

BIRTH PANGS

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the first Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

A Sad Mission Interrupted by Horror

On this family mission to scatter the ashes of my parents, I first drove down to North Carolina in order to spend a couple days with our kids. They're both living there now.

From there I went on to Bradenton, Florida, to visit Anna Maria Island because the final wish of my parents was to have their ashes scattered into the ocean at that place. And so I met with my two sisters, and that's what we did.

The trip ended up being about ten days overall, starting on Friday the thirteenth, the day that I drove to North Carolina. You may or may not remember that was also the day of the coordinated attacks in Paris by ISIS killers.

However, I didn't learn about the slaughter right away because I was listening to my favorite XM Sirius radio stations in the car, and I don't like listening to the news while I drive. So I didn't know about it until I arrived in North Carolina, anxious to be with the kids.

Then I learned about the horrific details of this event. It seems that what happened in Paris that day was to be France's equivalent, in its many similarities, to what 9/11 is to us. It's going to affect that country deeply, to change who they are as a people in the same way that 9/11 has affected us and changed us as a people.

The Interplay of Love versus Fear

So I went to Anna Maria Island, walked the beach with the ashes of my parents, accompanied by my sisters and my children. You think about things, about life and death, and I also thought quite a bit about the interplay of love versus fear.

I'm one of those souls who genuinely thinks that love is the answer. "All you need is love." And I realize that seems really naïve. I know the world is more complex than that, but somehow or other, deep inside, I nevertheless think it is fundamentally true. We are commanded to love. It's not merely good advice. It's not a suggestion. "Thou *shalt love* the Lord thy God with all thy heart, strength, mind, and soul" — your neighbors, yourself. "Love your enemies," Jesus said.

Even ISIS?

The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria? Known for beheadings and suicide bombers. Love your enemies versus fear because we've been afraid for these fourteen years since 9/11. The root of terrorism is terror itself. It makes you scared. You don't want to go out. You alter the way in which you live your life.

So I was thinking about these things while walking the beach. I remember on September 12, 2001, the day after the infamous attacks on Manhattan, Washington, and a field in Pennsylvania, I had planned to take my son

back to college in Chicago that day, and we decided to go for it anyway. The speed limit throughout the Ohio Turnpike was right around 55 miles an hour, yet it seemed odd that everybody went 55. Like I've never seen such obedience to the speed limit before, and I doubt I'll ever see it again. Not a single plane in the sky because everybody had been grounded.

Just Nuke 'Em; No, We Can't

We turned in at a truck stop someplace in Ohio to get gas and grab a bite to eat. It was one of these really big hangouts for truckers, and we walked in. Over in the corner, mounted up on the wall, was a large-screen television, with probably 30 or so truckers forming a quarter-circle around the TV. The news was simply replaying over and over again, showing the flames and the buildings falling. Occasionally some attention was paid to the Pentagon and the field in Pennsylvania, but mostly the focus was on the shocking sight of those two buildings plunging to the ground.

Except for the TV, everything was hushed in silence. Then one guy swore an extremely offensive oath, the gist of which was that we needed to nuke the perpetrators. "Just nuke 'em," followed by a long pause. Then another trucker chimed in, saying, "No, we can't do that." Thus began a heated discussion, and we've been hung between those two poles ever since, with anger and hatred and fear and hand-wringing.

And we're not really sure what to do about it. If you act complacent, you get accused of not being patriotic. So we've been in that place for quite a while now, and it looks like France is going to be with us in that troubled situation.

Thoughts upon Walking the Beach

This is what I was thinking about while walking the beach, and a story kept coming to my mind. It's not a pleasant story. On this first Sunday of Advent, I'd really rather give you something a bit more pleasant, but the more I think about this story, the more it has the potential of a kernel of gospel grace. Even though the story really isn't pleasant, I'm going to ask you to look for that kernel in it. It's a worthy tale.

The story is this: When I was in seminary, one of my best friends was Bob. He was my business partner. He was my drinking buddy. He was my fishing buddy. We did many, many things together, really good friends. But after you graduate, everybody tends to go their own way, and he became a Presbyterian minister, as did I at the same time. Except that Bob was more of the corporate CEO kind of person so he kept going to taller and taller steeple-type churches.

At one point, he invited me to preach at an installation service for him. He never lasted long at any given church, and so he was called to this one really tall steeple-type of church out in the Midwest, and he asked if I would preach for his installation. So I'm out there with my full manuscript of the sermon, and I'm going over it about an hour before the service, and I decided to go over it one more time.

Sitting at the desk in his office, I came across a little change that I wanted to make in the text, but I didn't have a pen, so I opened the drawer to his desk and saw that it was filled with antacids. I turned to the side drawer, and that's where he had antacids in bulk jars because they're taller. I finally found a pen and made my change, but I realized that this was not the best thing for him at that time.

A Friendship Falls Apart

A couple years passed. Bob came to visit me, and he had left the ministry at this point. He was of the opinion that I should do the same thing, and he insulted me about the choices I had made regarding serving churches during my career. So I was glad when he left.

We had sort of a falling out. He went his way, and I went my way. I never again contacted him, and never again did he contact me.

Twelve years passed. I was having trouble sleeping at night, so I picked up my quarterly seminary magazine that had just come in the mail. Lying on the couch, not ready to go to bed quite yet, reading through this magazine, I was shocked to see that Bob had died three years earlier. His wife hadn't told the seminary until recently.

The news hit me like a sledgehammer, so I immediately booted up the computer and went on line to look for his obituary. Finding it, I discovered that he had been battling cancer for a year and was survived by his wife and two daughters. No word about his son, whom I knew.

Pure Heartache for a Family

The son was one of those kids who's nothing but pure heartache for the family. Drug issues. Alcohol issues. And a long list of infractions against the law. Lots of jail time, lots of time in probation, juvenile court, all those kinds of problems. His name wasn't listed anywhere, so I started looking for an obituary. Come to find out the son had died nine months prior to the father. His obituary was literally one sentence: His name, son of so-and-so, died on such-and-such a date, period. That's all.

So I assumed a drug overdose or perhaps some violence having to do with needing money for drugs, something along those lines. Here's the part of the story that has the kernel in it. I visited Bob one time before we had our falling out, just taking a week of vacation to go see a friend.

I got there, and found that his son was under house arrest by court order. Dad had installed a security system for all the doors and windows in the house to keep the son in because the condition of his probation was that he could go to school and come home, and that's it. He was under house arrest in his own home.

Having had a nice visit, we all had gone to bed when suddenly, about 2 o'clock in the morning, the alarm system went off with a huge racket. Mom and dad got up, along with one of the daughters who was living at home, and one very awkward-feeling house guest. We all gathered in the kitchen and realized that the son had escaped. He just decided to heck with it, opened one of the windows, got out as fast as he could while the alarm was going off, and just ran.

Now Here's the Kernel

I stood there watching. Bob the dad looked at his wife, and no words were exchanged. He turned and looked at his daughter. Then he turned and looked at me, and he simply said, "I need to go make a phone call." He hung his head and walked to the phone in order to call the police to tell them to pick up his son for violation of parole and begin the process of putting him back into what he called juvenile detention.

For me this is an insight into how to deal with ISIS. The problem for that family is that they still loved the son. He was the prodigal son

who never came back but instead died in a foreign land. My personal opinion about what happened to this family is that the son contributed to the death of his father. The son was a reprobate, and he died that way. And so the father did what he had to do. He made the phone call. The next day was filled with paperwork down at the police station. I took my leave early and went back home.

If there was a message that I wish I could instill into myself regarding the way I feel about ISIS or suicide bombers in general, I wish I could remember that it's an "us" and not a "them." Chris was part of the family, a deeply beloved part of the family, who lived in such a way that he just simply died very young and contributed probably to the death of his father and to the agony of a family. But it is still the case that he was the son. He was part of the family.

Part of a Troubled, Violent Family

ISIS is part of the human family. Deeply troubled, deeply violent. Many problems that I could list, but part of the family. I feel that the solution to our problems, great and small, in the world, has to do with the way in which we conceive of *us* and different parts of *us* compared with us versus them. It's a different way of thinking.

In the Gospel of John, the very beginning of the Christmas story, which we remember now on this First Sunday of Advent, begins: "For God so loved the world," and that led to deaths, incarcerations, lots of problems, but it also led to the grave, for God so loved the world. I still think it's the answer.

Amen.