

I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

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John 8:12-20

On Wednesday afternoon it was reported that there had been a shooting in a high school in Florida. As the news unfolded we have learned that at 2:19 p.m. on that Wednesday, nineteen-year-old Nikolas Cruz climbed out of an Uber outside of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Cruz was a former student at the school but had been expelled for disciplinary reasons.

Cruz entered the school through the east stairway and removed his gun—an AR-15—from its case and then began shooting into classrooms. He made his way up to the third floor and finally escaped the building by blending in with the crowd of fleeing students. He walked to Walmart and bought a soda at the Subway. He then walked to a McDonald's and set there for a while. The police captured him at 3:40 p.m.—an hour and a half later—walking down the street. Cruz had killed 17 people and injured an additional 14.

Three weeks ago, I mentioned another school shooting. This one was just up the road in Benton, Kentucky. On January 23rd, a fifteen-year-old shot and killed 2 other fifteen-year-olds and injured 18 more.

You may have seen or heard the statistic that the Florida shooting was the eighteenth school shooting this year. That is not entirely accurate. There have been eighteen gun-related incidents on campuses or where students were congregated. Of these eighteen, five actually took place during school hours and resulted in injuries. Five is less than eighteen, but five shootings in six weeks is still too many. One is too many.

Many of you will recall the horror we all felt eighteen years ago when we learned of the shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado. There, two students—Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold—carried out their detailed plan of shootings and bombings at their high school. This event sparked an enormous national conversation. It was a watershed moment when we all wondered, “How could something like this ever happen?” “Nothing could be worse than this,” we reasoned. But there would be. Harris and Klebold killed 13 people before killing themselves. On Wednesday, the shooter killed 17 people. It is worse.

The shooting on Wednesday took place on Valentine's Day. I'm sure much will be made of that fact. But it was also Ash Wednesday. One of the more poignant photographs of the event shows two women—probably mothers—standing outside the school waiting for news. Both are distraught and sobbing. They are holding onto each other. One of them has a cross on her forehead. Clearly, she had attended the Ash Wednesday service at her church that day and she wore the cross of ashes.

The season of Lent began on Wednesday. On that day many of you gathered here for the ritual of the Imposition of Ashes. On your forehead, I inscribed a black cross drawn with ashes. Ash Wednesday began the journey that will take us towards the cross of Jesus Christ and then on to Easter. Lent is a time for Christians to repent of our sins, to die to the old ways, and seek renewal and rebirth in Christ. Lent is also a time to grapple with the notion that on Good Friday God died. Not Jesus, but God. The God of heaven and earth, the creator, the one who is love, died. Let that sink in for a moment. On Good Friday, God died.

Now you may argue that it was Jesus on the cross—God's son. And you would be correct. But understanding who died on that cross depends on who we believe Jesus to be.

From now to Easter, I will be preaching this series of sermons on the *I Am* statements of Jesus that we find in the Gospel of John. John's gospel offers us a handful of claims made by Jesus that begin with the words *I Am*. I am the bread of life; I am the good shepherd; I am the way, the truth, and the life; I am the door; I am the resurrection; and, as we see today, I am the light of the world.

The Gospel of John was the last of the four gospels to be written. As the gospels were written, we can witness in them this theological development of who we understand Jesus to be. Mark is hurriedly trying to get the story of Jesus down on paper. Matthew and Luke are teaching their people what it means to be disciples. When we finally get to John it is clear that people are struggling with questions of Jesus' identity. Was Jesus simply a good teacher, possibly a miracle worker? With these *I Am* statements John is reminding us that Jesus is more than a talented Rabbi; he is God. The ancient church was grappling with these same issues. We see it worked out in the words of the Nicene Creed: "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ... God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father."

In the section of John's gospel that we read today, there been an ongoing discussion by the Jewish leaders about Jesus' identity. The Pharisees believe he is a heretic and want to have him arrested. In the reading, Jesus addresses the authorities in Jerusalem telling them, *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.* It is interesting to note that Jesus is not saying this to his disciples or his followers, but to those who oppose him. "Who are you?" *I am the light of the world.* The Pharisees then question the validity of his testifying on his own behalf. They point out that there are no witnesses are corroborating evidence to what he claims, only his word. Jesus points out that his father back him up. *Where is your father?* they ask. Jesus response, *You know neither me nor my father. If you know me, you would know my father also.*

Jesus is explaining to them that he and God are one. He is fully human, and fully divine, not one or the other. This is what we have to remember as we travel

through Lent, that the one who was killed on the cross was not just a nice man wrongly accused (that would have been tragic), or a god pretending to die (that would lack credibility), but both. God died a human death on the cross. And at the time of death, the world went dark, the lights were gone.

Darkness is part of our world. It is part of our sin. Children shooting children is about as dark as it gets. As a parent with a child currently living on a campus, I worry. Statistically, I know my daughter is safe, but the darkness is still there. I can't imagine the pain and grief of the families of those who were killed in Parkland, or in Benton, or in Columbine, or in Sandy Hook, or at Virginia Tech, or in any of the dozens of other campuses where young people died from gun violence. This isn't an issue that we can simply pray away. There is a solution out there and it is political. Our prayers must be with our leaders and elected officials to do take the necessary steps to curb this violence. We pray with the belief that our Lord loves us, that our Lord died for us, that our Lord lives for us. Our Lord is the light of the world.

Now, I prepared this sermon earlier this week and I had an ending. But last night I was watching the news and I saw that dozens—if not hundreds—of people had gathered in various places around Florida in protest and to say to their lawmakers and elected officials that change must be made, that they would not accept this level of violence any more. Do something! And you can see in the pictures that the people are standing there in the darkness holding candles. These are candlelight vigils. Each little candle is just a pinpoint of light but each one is tearing a hole in the darkness around them. I'm not sure what is going to happen, but when I look at those lights I pray that they working together and will bring their lights together so that their lights can grow stronger and brighter and push the darkness away.

At this time of the year in the church we recognize that our God died. But our God came to life again bringing a new life for us all, a way for us to connect to our God in a way that we had not been able to before. And maybe the deaths that we witnessed this week and before will bring bring new life to our world—new life, hope, and new light. Amen.