

What Shall I Cry?

Mark 1: 1-8



©Rev. Sarah Cooper Searight
Swarthmore Presbyterian Church
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Some of you have become familiar with FUSE, Fellowship of Urban Suburban Engagement, a group of people here locally in Swarthmore, Wallingford, Chester and the surrounding areas, who are coming together regularly from a diverse set of religious, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds to try and find common ground. The goal of FUSE is to help nurture conversation and relationships across these diverse lines, so that we might be moved to be better neighbors and to seek the welfare of all our neighbors, whether they live on Yale Avenue or Upland Avenue or Possum Hollow Dr.

At a recent Steering Committee meeting we were gathered, as we often are, with a full agenda. We needed to talk about plans for the upcoming 4Ever Grateful Concert, check in on work being done with some consultants helping us to steer the path forward, and decide whether or not we might begin to offer childcare at the evening meetings. After 25 minutes going back and forth on this last topic, it was time to move on. Lunch had arrived, we were just getting resettled, and Cory spoke up. Cory Long is a resident and community leader in Chester and founder of the Making A Change Group mentoring program for Chester youth...and wonderfully, a friend. Cory spoke up about yet another shooting death overnight the night before. Then there was the one a few days before that. The whole community was on edge, he said. They're always on edge. "We can't continue to live this way," he said, "It's too much. We live in a city with 35,000 residents. We're the only city in a county of 560,000 residents in total. Chester in population is only 6% of Delco, however it is responsible for 75% of its homicides, shootings, and similar crimes."

In preparation for worship this morning, I reached out to the Editor of the Delco Times to ask if they had record of deaths by gun violence in this year in the county. He returned to me a list with 37 names from throughout Delco. 27 of those names were listed as being from Chester. Cory's math is spot on. No surprise.

These numbers do not come as a surprise. If you watch the local news, you've seen the flashing lights and memorial pictures, the crime scene tape and grieving family. If you volunteer in Chester, you've likely felt the weight of sorrow in the rooms and hallways where you work, particularly in the morning after an incident. When in the spring, Rebecca Frick and I visited the TM Thomas Learning Tree on behalf of the Outreach Committee. These are kids who will receive some of the gifts you have so generously given as part of our Giving Tree. On our visit last spring we learned that these preschool-aged kids could only use a small side yard as play space during the day. This was closer to the door. Several incidents of people running through the front yard with guns had taught them that they wanted to be close to shelter.

These numbers do not come as a surprise. There are similarly striking statistics for cities across our country, and the complexity of the conversation around guns makes for a din of disagreement and circling of wagons so that we end up arguing until we are weary, hang our heads, and fall silent. For it feels as though these days, issues trump people. Our fervency to hold the high ground, outweighs our ability to have meaningful conversation and to work together to problem-solve.

Around the table that day as a Steering Committee, hearing our friend and colleague cry out; we fell silent, heads down, eyes avert. While we had more than enough to say just moments before, we'd problem-solved the heck out of childcare possibilities, for this we had nothing. There were words of grief and comfort and conviction and faith, and then we were silent again. There was nothing to say and we were uncomfortable with the feeling that there was not much we could do immediately. There was nothing to say and we were

uncomfortable with the feeling that this was very much a reality we could easily retreat from. How desperate we were in that moment to pay attention to anything else.

John the baptizer showed up just as the prophet-poet Isaiah said he would. Or that is how we read it anyway, in this season of Advent. John's one and only job was to prepare the way, and he did that with aplomb. Always pointing beyond himself, behind and before, to the one more powerful who was on the way. Just like that herald of good tidings, John says to the cities of Judah "Here is your God! Coming to baptize you with the Holy Spirit! Repent and make way!" John was surely hard to ignore, and the Gospel writer tells us that he was all the rage.

Isn't it curious that rather than set up shop in the middle of Jerusalem, picking a perfect street corner from which to preach repentance and salvation and water and Holy Spirit; instead Jerusalem came to John—in the wilderness. They made the trek in droves, from the way we hear it. People were yearning for the particular water John was offering.

But I wonder how many actually got in it. I wonder how many actually *believed* they might need it. We know that we are not perfect: We don't always make the best choices, we are not always truthful with ourselves or others, we don't always love our neighbor as ourselves, and perhaps we question sometimes how much we love God, or if we do.

While the word 'repentance' makes us uncomfortable at times, especially in Advent (let's just agree to keep that one to Lent, ok?), we are pretty sure that it's got an important role to play in the life of faith. Because the flipside of repentance is forgiveness, and our hearts long for it.

Our understanding of the word 'repent' comes in large part from the biblical Hebrew word 'shuv', meaning 'to return or to turn towards'. When the Old Testament prophets cry for the people to repent, it is God asking the people of Israel to literally *turn*.

Turn and see God before you. *Turn* away from fear. *Turn* to your neighbor. *Turn*.

And this was just what John the baptizer was offering those droves of people who showed up at his riverside. An opportunity to *turn* and see the one who was to come. I'm going to guess that he didn't have many takers.

They came, sure, but they came because he was an oddity. They came because their friends did. They came because their curiosity was there, but when they realized exactly what he was doing and wanting from them, they lowered their gaze and studiously paid attention to anything else.

We are trained to do this; to pay attention to everything and to nothing, to feel overwhelmed by our feelings of inadequacy and unknowing and fear. These days there are so many things that come at us for which we have very few answers and precious little hope, that fervently distracting ourselves on the one hand with quick fixes, and on the other with total blinders seem the only way to survive.

Even though it is the loudest story, the whole story of Chester is not gun violence. The whole story of Chester is a city of good and faithful and hard-working and kind and creative people; of a downtown being locally redeveloped as a space for artists, of kids hungering for education and experience, of parents who work and volunteer at their children's schools, and who want what any of us want for our kids—safety, opportunity, hope.

It is not our job to be the saviors of Chester or of ourselves. Thanks be to God. That's for the one whom John the baptizer prepares the way. But it is our job to look. To turn and see. To dip into the waters. To lift our heads up and acknowledge that our neighbors are dying: Less than five miles away and in droves. This does not have to be their daily reality. This should not be their daily reality. It is not set in stone. Something can be done to change this.

Let us say that gun violence is a problem for our neighbors and we will have come to the waters.

Let us weep that it has gone on too long. And we will have reached the water's edge. Let us then confess that we don't know what to do, but that we will not turn away anymore but we will work together to figure it out: And we will have taken off our shoes, and waded in.

When we've been washed in these waters, when we get involved and stay involved, we see differently. We see God in the world differently. God deeply engaged and willing us to be as well. Those who did come in as John the baptizer invited them, were washed and made new in this very hope that John proclaimed.

Hope that cries, Comfort! to the captives. Hope that heralds strength to those who suffer. Hope that is constant and enduring and tender. Hope that arrives among us an infant and grows up an itinerant, just like his friend John; calling all to let down their fear, lift up their heads, to come and see.