

Everyone's Been Shot

A Sermon By Rev. Jessica C. Gregory

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Revelation 7:1-3, 9-17

7 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree. 2 I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, 3 saying, "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants[a] of our God with a seal on their foreheads."

9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

12 singing,

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom

and thanksgiving and honor

and power and might

be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" 14 I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

15 For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

“Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.” Kate Bowler reflected in her memoir *Everything Happens for A Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved*. You may remember when I mentioned Kate last year, shortly after her book was published. Northminster’s women’s retreat used it as its theme for its gathering. This historian, author and incurable optimist continues to experience life’s beauty and difficulty as she lives with stage IV cancer. Diagnosed at 35, four years ago, Duke Divinity School Professor and mother of a toddler, Kate moves through life with cancer. She takes the hard and cherishes the beautiful.

“Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.” And for Aryam Guerrero, forever different since 2016.

Since her brother Juan was shot and killed at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando. In the past four years Aryam has become numb to the threat of death. Instead she truly lives as though she will die: “I just live my life as if I could die in the next 30 minutes. You have no choice but to live with it” (Felsenthal 2019).

Aryam never relished the beauty of a sunset like she does now, always wondering if it might be her last.

“Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.” Sarah Pederson and her husband both followed their passion for children and education and became teachers. Both got certified and have master’s degrees and are in full-time positions they love. Recently they had a daughter and looked forward to her having a sibling.

Except they can’t afford it. Two full-time incomes aren’t enough when the incomes are teachers’ salaries, and each month \$600 goes to pay student loan debt. Sarah laments: “We had just expected that we would be able to have a big family, and right now, I’m not really sure we can have more than one kid. It’s so crazy to us that we might be raising an only child.”

“We’re helping to raise other people’s kids and yet not able to afford more of our own....We take these burdens on and sometimes kind of feel like Atlas — this huge weight on our shoulders” (Reilly 2018). The beautiful life that

Sarah and her husband worked so diligently to create is darkened by a cloud of financial limitations.

Life *is* so beautiful, and it is so hard. It always has been, and it always will be.

It was hard for those living in the first century in Asia Minor, too; for those being told the book of Revelation. The majority of people living in the agricultural provinces were slaves, people held captive without rights or knowledge...they couldn't read or write...people held together yet set apart by language barriers that kept them from being able to rise up in solidarity against their oppression.

For those that were free, life was still no picnic. Schools were few and far between. The joy that comes from having a free mind and stimulating ideas to consider was missing. No Google to answer your question of Why? And no reason to ask Why in the first place. Girls as young as 12 and ½ years old were married to men chosen for them. Life revolved around the necessity of food and shelter, weather and the Roman Empire.

Life was hard, and it was difficult to imagine it being anything other than what it was.

The Book of Revelation offered these people and us today apocalypse--revealing—of good over evil, as seen through Jesus Christ, messenger of God uniquely human and divine. John's revelation to the first century followers of Jesus offered assurance that in the end, life is more beauty than hardship and a reminder of God's comfort in it all.

Assurance given through visions and ideas so different from reality that one might actually believe the words of the eternal transformation they describe.

This morning, the good news of God's comforting love is described through visions of heaven... we imagine angels standing "on the four corners of the earth" (Revelation 7:1-2) and a fifth one flying down with the seal of the living God...a seal marking God's own; a seal of belonging; a seal of baptism...a seal given to "a great multitude that no one could count, from

every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Revelation 7:9) ; a seal given to God’s children. A seal given to ones who “ have come out of the great ordeal” and who are worshipping God morning and night.

They are worshipping the one who takes away their hunger; takes away their thirst, the one who will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

They are worshipping God, who was with them through the ordeal and is there to comfort them as they come out of it. God who reveals that good triumphs over evil; beauty remains after hardship.

Every generation, in each decade, Americans have endured hardship; they have endured great ordeals. In the 30s it was the Great Depression. In the 40s it was World War II, in the 50s it was the Korean War. In the 60s it was the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy. In the 70s it was the Vietnam War. In the 80s it was the AIDS epidemic and in the 90s, Los Angeles rioted after police officers were found not guilty of assaulting motorist *and black man* Rodney King.

In the 2000s it was 9/11 and the fight against Terrorism.

And somehow, for the most part, we have come out of those ordeals. Not unscathed, not unchanged, but somehow, in the midst of great loss, Americans have found a way to move forward, a way towards hope, towards good, towards God. We have journeyed through and come out of an ordeal to God’s comfort, rather than staying in a place without God, filled with isolation, cynicism, apathy and helplessness.

As we come to the end of the 2010s our ordeal is obvious: Gun violence. Today, life is so hard.

Far too many tears have been wiped away in the past weeks as we all have mourned for the victims of the Gilroy, El Paso and Dayton shootings...as we have wept for their communities and for our country.

Incredibly, according to the Gun Violence Archive, there have been over 250 mass shootings (incidents in which at least 4 people other than the shooter have been injured or killed) in the first 220 days of 2019. Gun Violence is a

devastating ordeal we are going through and cannot see how we will come out. It's hard to find beauty in the midst of bleeding victims and bleeding hearts of those who remain. It is just so hard. In this time, we must remember the ordeals from which the country has already come and be reminded of God's comfort in them and after them.

Printed on the front of your bulletin, wise spiritual writer and ordained Catholic priest Richard Rohr explains: "Faith is not for overcoming obstacles; it is for experiencing them—all the way through!"

Like the multitude gathered by the angels in our text for today, we are active people. These people, clad in robes, had washed them white, and were worshipping God day and night. They were not passive; their ordeal did not define them nor defeat them. Strengthened by their faith, they moved all the way through their obstacles, and experienced God, and their world, in a wholly new and different way.

Even through her obstacle as great as incurable cancer, Kate Bowler gained vitality: "...Cancer has ushered in new ways of being alive....In my vulnerability I am seeing my world without the instagrammed filter of breezy certainties and perfectible moments. I can't help noticing the brittleness of the walls that keep most people fed, sheltered and whole. I find myself returning to the same thoughts again and again: Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard" (Bowler 2016).

Our faith, and the comfort of God is present, as we are going through this great ordeal of guns, not only when we come to its end. Beauty remains after hardship. God's comfort is for us, too, in all of our own great ordeals.

Friends, in one way or another, everyone's been shot. Whether by cancer, or gun violence, like Aryam Guerrero or financial hardship, like Sarah Pederson, we all have ordeals, and we have all been through them. We have all endured many losses. For some of us, it is the loss of parents, either by death, illness or geography.

Or the loss of spouses, the loss of relationships...the loss of children, or the loss of one's self in some way. We've lost pets, and we've lost friends.

We've lost money, we've lost jobs, we've lost homes, and we've lost opportunities.

We've all had losses; we all have ordeals we are going through. Life is so hard.

Truly, whether by bullet, cancerous cell or a company's downsizing, everyone's been shot. We have all been wounded; we are all healing, to some extent, and are moving forward.

Katharine Weber's novel *The Music Lesson* describes the journey of a woman confronting the extraordinary loss of her daughter. In this work of fiction, Weber offers real life wisdom about experiencing loss: "Life seems sometimes like nothing more than a series of losses, from beginning to end. That's the given. How you respond to those losses, what you make of what's left, that's the part you have to make up as you go."

Our response to our losses, to the ordeals presented us, is all that we can control. Too often, we spend time making ourselves feel better by comparing our loss with someone else's as a means of comfort, and perspective. These comparisons begin with "It's not so bad...or it could always be worse." And then we try to rationalize how things will be okay, in part in attempt to keep those emotional responses at bay.

While both statements may be true, they remove us from owning our ordeal...from truly feeling the depth of emotion attached to it, from seeking and experiencing God's comfort within it. Our unwillingness to and fear of experiencing the pain keeps us from being able to heal from it. They keep us from fully coming out of the ordeal, instead they paralyze us in it.

John's words for the first century hearers and us today are words of encouragement, solidarity, comfort and hope. *They* have been through a great ordeal; not just one person has struggled, but many. And many have come out of it. So to have we, and so will we. And there will come a time when we hunger and thirst no more, when God will wipe every tear from our eyes, when gun violence in America will cease being an epidemic, and the beauty of life will outshine its hardships.

Everyone's been shot. We have healed in the past, and we can again. We have the resilience, courage, intelligence, faith and strength to continue on in life, creating good out of what remains after our ordeal; after our great losses. But will we continue on? Will we turn towards God's comfort or will we turn away? John encourages us to go with God...because life is so hard, but life is SO beautiful. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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