

A sermon preached on February 18, 2018.  
The First Sunday in Lent  
Four days after the school shooting in Parkland, Florida.

Gospel passage for the day: Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

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In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If there was ever a time when we understood today's passage about being in the wilderness with the wild beasts and the need for the angels to come and minister to us, and for the proclamation of the Good News it is on days like today when we are still coming to terms with yet another school shooting.

I clearly understand that I stand before you today as your rector. I represent this parish. I am deeply committed to my relationships with the Vestry, our Wardens, and all of you. I am aware that my ordination vows call me to be under the authority of our bishop.

I am also deeply aware that none of you agree with every single word that comes out of my mouth — if you did, it would be a travesty, since I do not agree with every word that comes out of my mouth! Allow me the privilege of disagreeing with myself, from time to time, of changing my mind and, when I am in the wrong, repenting!

I am also keenly aware that I just said, as I do every Sunday, that what I am offering to you in this moment is in the name of the Holy Undivided Triune God — trust me, that is never lost on me, and although you may not see it, I am crouching every week in fear and trembling when I dare to utter those words. I often wonder if this is the time when God gets fed up with me speaking in God's name.

But with all of that, there are times when I cannot help but stand as a witness to the truth as I understand it at this moment in time — through much prayer, through the humility of wanting to be in a community in which we can continue to discern together what that truth is, and with a desire to repent if I am ever in the wrong.

So, let me be as clear as I possibly can be: as a follower of Jesus Christ in this time and this place I stand as a witness to say that if I ever had a commitment to the Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States I no longer have such a commitment. I know that not all of you

agree with that, and I do not mean in any way to suggest that people who are as committed to their faith as I am, or even more so, do not hold a very different opinion.

However, I must say that I believe we as a nation are in grave danger of committing idolatry. We have made an idol of our firearms, and more broadly, of the violence that we believe will keep us safe and secure, but which is in fact killing not only our bodies, but our souls – something Jesus warned us about.

I understand that the issues in this most recent act of violence in a school are deep — they involve mental illness, the disintegration of the family, the lack of social and communal support, the failure of our government institutions to identify and protect, and many other issues we could name.

However, I am not willing to use these important issues as an excuse to continue putting weapons that were designed for one purpose, and one purpose only, in the hands of citizens. It is simply unfathomable to me when I look at the number of things we regulate, as a country, the number of things we willingly subject ourselves to, as citizens, because we collectively understand that it is for the greater good. While I know it is an over-used and perhaps cliché example, based on one incident of a bomb in a shoe, we all willingly, if not gladly, have been lining up in airports for years and removing our shoes! For God's sake.

I understand that repealing the Second Amendment is a fool's errand. I understand that there are those who will argue that it is absolutely necessary on the grounds of self-defense. I fully understand that I am open to criticism for having the luxury, the privilege, and making the choice to live in a community where I am not daily confronted with the possibility that I might need a firearm to defend my family or myself.

However, I cannot stand as a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and continue to proclaim God's kingdom, God's reign, and say "this is the best we can do". This is NOT what the kingdom of God looks like in any way that I can possibly read in our scriptures or conceive of based on my faith, and I am not willing to say that we should just forget about that kingdom and let God figure it out in God's good time.

When Jesus was baptized, he heard the voice from heaven that proclaimed, "You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased." And *immediately* he was *driven out* into the wilderness to be tempted and was surrounded by wild beasts. Some way to show how much he was loved, and that he was God's son! None of us are promised a life of luxury — one free from struggle, temptations, or a life free from the myriad wild beasts, both without and within, that we have to contend with. What we are promised is that we are children of God and that we are beloved of God and that God will be with us, ministering to us through his angels.

When Jesus emerges from that wilderness he does not begin to organize a movement. He does not realize that in order to compete with the wild beasts of his day he needs to arm himself and his followers. He simply proclaims, in a fool's errand, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

So no, I have no commitment to some words written by men a couple of hundred years ago which ensured that every citizen of a particular country would have the right to bear arms — no matter the consequences.

Here is what I *am* committed to: At my baptism, and reaffirmed at my confirmation, I committed myself to two things, and two things only: 1) the “renunciation of evil” and 2) I committed myself to Jesus Christ. All other commitments are subject to these primary commitments. I know that the work of reviewing my other commitments is a matter of discernment, correction, repentance, and in the context of the community of faith.

But today, here and now, I cannot conceive of how these commitments can possibly justify the defense of the right to bear arms when our children cannot go to school without wondering if this will be their turn, without becoming, literally, sick with fear of being dropped off at school in the morning. This is NOT the kingdom of God, and we should repent.

The students and staff at the Marjory Stoneham Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida were not abandoned by God. They were, and remain, beloved children of God. Our Lord, who was tempted in the wilderness, who was crucified, and who is risen, was and remains with them. And we do keep all of them in our thoughts and prayers, as much maligned as thoughts and prayers have become of late.

I stand here today, as one witness, to call for our collective repentance for our idolatry in which a god of fear and violence could lead *us* to abandon our neighbors.

The time for repentance is now. The kingdom of God *has* come near, and it is time to start believing, and proclaiming, the good news — no matter how foolish it may seem to do so.

Amen.