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**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**December 16, 2012**

**“Advent Gifts: The Gift of Light”**

**John 1:6-13** | *Read the scripture online* <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=222091704>

I've always liked the 1986 movie “The Mission.” I love the image of Father Gabriel going to a South American jungle to bring the gospel to people living at the top of waterfalls. He hikes to where he knows he will be found by the Guarani Indians. What does he bring? He doesn't come with weapons or gold. He comes with an oboe. And at the moment when death emerges from the shadows, when Indians with poisoned-tipped arrows surround him in war-paint and mistrust, what does he do? He plays music. He plays the oboe and a transformation comes over them. They move from being savages to being an audience at a classical music recital. Their humanity becomes instantly visible as they crouch on rocks and breathe in the oboe's song. Their humanity, though, includes both light and dark, as one older chief grabs the oboe and breaks it, lest its magic bewitch them fully. But another Indian wants to hear more and he looks the stranger in the eyes to see if what was broken can be repaired. Gabriel shrugs as if to say “No,” so the man goes to another, whose skill can fix what is broken. Then hand-in-hand the stranger is led away to join the tribe.

I love how this scene describes a transformation; how two groups of people become a new creation altogether. The white man represents the slave traders who hunt the Guarani Indians, steal their children so they can be sold for money. Yet the two groups share a common humanity under God, and in time enemies become a family. Gabriel establishes a mission at the top of the waterfalls. The Guarani form choirs and orchestras, and they live together as children of God in their jungle community of faith.

Stories of such transformations are at the heart of what we believe as Christians. An outcast-yet-good Samaritan becomes a model of faith. A demoniac is cured and leaves his chains and cemetery to walk once more among the people. An old poem tells the story of how people were gathered at a public auction, when the next item for sale was a weathered, old violin. Hardly anyone bid for it, but just before the hammer came down to end bidding, a stranger entered the room, mounted the podium, took the bow and played the instrument. Wonderful music came from the violin; the audience was spellbound. After the person stopped playing, the bidding escalated to unheard-of amounts simply because the discarded violin had been touched by the master's hand.<sup>1</sup>

In a moment, the way the violin was seen changed. In a moment, the priest and the Indians became different people in each other's eyes. Transformations do happen: The homeless, the addict, the wounded person, the wounding one; all have the capacity to be different, to be made whole. That is the message of our faith. We trust that, in Jesus Christ, transformation *is* possible for us, and for others as well. That is why we walk with Christ toward that vision, that light. That is the Advent journey of faith. That's what I wanted to talk about today.



But then, once more the curtain of life's tragedies was pulled back and in our very midst came news stories of gun violence and lost innocence. Another volume on the bookshelf of human atrocity is being written even as we gather here in church. On the binding it says "Newtown, Connecticut. Population 27,500." Inside it lists facts and details: "Sandy Hook Elementary School, Adam Lanza, 27 dead—20 young children, 6 adults, plus the gunman." What happened can scarcely be put into words; the tragedy of children and teachers dying in their classrooms runs counter to everything we value and trust. Yet it *will* be put in words, written in the book of human tragedy, filed on the shelf between Virginia Tech 2007 and Columbine High School 1999. It will be included in a library of darkness and violence that already contains more books than we'd ever dreamed possible. On the library tables are also newspapers that report 91 deaths have occurred in Pittsburgh so far this year, 73 of them being African-Americans. Nearby, packed in boxes are volumes about other tragedies: the Holocaust, the lynchings down South, the massacres of Native Americans out West, our relentless parade of Cain's descendents who murder, rape, and abuse one another.

The curtain pulls back on these shadow moments of life and even as I want to talk about light and hope and life transformation, attention must be paid to life's tragedies as well. We ask: Where was God this past Friday? I am sure we will learn dozens of stories of God being present as brave teachers and children responded that day in Sandy Hook Elementary School: of the principal who raced from a meeting toward the gunfire and was later killed, of teachers barricading kids in closets, of putting themselves in harm's way to protect the young ones under their care. Some God-moments were successful in saving lives; some were sacrificial moments. And what of Adam Lanza? What horror of darkness made Friday's events possible by his hand? With our justifiable anger, can we find a modicum of sadness for his brokenness and the destruction he has wrought upon so many, including his own family?

Suddenly the oboe music from "The Mission" shifts from being a melody of life transformation into being an elegy for those who have died. We watched an early scene from the movie. But ironically the movie, based on true events, moves on to a tragic conclusion. The land where the mission was built was sold from Spain to Portugal, who hopes to once more profit from selling slaves. There was something unsettling to the powers-that-be about these Indians making music and singing to God as if they were equal with the slave traders. So the mission is burned. Gabriel and the Indians march out toward an enemy army; they carry only a cross and are singing a hymn. They are shot down. One old priest in a distant palace files the tragic book of the Guarani mission on the shelf, saying "The world is thus," to which another one corrects him and says, "No. Thus have we made the world." The only glimmer of hope in the movie's end is when we see a young Guarani Indian boy, fleeing into the jungle away from the gunfire, stop to pick up the broken pieces of an oboe floating in a nearby stream and take it with him.

There are no words to explain away the tragedy in Newtown. There is light and transformation at the heart of our faith, but there remains shadows and darkness all around us. At any moment the curtain can be pulled back and tragedies like in Newtown, Connecticut can touch us. Given that 20 young children died Friday morning, the poignancy of how God responds to such tragedies can scarcely be spoken out loud, but it is true: God comes into this world of light and darkness as a child. That is



the heavenly answer to a world's-worth of brokenness, violence and pain. Before the largest curtain imaginable, hiding the highest stacks of tragic volumes conceivable, God comes to us as a child, and is laid in swaddling clothes on the floor before us and the dark curtain.

Philosophers remind us that there is no way to exist without there being both light and dark around us. To know what is good and loving in this life requires that we also understand what “not good” and “unloving” looks like as well. The good news is that, in the fullness of time, God entered into our world of light and dark, and in the midst of the shadows was born as a child of light. Our eyes are drawn there. Our focus goes there. By grace, we each have been given the chance to hold that child. And in that moment, our fullest humanity is re-born in us. Darkness recedes. Doubt and evil and pain are shown not to be the ultimate powers in this world. Next, by amazing grace, we each in turn are *held* by that child: the One whose resurrection victory over death on a cross literally picks us up from our knees and holds us close, comforting us with words of peace when our hearts are broken—like now after Newtown’s shooting; rejoicing with us with songs of joy when our hearts overflow, as will assuredly happen again, in time, for each of us.

John the Baptist walked the earth during times of destructive armies, poverty, oppression and pain. He stood by the water’s edge and pointed to the horizon, to the light that was coming into the world. An older chief, named Herod, grabbed John and broke him, lest his words fully bewitch the people. But others wanted to hear more and they looked around for the true light. And so the child of the angel Gabriel’s prophecy appeared, and he was named Jesus. He walks in our midst as an adult, repairing what we and others have broken. And he calls us to walk hand-in-hand into a new family of God’s children of the light. For the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not, cannot—will not—overcome it.

Faith is the light that casts out darkness. It is the love that casts out fear. It is the hope that sustains us in all time and places. But know this: It can be as stark and unsettling as an infant child lying alone on a hard floor, until we pick up that child, and hold it, and protect it. And everything else becomes secondary to that moment and that embrace. And then by grace *we* are held. By grace, *we* are made whole. By grace, *we* are transformed.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Robert Dykstra, *Images of Pastoral Care*, 2005, p. 68.

