

The Third Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2012. Nigel J. Taber-Hamilton

I remember it clearly – it was Sunday, December 17, 2000 – the 3rd Sunday of Advent, and my first 3rd Sunday of Advent here at St. Augustine's. We celebrated Santa Lucia – a Scandinavian custom that St. Augustine's had observed for a number of years.

Santa Lucia – St. Lucy – was martyred at Syracuse, in Sicily, during Diocletian's reign of terror of 303-304, among the most dramatic of the persecutions of early Christians. In the tradition she is remembered for the purity of her life and the gentleness of her spirit. There's a strong suggestion she was a young girl. Her name – Lucy – means "Light"

Lucy's Day was connected with the Solstice – on her day the light began gradually to return and the days to lengthen. For us, who live in the northern climes, that's a powerful image – the returning of the light while we are still in the middle of darkness. And it's a great preparation for what we will celebrate in eight, short days.

Light is such a central part of our understanding of our faith – just think of the eloquent opening to the Fourth Gospel where John, speaking of the Divine Word, says: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it"

The long shadow of evil threatens to block out that light with Friday's events in Sandy Hook, CT. This is a tragedy beyond words - an egregious, brutal event that tears at the fabric of our common life. I suspect every mother and father of young children slept badly Friday night, and hugged their children just a little bit tighter before putting them to bed.

John the Baptist's metaphor seems to have been twisted – the ax has taken the wrong trees – young, defenseless saplings.

In the midst of the sorrow there's been blazing anger, and misunderstanding. The most inaccurate statement I have heard in a long time was made by one person late on Friday: "The perpetrator of the crime is dead." The shooter is dead, yes. But who participated, passively in this outrage? Gun manufacturers, their lobbyists, weak-kneed politicians, the rest of us who allowed our government to increase military spending, while failing to regulate who can own guns

Here are some stunning figures: Japan: 48, Great Britain: 8, Switzerland: 34, Canada: 52, Israel: 58, Sweden: 21, Germany: 42, USA: 10,728. These figures prove the NRA is only half-right: Guns don't kill people, people kill people; BUT guns make it so much easier, quicker, and more infinitely vaster than all the other evil methods human beings use to end each other's lives violently, put together.

So a question we should be asking ourselves is this: what will it take – how many children have to be killed with guns – before we're going to do something; demand action, push our legislators, oppose the NRA?

That broader picture of government spending has also played a role in this tragedy. Successive Federal administrations, and those in many states, have cut mental health spending.

While I think we would all say that Adam Lanza was obviously mentally unbalanced – you don't go shooting 27 people then kill yourself if you're in your right mind – it now turns out that Adam had Aspergers Syndrome, a not well understood neurological disorder. He was also incapable physically of feeling pain. What difference might a few billion have made for him? After all, that's "chump change" for our government. Instead, we have a new missile system, or some battle tank the military actually don't want.

As one of our parishioners said to me on Friday "If the [shooter] had developed a disease such as cancer, we wouldn't be angry at him, we would be sad. But mental disease so often goes unnoticed. Did we as humans somehow fail him? Maybe, but perhaps a dreadful silent illness is the real killer

Which brings us back to the 3rd Sunday of Advent here on Whidbey Island, and leaves us with unanswered questions, such as how – in the face of such horror – can the parents and families of the murdered children cope? How can we cope?

Anthropologist Loren Eiseley, in her book "The Immense Journey" described a scene she observed in a glade in the woods one day:

"I had sat down to rest with my back against a stump. Through accident I was concealed from the glade, although I could see into it perfectly. The sun was warm there, and the murmurs of forest life blurred softly away into my sleep. When I awoke, dimly aware of some commotion and outcry in the clearing, the light was slanting down through the pines in such a way that the glade was like some vast cathedral.

"I could see the dust motes of wood pollen in the long shaft of light, and there on the extended branch sat an enormous raven with a red and squirming nestling in his beak. The sound that awoke me was the outraged cries of the nestlings parents, who flew helplessly in circles about the clearing. The sleek black monster was indifferent to them. He gulped, whetted his beak on the dead branch a moment and sat still. Up to that point the little tragedy had followed the usual pattern.

"But suddenly, out of all that area of woodland, a soft sound of complaint began to rise. Into the glade fluttered small birds of half a dozen varieties drawn by the anguished outcries of the tiny parents.

"No one dared to attack the raven. But they cried there in some instinctive common misery, the bereaved and the unbereaved. The glade filled with their soft rustling and their cries. They fluttered as though to point their wings at the murderer. There was a dim intangible ethic he had violated, that they knew. He was a bird of death. And he, the murderer, the black bird at the heart of life, sat on there, glistening in the common light, formidable, unmoving, unperturbed, untouchable.

“The sighing died. It was then I saw the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death. I will never see it again so forcefully presented. I will never hear it again in notes so tragically prolonged. For in the midst of protest, they forgot the violence. There, in that clearing, the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And finally, after painful fluttering, another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first, as though some evil thing were being slowly forgotten. Till suddenly they took heart and sang, from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. In simple truth they had forgotten the raven, for they were the singers of life, and not of death.”

For us as Christians that’s almost right – we are indeed singers of life: “the life that is the light of all people. The light [that] shines in the darkness, and the darkness [has not yet] not overcome it”.. But the difference is this: we do not forget; in fact it’s in the remembering that we can fully understand and enter into being singers of life. In just a while we will together sing what’s called the “Memorial Acclamation” in the middle of the Great Thanksgiving Prayer: first “we remember his death” – we stare the great Raven of death right in the eyes; only then we proclaim Christ’s resurrection. Only then can we proclaim his resurrection.

We are approaching an event in 8, short days, that’s about a young child – our hymns and carols will inevitably take us not only to a manger, but to an elementary school in Sandy Hook, CT.

There is a place of overlap – for we are celebrating the birth of one whose life was also cut short by the brutal actions of other human beings, other children of God.

So how should we respond? We should remember. Remember that a cross comes before resurrection, and that after the joy of this coming birth there will come the sorrow of that cross, and that there’s no way around it, only through it. In that context we can see the overlap, which invites us to: **Remember** the children.

Remember the heroes, like the **school custodian** who, as shots were ringing out, ran through the school halls making sure classroom doors were locked from the inside.

Remember the Principal, Dawn Hochsprung, who was emerging from a meeting and saw the gunman and warned several colleagues who were about to step into the hallway behind her, and then turned and ran **toward** the shooter, protecting her children from him before he killed her.

Remember the parents, who have no hope - we have to be hope for them; we have to be the light that the darkness cannot overcome for them.

And, lastly, remember these words from parent Robbie Parker, a Christian, speaking from the deep places of his faith, echoing John the Baptist’s call to live a compassionate, moral life where you are so as to transform those around you; I can’t think of anything that better sums up what “proclaim[ing] the gospel by word and deed” is all about:

“As we move on from what happened here, happened to so many people, let it not turn into something that defines us but something that inspires us to be better, to be more compassionate, and more humble people. Let us please keep the sentiments of love that we feel for our families and the compassion that we feel for others, even complete strangers; and [let us] keep them with

us at all times, not just in times of sorrow and tragedy.

If he – out of the depths of his anguish – can say and do that, then how could we live any differently? Amen.