

“Baptism of Water”
Based on Matthew 3: 13-17
by Rev. Meghan Davis
Longview Presbyterian Church—January 9, 2011

From time to time, current events intervene in the sermon process. From time to time, pastors, or at least this pastor, find themselves called to make last minute changes to the planned course of a sermon to address what is weighing heavy on their heart and presumably, the hearts of many in the pews. Today is one such time, but I have to admit, the event itself is not what has led me to this sermon, but a commentary on the event. It is a blog by the well-known religion commentator and scholar, Diana Butler Bass which she posted yesterday. Rather than paraphrase the prophetic call that has so moved me, I will be reading it in full.

The Sunday after Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968, my husband's family attended their Presbyterian church. They went with heavy hearts, expecting the pastor to help make sense of the tragedy. The minister rose to preach. The congregation held its breath. But he said nothing of the events in Memphis. He preached as if nothing had happened.

My husband's family left church that day disappointed; eventually, they left that church altogether.

This Sunday, many Americans will go to church. A sizeable number of those people may be hoping to hear something that helps them make sense of the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and the others who had gathered at her sidewalk townhall in Tucson. Some pastors may note the event in prayer and some may say something during announcements or add a sentence to their sermons. But others might say nothing, sticking instead to prepared texts and liturgies. Many will eschew speaking of politics.

That would be a mistake.

Much of American public commentary takes place on television, via the Internet, and through social networks. We already know what form the analysis of the assassination attempt will be. Everyone will say what a tragedy it is. Then commentators will take sides. Those on the left will blame the Tea Party's violent rhetoric and "Second Amendment solutions." Those on the right will blame irresponsible individuals and Socialism. Progressives will call for more gun control; conservatives will say more people should carry guns. Everyone will have some sort of spin that benefits their party, their platform, and their policies.

But who will speak of the soul?

Since President Obama has taken office, many ministers have told me that they have feared addressing public issues from the pulpit lest "someone get hurt." Well, someone is

hurt--and people have died--most likely because bitterly partisan lies have filled the air and most certainly because some unhinged individual killed people.

At their best, American pulpits are not about taking sides and blaming. Those pulpits should be places to reflect on theology and life, on the Word and our words. I hope that sermons tomorrow will go beyond expressions of sympathy or calls for civility and niceness. Right now, we need some sustained spiritual reflection on how badly we have behaved in recent years as Americans--how much we've allowed fear to motivate our politics, how cruel we've allowed our discourse to become, how little we've listened, how much we've dehumanized public servants, how much we hate.

Sunday January 9 is the day on which many Christians celebrate the Baptism of Jesus: "When Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" Jesus' baptism in water symbolizes life, the newness that comes of cleansing. But there is a darker symbol of baptism in American history: that of blood. In 1862, Episcopal bishop Stephen Elliot of Georgia said, "All nations which come into existence . . . must be born amid the storm of revolution and must win their way to a place in history through the baptism of blood." Baptism as water? Baptism as blood? Baptism accompanied by a dove or baptism accompanied by the storm of revolution?

American Christianity is deeply conflicted, caught between two powerful symbols of baptism, symbols that haunt our political sub-consciousness. To which baptism are we called? Which baptism does the world most need today? Which baptism truly heals? Do we need the water of God, or the blood of a nine-year old laying on a street in Tucson? The answer is profoundly and simply obvious. We need redemption gushing from the rivers of God's love, not that of blood-soaked sidewalks.

If we don't speak for the soul, our silence will surely aid evil.¹

But what is there to say about this event? How can one possibly make sense out of it? I can't give you an easy answer that "it's all part of God's plan" because I don't believe that it's ever part of God's plan for innocents to suffer. I cannot believe that God would devise a plan that involves the murder of a nine-year old child. I believe that God is just as shocked and outraged as the rest of us, that God is grieving with the parents of that child, with the family and friends of the congresswoman trying to connect with her constituents, the judge stopping by to say hello to a friend after attending his daily Mass and all who were killed and injured in yesterday's bloodbath. It is impossible to make sense out of senseless suffering.

This event has been labeled a "tragedy." But none of the victims are tragic heroes. According to Aristotle's definition of tragedy, tragedy is the fall, the reversal of fortune

¹ Diana Butler Bass, "Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords: Speaking for the Soul," January 8, 2010 <http://blog.beliefnet.com/christianityfortherestofus/2011/01/congresswoman-gabrielle-giffords-speaking-for-the-soul.html>

of a great person due to their own tragic flaw which they come to recognize (though always too late). *Oedipus Rex* is considered the perfect tragedy because it perfectly fits these, and other qualifications Aristotle details (which probably has more to do with Aristotle using *Oedipus Rex* as his model than Sophocles having hit the nail on the head, but anyway...) Oedipus, is the figure in Greek mythology who was born a prince but a seer tells his parents that he will kill his father and marry his mother so they get rid of him. But instead of being killed, he ends up being adopted by another couple. Then when he's an adult, he is told by a seer that he will kill his father and marry his mother, so he leaves his adopted parents (who he thinks are his real parents) and unknowingly meets and kills his real father then marries his real mother. A seer tells him what he has done, his wife/mother kills herself and he blinds himself with her brooch.

But where is the tragedy in yesterday's events? Did some error or flaw in Giffords' character bring this on? Were the staffers, the judge, the nine year-old and other victims responsible for what happened to them? Of course not. Traumatic, shocking, sad and horrible though it was, yesterday's events are not technically, according to the classical definition, tragic.

Except, it is tragic. But the tragic hero, that is, the great one experiencing a reversal of fortune due to a tragic flaw, is not Congresswoman Giffords, not Judge Roll, not the staffers or the nine-year old or any of the other victims in Tucson. The tragic hero is the American soul. We find ourselves in a time when rhetoric continues to be ramped up, not just for elections, not just for hot-button issues, but apparently political antagonism has become the new normal. But hopefully this will be our moment of recognition and an opportunity for salvation. Hopefully, this terrible incident will be a wake-up call for us and we will be able to turn this tragedy around. Hopefully, we can stop the vitriolic rhetoric before any more blood is shed.

Last fall, comedians Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert held a "Rally to Restore Sanity" in Washington, DC, which was pretty much panned by everyone from both the left and right in politics and media. (Of course, I loved it.) But in his closing speech, Stewart said, "We hear every...day about how fragile our country is—on the brink of catastrophe—torn by polarizing hate and how it's a shame that we can't work together to get things done, but the truth is we do. We work together to get things done every...day! The only place we don't is here or on cable TV. But Americans don't live here or on cable TV. Where we live our values and principles form the foundations that sustain us while we get things done, not the barriers that prevent us from getting things done. Most Americans don't live their lives solely as Democrats, Republicans, liberals or conservatives. Americans live their lives more as people that are just a little bit late for something they have to do—often something that they do not want to do—but they do it--impossible things every day that are only made possible by the little reasonable compromises that we all make."²

What does it say about the psyche of a culture whose most prominent proponents for civilized and rational discourse are comedians?

People from both sides are saying that we need to be careful not to politicize this. But

² Jon Stewart, October 30, 2010

regardless of how politically motivated the individual was, regardless of his mental state or whether or not he acted alone, it's not about whether or not we insert politics into this violent act. It's about whether or not we insert violence into the political acts. In the current atmosphere we have plenty of vitriol. And I have to admit, I get a certain glee from the antics. The crazier the people seem on the "other side" the more justified I feel for my position. But at the Epiphany service the word I got, the gift of the Spirit I am to work on developing and sharing with others is "fairness." When I got it, I thought, "that's boring, and also, I'm a very fair person...." But perhaps I, too, have room to grow.

This week as the 112th Congress convened, we were reminded that one of the hallmarks of democracy is the peaceful transfer of power as Nancy Pelosi handed the gavel over to John Boehner. The time for baptism of blood is long in our nation's past. Now is the time for baptism of water, now is the time for the dove.

As we celebrate the baptism of Jesus today, re-telling the story of his baptism and our own, we are reminded that we are God's beloved, too. That is the Good News of Baptism and the Good News of this opportunity to celebrate and remember our baptism. You are a beloved child of God. It's a story worth retelling.

But we also have to remember that those around us, too, are God's beloved children, whether or not they share our political or religious beliefs or views on society. So we must treat each other with the respect and dignity due to beloved children of God.

Remember, you are a beloved child of God. Remember, Sarah Palin and Barack Obama are also beloved children of God. Remember, you are a beloved child of God.

Remember, Nancy Pelosi and John Boehner are also beloved children of God. Together, let us snatch the American soul from the jaws of tragedy. Rather than being tragic heroes, let us simply be "heroes." Remember, we are beloved children of God.