

**Herod wants to kill you. God is longing to love you. Choose God.
A Sermon for St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN
Sunday, March 17, 2019 – The Second Sunday in Lent**

In the name of God who longs to love each of us and who broods over us as a mother broods over her children. Amen.

“In the midst of life we are in death; from whom can we seek help?” These words from the Office of the Burial of the Dead¹ were composed by Notker, a medieval monk of Saint Gall in Switzerland, while he watched the construction of a bridge over a chasm and realized the peril that threatened its builders.² “In the midst of life we are in death; from whom can we seek help?”

Last week began with the tragic news of the Ethiopian Airlines crash which claimed all 157 lives on board.³ On Wednesday evening, our youth group curated one of the most courageous, thought-provoking, and enjoyable conversations about death and dying I’ve ever heard. On Friday in New Zealand a white nationalist killed 50 people, wounded 50, including children, shooting them while they were praying.⁴ Yesterday, here at St. John’s we gathered for our Lenten day-retreat and workshop to share practical and pastoral resources to prepare for

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church Together with The Psalter or Psalms of David According to the use of The Episcopal Church* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 492.

² Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981, 1980), 485.

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47553174>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/asia/new-zealand-shooting.html>

the end of life. The words of Notker, that monk from the early middle ages, have been haunting me: “In the midst of life we are in death; from whom can we seek help?” Today’s sermon will not provide any adequate answers to Notker’s question. Instead, by exploring today’s appointed Gospel lesson with the help of Puccini’s opera *Tosca*, a poem by African American genius Lucille Clifton, and the Prayer Book, we might begin to respond to Notker’s haunting question. But first, an outrageous personal story about how I came to know, ontologically, that yes indeed, “In the midst of life we are in death.”

I won’t bore you with the complicated details of how and why I ended up living in a funeral home for a year. In a nutshell, I was forced into unemployment after a botched visa petition led to my immigrant status being compromised and a lengthy, costly, and convoluted process to have my status reinstated in order to submit a new Religious Worker petition ensued. For six months I had no income, lived in terror of being deported, and thanks to beloved Episcopalians, I survived. My legal status was reinstated, my visa was granted, I am now employed, and I can look back on that year I lived in a funeral home with gratitude. There is nothing more sobering than doing one’s laundry in presence of a cadaver or two. You see, the prep room in the basement of the funeral home was right next to the

laundry facilities. So, when I did my laundry, oftentimes dead bodies on gurneys were either on their way in or on their way out of the prep room; or they were in their caskets dressed and ready for their funerals.

I discovered that corpses are very quiet, very still, very calming; you can separate laundry and re-match your socks in peace; and they were very attentive when I needed to rehearse sermons. Humor aside, every morning, when I looked out of my second-floor window, I would see the undertakers carefully delivering bodies, or loading caskets into the hearses. On my way out or upon my return, I would see grieving individuals and families in various stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, or acceptance. I heard hymns, laughter, sobbing, snippets of love-language from eulogies being practiced in hallways; rhythmic, mesmerizing voices fervently praying the Rosary in unison; Gospel singers wailing; and sometimes a mariachi band. The aroma of flowers, cologne, coffee, perfume, and delicious food from a variety of cultures wafted through the mansion. Seeing the bodies of deceased people of all ages, some far too young, whose life-stories are as complex, tragic and beautiful as yours and mine, always gave me pause. For that year, the daily presence and constant reminders of death were a gift. In the words of Cavaradossi's aria, "E lucevan le stelle" from the third act of *Tosca*, "I

never before loved life so much. Loved life so very much!”⁵

In today’s Gospel we are reminded that Jesus lived and worked with a constant threat of death looming over him. Even the Pharisees said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”⁶ Why? Because Jesus’ prophetic movement of love-based ministry threatened Herod, Rome’s puppet-king, whose tyrannical rule was dedicated to Rome’s mission of colonizing, exterminating, and enslaving precious human lives for the sake of maintaining imperial power and hoarding extravagant wealth. Herod is alive and well today. From 1999 to 2017 over 700,000 people have died from drug overdoses; the majority, addicted to prescription opioids; addictions which are making big pharmaceutical companies extravagantly rich.⁷ “Herod wants to kill you.” White nationalists committed the most extremist murders in the United States in 2017⁸ and Friday’s massacre “underscores the fact that white supremacy is a global threat whose ideology manifests around the world and results in acts of violence.”⁹ “Herod wants to kill you.” Jesus’ response to the threat of Herod is remarkable. He says, “**Go and tell**

⁵ <https://youtu.be/hxdij74AL5Y>

⁶ Luke 13:31 (NRSV).

⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html>

⁸ <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-report-white-supremacist-murders-more-than-doubled-in-2017>

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<https://www.adl.org/blog/white-supremacist-terrorist-attack-at-mosques-in-new-zealand>

that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’¹⁰ Even in the face of death Jesus continues to do the hard work of ministry, and so must we.

As followers of Jesus we must continue to do the hard work of radical love; to cast out the demons of white nationalism, racism, and xenophobia and liberate one another from the chains of selfishness, violence, and greed. As followers of Jesus we must continue to lovingly perform cures to heal the sin-sick soul of a world whose leaders, like Herod, are morally bankrupt. As followers of Jesus, in this Holy Season of Lent, we must continue to make our pilgrimage of love to Jerusalem. We too “must be on our way” with Jesus to face death head on, and with Jesus, trust in God’s promise that love will always win.

In one of his most beautiful and profound statements which affirms the feminine essence of Christ’s Holy Spirit, Jesus laments, **“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”¹¹**

Friends, Herod wants to kill us. God is longing to love us. Choose God! When we allow ourselves to be loved by God, when we allow ourselves to be gathered together with all the children of God – especially those who are different to us –

¹⁰ Luke 13:31.

¹¹ Luke 13:34b

that's when we realize that if we allow love to win, then you and I can face death together and celebrate this precious gift of life. African American poet Lucille

Clifton says it best in her most famous poem:

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.¹²

Jesus' commitment to the way of love turns the monk Notker's question around and answers it. In the midst of death we are in life; because we seek the will of God who is always longing to gather us together and love us all back to life.

I close with words that the medieval monk Notker would have heard at funerals in his day; words which are still sung or spoken as a body is borne from

¹² https://youtu.be/XM7q_DUk5wU

the Church today: **“Into paradise may angels lead you. At your coming may the martyrs receive you, and bring you into the holy city Jerusalem.”**¹³ Amen.

¹³ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 500.