

1st Sunday of Advent 2021

We are troubled by demons of worry, stress, anxiety, anger, and greed. The warring of the nations goes on and we find our trust placed in so many wrong places. Center our living upon you, Lord of history and creation, and remind us that we continue always to live in your grace and mercy; in the name of Jesus, our constant friend. Amen.

St. Matthews Episcopal Church in Kenosha, WI is about a ¼ mile from where Kyle Rittenhouse shot one of his victims and where on Nov 19th, a jury found him innocent on all charges. 2 days later, about an hour NW from Kenosha, a speeding SUV crashed into a crowd of people on Sunday evening, November 21, killing six and injuring dozens more. St. Matthias Episcopal Church of Waukesha is 2 blocks from where this all occurred.

The level of concern and fear must have been through the roof for the congregation of St. Matthews as the verdict in the trial of Kyle Rittenhouse was read out in court. I can only imagine the level of shock, disbelief, sadness, and anxiety that permeated the city of Waukesha and the congregation of St Matthias.

Neither congregation could have anticipated the tragedies that occurred in their cities.

An article in People Magazine this past week discussed the actions of Episcopal priest David Simmons:

“Amid the chaos that erupted at Sunday's Waukesha Christmas Parade, David Simmons, a pastor at St. Matthias Episcopal Church, heard gunshots. Then he sprung into action, pulling children off the street and into his church.

It was a harrowing experience for all involved, especially the children, many of whom were separated from their parents for more than two hours until the tragic scene, at which five people died and forty-eight were injured, was stabilized.

"When we were bringing the kids in and many of them were crying and didn't know what was going on," Simmons says. "The young ones didn't know what was going on and were terrified. The older ones knew what was going on and were terrified because they'd all been through active shooter drills before."

The doors to the church are always open during the annual holiday parade. Situated at the beginning of the parade route, it is a place where people can come in and warm up from the cold or use the restroom.

"We're always right there," Simmons says.

But about 40 minutes into the parade, a red SUV came barreling down Main Street, allegedly driven by Darrell Brooks, 39. At that point, the church became a safe haven for children.

"[Brooks] was going really fast," Simmons remembers, "He was laying on his horn pretty hard."

Police fired their weapons at the SUV, and then a police officer near the church said that everybody needed to get off the street.

"We just started pulling people into the church," Simmons says.

Many were children separated from their parents.

The parade's young baton team sought refuge in the church, Simmons says — but they were without their parents.

"Their parents were almost all down at the other end of the parade route and were sheltering in place in a completely different place," Simmons says. "So, there was a lot of phone calling, a lot of handing around of cell phones so that parents could know that their kids were in a safe place. But it took about two, two and a half hours for the parents to finally be allowed to leave and then come to pick up their kids."

Watching parents reunite with children they had been separated from was "heart-wrenching," Simmons says.

"I was not there where the casualties were occurring. So, for me, the heart-wrenching part was watching some of these parents who had been down in

the area where the stuff happened, coming in and just grabbing their kids and not letting go," Simmons says." End quote.

Fr. David reacted immediately out of necessity, and I have no doubt that most of us would have done the same thing. But the fear of those in the crowd and the parents of those children must have been off the charts.

He addressed some of this in his Thanksgiving Day sermon and said that he will talk more about the process of healing at today's service.

One only has to look back over the past 21 months and feel the tension, fear, anxiety, sorrow, and anger that the pandemic has engendered. Add to that the prolonged and dangerous infighting within Congress, the death threats against election officials, people being attacked, and some killed over face masks, the attack on the Capitol, and the unrelenting racial discrimination and subsequent violence. It is no wonder that so many of us have operated on a continual high level of anxiety in our lives and do not know what to expect next. It is not surprising that anxiety disorders affect 18.1% of the population in the US every year. This means that approximately forty million adults aged eighteen and older have some form of anxiety disorder. But during the pandemic, in the United States, the average share of adults reporting symptoms indicative of an anxiety or depressive disorder rose from 11 percent in 2019 to over 41 percent by the beginning of 2021.

According to the Mayo Clinic, common anxiety signs and symptoms can include:

--Feeling nervous, restless, or tense

--Having a sense of impending danger, panic, or doom

--Having an increased heart rate

--Breathing rapidly (hyperventilation)

--Sweating

--Trembling

--Feeling weak or tired

--Trouble concentrating or thinking about anything other than the present worry

-- and difficulty sleeping.

Back in 1995, I began having feelings of weakness and a sense that I could pass out. This usually occurred in public situations. I would make sure that I always could see a way out of the crowds and if possible, avoid the situation causing the symptoms entirely. I cancelled out of some events due to fear that I might pass out, although I never did. If things got too intense, I would walk out.

After dealing with this for a couple of years, I was diagnosed with panic disorder and underwent Biofeedback training which helped. This did not mean that I never get anxious anymore because I still do. However, the panic episodes pretty much went away. Panic attacks are characterized by a fear of disaster or of losing control even when there is no real danger. As you can see, anxiety disorders can have a terribly negative impact in one's life, lead to other physical disorders, and cause hope to seem a distant possibility.

Our gospel reading starts out with statements by Jesus that may have caused increased anxiety among the disciples and should cause some alarm for us too.

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. 26 People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. 27 At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

People fainting from terror does not engender a sense of peacefulness and tranquillity. It is frankly scary. Jesus is making the point that when these signs and events begin to take place, the kingdom of God is near. And make no mistake, they will occur, so we need to be prepared.

How do we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus Christ as we begin this Advent season?

Psalm 25 helps with that.

“Show me your ways, Lord,
teach me your paths.

5 Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.

6 Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.

7 Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me,
for you, Lord, are good.

8 Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore, he instructs sinners in his ways.

9 He guides the humble in what is right

and teaches them his way.

10 All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful

toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.”

Jesus is warning us of what is to come so our anxiety may be less. Advent is our time of preparing for what is to come.

South African theologian and pastor John W. De Gruchy, wrote the following:

“We who believe in Jesus Christ are aware that we are living between the time of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the fulfilment of all things. We live, not in utopia, not in a cloud-cuckoo land, for we are aware of the pain and evil around us. The struggle against evil continues. But we know that the beginning of the end has come. Like the Allied forces in World War II, we have landed on the beaches of Normandy; the war is not over; there is still a costly fight ahead, but victory is certain; the end is in sight. We know that a new creation has been inaugurated. We know that something has happened in history which cannot be turned back. We know that we will still have to struggle against evil, but we know that the victory has been won.” Faith for a Time Like This (Cape Town: Rondebosch United Church, 1992), 74.

Anxiety, worry, and fear may in fact be, part and parcel, of our lives as we live within society today. But it should not be the case for our lives in the kingdom

of God. We wait in hope for the coming of Jesus to establish His kingdom in all its glory. The message of Advent is, that Christ is coming. Jesus is nothing less than the Prince of Peace, the One who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). He is the One who shows us the abundance of God’s steadfast love for us, and the desire of God to save us from anything that can hurt or destroy us.

Although the world will continue to make us anxious, Jesus comes to offer us perfect peace. That is a reality in which we can find hope.

Amen!