

“Out of Control”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Christmas is coming soon. So I'm glad you are here this morning, because sometimes the frenzy of the season crushes worship attendance and the “reason for the Season.”

The frenzy is something with which we all are familiar: that “out of control” feeling – and sometimes reality – of “to do” lists, visitation choreography and travel schedules. This past Tuesday I cancelled Confirmation class for several reasons: the horrendous rain was the – excuse the pun – precipitating cause, but the fact that I was going to miss two of six students to school concerts and the fact that my own work was behind also led to the decision.

Yet, with apologies to those of you who are, by now, fixated on incomplete Christmas preparations – assuming you were not already so fixated – I must say that this kind of “out of control” is really nothing. Although it may feel overwhelming it is really no more than a brief nuisance in the script of life.

Real “out of control” was shared Tuesday night as Becky Virgalla, a member of our church, spoke to the Disciple 3 study. The theme of the lesson was “courage” and Becky demonstrated hers in telling 15 of us her story. On that fateful Friday morning two years ago today, 20 children and six faculty were gunned down at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. When the shooting started, Becky was steps behind Principal Dawn Hochsprung, school psychologist Mary Sherlach and lead teacher Natalie Hammond when they entered the hall, encountered the shooter, and called back “Shooter! Stay put!” Dawn and Mary were killed, Natalie wounded. The warning saved Becky's life. The details of that horrific day are available to any one who wants them and need not be recounted here. For most of us the day is forever etched in our memories: where we were, what

we were doing, when the word came. Becky shared the life-shattering, life-altering and, in more recent months, life-enhancing impact of that infamous day. She is now involved in the “Not One More” campaign to end gun violence. Our MYF and its adult leaders have led us in responding to the massacre by contributing to the construction of the Milford “Sandy Ground Project” playground, one of 26 built in memory of the victims. But more response is necessary. It is unthinkable that we cannot send our children to school without wondering if they will return home. But the unthinkable has become reality and it is incumbent on all of us to say, “Enough!” and to take action to stop the violence.

Yet for Becky and so many others this out-of-control experience has led to redemptive acts. I think of Victoria Soto, the Stratford resident and Sandy Hook teacher killed protecting her students, and in whose name a scholarship foundation has been established to support people going into the teaching profession. The reality is that every day there is some news report of some life-altering event that is out-of-control. The challenge for people of faith is whether we will allow it to be redemptive.

Christmas is, in the final analysis, an out-of-control experience. The basic message is completely the opposite of what was expected. The Messiah was expected to come in glory and triumph in the heart of power. Instead, he was born in a backwater town in a far-flung outpost of the Roman Empire.

This is why John confounded the Jewish leaders. Their country was occupied by the polytheistic Romans: unclean gentiles and heretics. Yet they had to get along. So the religious leaders spent years – generations – creating the delicate balance that allowed them to live their faith in relative peace. As long as they maintained the peace, maintained control, everything was okay.

John the Baptizer was a disturber of this peace, a random, seemingly out-of-control variable who brought with him the possibility of chaos. So the leaders interrogated him: “Tell us your

name.” It is a control question. Control the identity of the messenger and we can control the message. We have seen this again and again in coverage of the protests in Ferguson, New York, Berkeley and Cleveland in response to police shootings. Peaceful protests get scant coverage: what is covered are the few who turn violent. I encourage you who are able to view the 3 and one half minute November 26th YouTube video “The Heartbeat of Democracy” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=uf-z9zbeRys) in which peaceful protesters successfully disperse over 20 police officers by announcing their intention to be at peace using the words of Dr. King, South African Bishop Desmond Tutu and Mahatma Ghandi, among others. You will not see this video on mainstream media which, for most of us and for good or ill, controls the messaging.

As for John the Baptizer, his answer to the interrogation was to tell them who he was not. He was not Messiah. He was not Elijah, whose return was believed to herald the onset of the Kingdom of God. He was not Isaiah, whose words he quoted. He was rather an announcer of what was to come. And what was to come was nothing less than the salvation of the world. God is in control, we are not.

And what is the nature of this God? We have heard it again and again this Advent: a God who “lifts up valleys and makes mountains low” (Isaiah 40:4) - levels the playing field, if you will - who tells us to “stay awake” (Mark 13:37) at the signs of his coming, who proclaims comfort to those who mourn (Isaiah 61:2) and hates wrongdoing (Isaiah 61:8). In other words, this God is not only the God of serenity and peace, but the God of struggle and holiness and justice. You won’t see John the Baptist in this Nativity (point to crèche scene) but he is no less there all the same.

Salvation requires this. The cross is in the crèche. Many of you know the children’s book series “The Chronicles of Narnia” by C.S. Lewis, which was also made into a movie about a decade

ago. It tells of the fanciful journey of four British schoolchildren into the magical kingdom of Narnia and the return of Aslan the Lion to liberate Narnia from the perpetual winter imposed by the White Witch. It is good fanciful fun, including taking animals.

But the story is also a Christian allegory for those who read it so. Aslan is the Christ. In one of the books of the series ⁽¹⁾ we overhear one of the children, Lucy, asking Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan. Think of Aslan as Jesus as you listen to Lucy saying:

“Is Aslan quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver. *“If there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or just plain silly.”*

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. *“Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”*

Jesus isn’t safe. He challenges our need to control – mine and yours – and challenges us to be different, to take risks, to think what the world regards as dangerously. But, oh, he is good! He’s the King. This is where we find the joy of this day, envisioning and living out a new world, a realm where God’s values are fully revealed. A world where the Repetskys say “We will host the Community Dinner on Christmas Day.” A world where the Virgallas and the MYF invites us to redeem life from death. A world where together we recognized that we are all diminished by violence, whether that violence is from rogue police officers or rogue demonstrators.

Christmas is coming soon. We don’t need to be in control. We need to rather to **seek what God is asking us to do** that His righteousness and glory might be revealed. *These* are the things that are important. Amen.

(1) [The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe](#)