all the prophets waited for, and looked for, and wrote about. And so when she gets to Elizabeth's house and receives such a welcome, it all comes gushing out! All those words about what our Lord has promised to do, and what He was now doing, in His Son, in Mary's Son. The One who is both true God and true man. The One from whom erupts only good things and no evil. The One who lifts up the poor and lowly, who fills the needy, is strong for the weak, and has come to bless all nations and every person with the forgiveness of their sins. To do great things not only for Mary, but also for you and me. To have mercy on us all. *He is the answer because He is no Law-giver, but a forgiver.*

And this is, in fact, what the author to the Hebrews was writing about when he said that it's not about the Law! In the Old Testament, yes, God had legislated sacrifices and offerings - that was the Law. But what did we hear from Hebrews today? **"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired . . . in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure."** Hmmm. Or in other words, the Law was not the answer. The Law didn't please God. It couldn't make holy. The Law pointed to the One who could, and did. And so sinners are not and cannot be sanctified, or made holy, by the Law - no, he writes, **we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.** The body carried by Mary, laid in a manger, hung on a cross, and then risen from the dead. That body that bore all our monstrous sins in death, that we might rise with Him to a new life. A holy life,

with holy desires, and a holy heart. A heart no longer dominated by evil, but now by love; a will no longer serving self, but serving others; and a joy that comes not from demanding, but from forgiving. No Law could do that. Only a change of heart. Only a heart cleansed and healed by the blood of the Lamb of God.

The Lamb of God who, as the prophet Micah points out today, was born in the little town of Bethlehem. The little town that (as Micah says) some thought was **too little**. But just as Newtown was not too little for such a great evil, so Bethlehem was not too little for such a great Saviour. And Bethlehem too, remember, experienced a great evil very much like Newtown - when King Herod erupted in a murderous rage after Jesus was born and slaughtered all the male children two years old and under. There was much weeping and wailing then, too.

But it is exactly to be born and live among us *in such tragedies* that Jesus came. Tragedies public and private, large and small, well known and unknown. He was born into such a world and lived among the same troubles and heartaches, **to be our peace** in the midst of them. If we didn't have them we wouldn't need Him. But, Micah tells us, in this world of sin and sadness and devastation, this One born in Bethlehem, Jesus, **shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord**. He will find the lost, bind up the wounded, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and call those going astray, that **we may dwell secure**. That when evil befall us, we be safe; and when it erupts from us, we be forgiven. No law can do that. Only a Saviour. Only Jesus.

So just as Elizabeth and John, how blessed we are that our Lord has come to us! And while Mary and Jesus stayed with them for three months, our Lord dwells with us now *always*, coming to us in His Word and Sacraments, so that this joy and peace be ours always. He is here, in the water of baptism, in the word of the Gospel, in the Body and Blood of His Supper, to forgive, to sanctify, to strengthen, to heal, to protect, to call, and to bless mightily. To lift us in our sorrow, to humble us when we're proud, to fill us with His good things, and to give us His mercy. The mercy that tragedies like these remind us we need. That we *always* need. And that He is always here to give.

And this we celebrate. Tomorrow is Christmas; the birth of our Saviour. But we celebrate not just His birth, but that as He learns to walk, He will walk the road to the cross, to die for you and me, to die for our sins, that we may live. He is born that we may be born again, born from above, as children of God. That we may learn to walk His way, the way of holiness, the way of life. To celebrate that with His birth, He joined Himself to us not just for a time, but *forever*. That we may be with Him forever, and one day leave all sin and sorrow and sadness behind, forever.

And so John leapt in the womb; a child filled with joy at the birth of Jesus. Is that not the way today as well? Our children filled with joy at the birth of our Saviour! Leaping for joy. We need to take a cue from them and stop acting like adults at Christmas! But start acting like the children we are - children of God. And leap for joy.

That's not always easy, and many folks right now don't feel very joyful, but empty. But as Mary said, our Lord **fills the hungry with good things**. And He will fill them with His peace and joy through His Word and Spirit. The Son will rise on them and fill them with hope. For He is merciful. He knows sin, He knows sorrow and sadness, He knows about small towns and great tragedies. That's why He came. And that's why even in the midst of troubles and sorrows great or small, public or private, our souls can, with Mary's, **magnify the Lord who has done such great things for me**. For as He fulfilled His Word then, so He does now, and so He will forever.

So as you sing *O Little Town of Bethlehem* this Christmas, remember not just of one, but two little towns: Newtown and Bethlehem. And that neither is too little for God *our Saviour* to do great things.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.