

## *Hope in a Time of Mass Shootings*

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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Hope is not so easy to preach about in a time of mass shootings. In fact, it's a bit of a stretch for me to preach about it, because I'm not so sure what the future holds for our nation. Some days, I think we can figure this out, and others it seems hopelessly bleak. But the best sermons are ones that the preacher needs to hear, and so I am going to talk to you about hope because it is one of the most important things I can proclaim to you. And I want to get something straight. It's OK to feel down, it's OK to feel desperate in the face of hate, it's OK to not have all the answers, but to be hopeless is a luxury that people of faith cannot afford. Especially, comfortable as most of us are in Evanston, IL, it is a luxury to adopt fatalism, attractive as it may be in some instances. But it is attractive because if you believe that this world is all going to hell anyway, than you can stop caring about it can't you? And there are some days that would seem like a relief.

And I ought to pause here and tell you that in the West, Christianity has been a great purveyor of fatalism about our world. If you believe there's nothing you can do to improve the world, because it's all in God's hands, if you believe that the world is condemned as abandoned by God because of its sin, if you believe that our actions here are just about getting to the hereafter, then that's an easy out to not caring about this world. I want to tell you right here and right now, this is the only world that we've got. As so many young, climate activists have reiterated, there is no planet B. And, for those that want it, that's just good theology – Revelation talks about new things happening here on earth, about the healing of this earth, about heaven coming to earth. The Lord's Prayer is a prayer for heaven's invasion of earth. Jesus preached about bread to people who needed bread. He couched sin in debt language to people who owed vast sums of debt. The first action taken

in the revolt that would lead to the destruction of the temple was to burst into the place where the debt records were kept and to burn it. This place, its glories and its transgressions, its hurts and its triumphs **matters**.

One of the things that I learned from the Black Lives Matter movement was hope, and what it looked like to see it mobilized to bring force to bear on those with power. Originally a sports cheer, which was made very popular in that arena by its use by fans of the men's national team, "I believe that we will win" has been a staple of protest actions by Black Lives Matter activists and immigration activists. It is a simple chant, and it shouldn't necessarily promote such an emotional response. Except, when I heard that chant a few years ago, I was all but bowled over by these activists who had sacrificed for the movement, and these grieving mothers, who joined together in a simple, but effective chant. I believe that we will win. It's a simple message, but it is exceedingly effective. And it is moving for one reason – it is not defeatist, in the face of everything to hear people who have experienced white supremacy's ugliest side tell the world that they believe that they will win because, as Martin Luther King JR. said, "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

It shook me because if these folks can hope, if these people who have experienced pain can stand up and say, count me in, because we are going to be victorious, then who am I, white dude, clergy, straight – who am I to dare to be hopeless? And so I proclaim to you today, "I believe that we will win" this fight on gun violence in the United States. I'm not saying it will be easy. I'm not saying that I have the answers, but I really do believe, I really would say, "I believe that we will win."

The status quo would have you believe that it is unchangeable, that it has always been this way, that some folks some two hundred years ago declared something immutable about how we will always have guns amongst us, how there will always be school shooting drills. But that is false. The world that we see is of our own making. It is made by people who decide what they will put up with and what they won't. It is the people of this country that will decide our future.

So the greatest thing that people of faith can do is hope. And not hope in some sort of soft, banal way. I mean solidarity, I mean showing up, I mean having it up to here with people who won't act on an issue so clearly of moral import in this country. And so the first step that people of faith must take, the first step that we have to make is to hope again that we will win. So, you know you have to do it. I want you to turn to you neighbor, and I want you to say, "I believe that we will win." And now, let's say it together. I BELIEVE THAT WE WILL WIN.

And once we believe that in our hearts, the fight is clear. We have a lot of work to do, but we never do it alone. There are people who are fighting for this, we are allying with them, and I am committed to showing up when it counts to fight. But you have to too.

Hope doesn't mean blind optimism about our future. That's just as dangerous, I think as fatalism. Hope is something like the poem that we read today as one of our ancient witness readings: that even in this ruined house, the moonlight still shines in. That, in immortal words of Leonard Cohen, "there's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

And hope is about things not seen. That's what scripture proclaims. IT's about midwifery of justice, of God's hope coming to fruition. We are built for hope, for purpose, and I hope that we are finding our purpose in this fight against gun violence in this country. Because at the end of the day, even on my darkest hours, if you pressed me, I might not shout or chant, but I could manage a whisper, "I believe that we will win." And it's all that it takes, a whisper. The greatest promises of scripture are whispered, barely heard above the din and clang: "Behold, I make all things new." Whispers, shouts, chants, whatever you can manage is what people of faith have to bring to the table. Minds and hearts can change. Societies can change. We can fight for what we believe in and hold others to account. Perhaps we can even testify to the radical nature of hope in our world. That might be what people of faith have to bring to the table, an old old proclamation of hope, a sometimes whispered, sometimes shouted, "I believe that we will win."