

## EPIPHANY II

*Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away.* Isaiah 41:1

Sometimes it's too much of a stretch to connect the propers for the day with what I want or need to say. Today, I'm not going to try. Sometimes the world intrudes and takes precedence over biblical messages per se, and this is one of those weeks.

Here are some of the headlines from Wednesday's papers.

*GOP leaders hail gun OK in N.H. capitol: Relief, fear, as N.H. voids weapons ban in capitol*

*Students mourn Nebraska school administrator slain by teen.*

*More warning signs of shooting surface: Menacing note discovered in Loughner's home*

*Sales of Glocks surge amid fears of limits.*

*Kerry calls partisanship a threat.*

*Doctors say Giffords's Condition points to survival.*

*Legal strategy could hinge on mental ill.*

The pundits and pontificators have had a field day with the Arizona tragedy. And people are responding in their own ways: buying more Glocks, permitting weapons in state capitol buildings. Fred Phelps and Co. that hate filled, hateful crowd, were going to picket the funerals of Loughner's victims, (though later they decided not too, probably deciding that such an action would get them even worse press than usual. They bought airtime instead. ) Mike Capuano says that he doesn't want more security, that "nothing is going to get between" him and his constituents. He's not the only one. The House of Representatives postponed their attempt to repeal health care reform for a week in order to discuss the shootings in Arizona, doubtless each Party hoping for political advantage.

And Sarah Palin says, "Especially within hours of a tragedy unfolding, journalists and pundits should not manufacture a blood libel that serves only to incite the very

hatred and violence they purport to condemn. That is reprehensible."

The use of the phrase "blood libel" -- a term that has its origins in anti-Semitic accusations about Jews using the blood of Christian children in their religious rituals -- is to my mind one of the most reprehensible comments I've read.

And everyone seems to have an opinion about the "root causes" of our increasingly violent culture. It's lax gun laws. It's an inadequate mental health system. It's inflammatory rhetoric.

Here's what I think. It's all of those things. All of those problems, and more, are the signs of a nation and a culture that seems to have lost its way.

What do we expect when leaders respond to gun abuse by acquiring and permitting more weapons in public places? What do we expect when Sarah Palin puts even moderate politicians in her crosshairs, and then won't take responsibility for that irresponsible behavior? What do we expect when folks with severe mental health problems are not identified and taken into treatment? These are systemic problems, interconnected problems, and constitute what I understand as original sin: the creation and perpetuation of a society in which we do not adequately care for one another, nor do we firmly enough hold ourselves and others accountable.

I know I sound bleak here, and I'm supposed to be the bearer of good news. So let me offer, at least, some constructive -- I hope-- though rather random, observations. One is that none of the reasonable opinions I've read and quoted is wrong. Inflamed rhetoric is a serious problem, as is political partisanship. Ready access to guns, particularly semi-automatic weapons for civilians, is a problem. Shoddy mental health systems are a problem. Everybody who cites one of these causes has a piece of the picture: the whole picture is more profound and complex than any of us can know or understand, I believe.

As I think I've quoted here before, from my time in the abortion dialogues, when we were asked early on what we would have to give up to participate in the process, I said we would have *to give up being right*.

*You mean, being righteous?* one of the pro-lifers said. *No, I said, being right. All of us have some of the truth, none of us has it all.* People who are seriously thinking and

working on the issue of violence in the U.S. need to stop being righteous, and stop believing that their explanation is the one and only answer.

And as to Mike Capuano and all those others who are making bravado statements about not wanting additional security, well, one of Gabrielle Giffords's *aides* was killed. Our legislators may want to look macho and "of the people" but they are responsible for others as well, and they need to think about caring for those who work for them as well as their own images.

I met this week with one of the postulants in the ordination process, Jude who was in Haiti last year during the earthquake, and returned quite shattered, as who would not. And I had heard from several sources that over the summer, when he was working as a chaplain at the Barbara C. Harris Camp, another man had an accident doing the ropes course, Jude was involved, and had had a real freakout afterwards.

I asked him to tell me about that, and he talked for a very long time. One of the things he kept repeating was that he had thought the stunt that caused the accident was dangerous, that the injured guy had taken irresponsible risks, and that he, Jude, should have said something. *I should have said something*, he lamented.

Apparently some people, especially classmates Jared Loughner's,, were alarmed about his increasingly bizarre behavior and did *say something*. But none of their alarms were taken seriously enough, and none of them persisted.

Now so many are quoted as saying they knew something was wrong. Hindsight is wonderful. But foresight is better. What do I mean?

I know that some of my nearest and dearest, and maybe some of you as well, think I overreact to what I perceive as signs of trouble, that I can be hyper vigilant or alarmist, or maybe just *dark*. But I'd rather over-function in this way than under-function, and I'm not sure how much I can do about my temperament in any event.

For a couple of years I've taken some Bystander Awareness training. In brief, these workshops ask us to examine our behavior in situations of conflict and, particularly, when injustices are being perpetrated: are we passive witnesses to trouble, do we make neutral observations, or do we move to standing by someone in trouble? Where are we on this spectrum, and can we, do we want to, move from one role to another?

I was saying to a friend when we were talking about the Loughner carnage and the larger problems it represents, that I think, much as we love living in Massachusetts and are grateful for the Commonwealth's progressivism, it can be discouraging to realize that our voting and activism locally does little to affect the national scene. Our representatives and senators are, by and large, okay. Even Scott Brown is better than most Republicans, I think, though he opposes renewing a ban on assault weapons. We've done what we can to get good people—at least relatively good people—to D.C.

So, what can we do? Well, I think we can practice moving from being bystanders to being standers-by. We can make ourselves accountable for perceiving situations of injustice or potential danger, and doing what we can to correct or prevent them. We can call others to account for acts of unfairness or irresponsibility.

This weekend we celebrate the life, work, and vision, of Dr. Martin Luther King, who died in 1968 as a martyr to the cause of freedom and justice for his people. He had a dream. We pray that we may hold that dream in our hearts, and live our lives in furtherance of his vision.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, which we heard as this morning's epistle, he promises that God will strengthen us to the end. God will give us what we need to live well in community, to care for one another, to hold ourselves and one another accountable, *to speak the truth in love*.

In a famous passage, quoted by David Brooks in The Times on Thursday, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote,

*“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. ... Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”*

That's the Good News, my dear friends, Good News in a bleak and scary time. We are not alone. We have God with us. We have Jesus with us. And we have one another, *living members in the body of Christ*.

And for that, let us give thanks and praise. Alleluia! Amen.