December 16, 2012 – After Newtown

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Please pray with me.

Sustaining and redeeming God,

In sadness and in the tragedy of awful loss, we offer before you those young lives lost as a consequence of human violence this past week.

We raise, in the distress of this time, the families of whose children are no longer to share life and joy with them.

We mourn those other families also fractured by the needless killings of that day.

As Jesus first came to his people and lives of the young and innocent were lost in the cruelty of one individual upon others, so now 2000 years on we stand alongside those whose similar grief is beyond our imagining.

Holy and loving God bring all consolation that can be brought to those most in need of your presence today, and never cease to make your presence real in this their hour of need.

To you we voice this prayer, Amen.

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is traditionally called Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is the imperative form of the Latin verb gaudere, which means to rejoice. It comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians, which we heard today.

The purpose of setting aside this one Sunday in Advent is to take a little break from the more somber tone of penitence and reflection and to bask in joyous anticipation of our Lord's upcoming birth.

But THIS Sunday, after the horrific events of last Friday, I don't particularly feel like rejoicing. I'm sad and I'm angry, and I don't know what to do. Where is God in this tragedy? How could there possibly be joy today?

I hope I have some kind of answer to those questions, but first let's turn to Luke for a minute. In our reading for today, the first thing we hear John say to the crowd is to call them a brood of vipers. Our John is not one to mince words! The people had been bragging about being the special people of God, and he sets them straight in no uncertain terms.

The word for viper in Greek is "echidna." It doesn’t mean any ordinary snake, but specifically a poisonous one. But the word echidna also has a figurative meaning in the Bible. It can also mean "words that deliver *deadly venom*, with the use of blasphemy."

The tragedy in Connecticut has brought out a lot of snakes and their deadly venomous words. One person on the radio blamed the separation of church and state, saying that God didn't save those little children because he's a gentleman and doesn't go where he isn't invited. That is pure poison.

I've heard some people say that this wouldn't have happened if only the teachers had been armed. And I've heard people say that this wouldn't have happened if we could just get all of those gun nuts and their weapons of mass destruction off of the streets.

These words are ALL poison. They, and other statements like them, are venom that's continuously being injected into our public discourse which first paralyzes it, then kills it.

The fact of the matter is that we will never know why that extremely troubled young man did what he did. And unfortunately, that not knowing is also poison. It kills our trust in our fellow man, and it paralyzes our communities into fearful isolation.

Getting back to the Gospel. John doesn't leave the crowd in suspense. "What should we do?" they cry, at the thought of being chopped down and thrown into the fire. John's answers are simple.

He tells the Jews, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." But he doesn't just speak to the good, God-fearing Jews. To the reviled and outcast tax collectors he says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." And he even instructs the Roman soldiers, saying, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

In other words, John tells the crowd, and us, to be benevolent, not selfish. To be honest, not greedy. And to be gentle, not cruel. I can see that there might be some seeds of joy in those ideas, even in this sad, sad time. What it says to me is that there is no better time than the present for us as a community of faith to reach out to our wider community with hospitality and gentle generosity.

Our country is hurting right now, and sometimes it feels like a hopeless pain – like there's nothing we can do. But we CAN do something. We can reach out to those who are in need or who are hurting or who are lonely, right here in South Dakota, and right here in Huron. We, here at Grace, need to put our heads together to figure out creative ways to reach those people and we need to do it now!

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, offers a similar formula to the one in Luke, but with some additions: "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Familiar words.

Paul was not the most happy-go-lucky guy in the world, but even HE thought there was joy in this, as he told his Philippians to "Rejoice in the Lord always."

Both John and Paul tell us some specific actions we can take to find joy and peace in a hateful and venomous world. But the real reason we should rejoice today, even in the face of all of this sadness and pain, is simple.

Jesus.

God has chosen to empty himself and come to us in the form of a little, helpless child. He has chosen to live among us and share our humanity. He has chosen to experience the pain, sadness, loss, fear, loneliness, and ultimately death that is our human condition.

But then, as if coming into our world as one of us wasn't amazing enough, Jesus went on to defeat death and to assure our place alongside him in heaven. It was a spectacular act of love that keeps on going.

We ask where God is in this tragedy. He's right there in Connecticut, and he's right here in Huron. He feels the pain of every family who lost a child. He knows the fear of every child who wasn't physically hurt but who have lost their innocence forever. He weeps with all of us. He knows what it is to be human and to suffer.

And in a very real way, Christ is not only present with us, he is also present through us. We are called, in Baptism, to be Christ's body - his arms and legs and voice and generosity and compassion and love and healing in the world. Our prayers are not only heard by Jesus, they are his own prayers. Our compassion and helping others are his compassion and help, and they are so needed in our world today.

God didn't cause this tragedy, and he didn't stand by and let it happen. The world is a broken place. Whether this has been caused by Original Sin, or by our misguided use of our free will, or by some other means, I have no idea. No one really knows for sure, no matter how positive they are that they do. But one thing I do know for certain is that God is here with us in our brokenness, to heal our wounded hearts with his eternal love for us.

Maybe there is a reason to rejoice after all.