

I. Intro

A. Last Sunday, Sheri and I were in Iowa City visiting our days old granddaughter. It was a wonderful time in so many ways. SLIDE

1. I've heard that humans can stare at three things for long periods of time: water, fire and babies. I will attest to the third. It was wonderful.

B. That was Sunday, July 3. Less than twenty-four hours later – late morning on July 4th – things went from wonder to horror.

1. For me it started with a text from a friend in Arizona, asking if I'd heard that shots had been fired at the Highland Park parade. I had not. I started scanning the news, called Brad – the campus pastor at the Highland Park campus - and things began to unfold.

C. You know – or can imagine – how the rest of the day went.

1. For a while there was confusion. No one seemed to know what had happened.

2. Then then reports started to come in – and they were bad.

3. For the first several hours the authorities had no idea who had done this or why. And then, late in the afternoon, Brad called me to say they had named a person of interest, and it was a 21-year-old man who had been attending the Highland Park campus off and on over the last three years.

a) He was quiet. He sat alone. He left early. People had tried to engage him – offered him rides, bought him lunch. No one felt as though they had connected with him. No one had any idea of what was going on in his head.

4. At the time, he was still at large, so Brad hung up from calling me to call the HP police to report that this man had periodically attended our church over the last few years, and I sent out a note to you saying the same. Noting that best we could tell, while a number of church members attending the parade had been traumatized by what happened, no one had been shot; and also noting that the person of interest had been around the HP campus. We were seeing speculation about that on social media.

5. We wanted to be as helpful as we could with the police and transparent with you.

D. And you know the rest.

1. He was caught and would confess. The number who died would climb to 7 with 40 injured

2. The names of the victims began to be made public. And it would be unthinkable.

3. In the last few days there have been a half dozen public and private prayer services.

4. Highland Park in general – and our campus there – have received a lot of media attention. Politicians have rolled into town.

5. There has been lots of second guessing. Lots of speculation as to why.

6. And lots of conversations. I have been in a number of heavy conversations with people trying to process anger, confusion, fear, sadness, shock, grief and other paralyzing emotions.

II. I want to talk this morning about how to think about – and how to respond to - what happened.

III. Let me begin by noting:

A. We're not trying to fix anything today – whatever that would even mean. We cannot fix this. My comments here are meant to contribute to a process, not end it.

1. Those of us in this room are in very different places on this – for a host of reasons, starting with how connected we are to the people and events, and including how we process grief.

2. Some in our midst today are really struggling – and may struggle for some time. That's OK. If that is you, I want to say, it's OK to not be OK.

3. And we are here together to move through this together. We will get through this. You will get through this.

4. For those of you who are struggling I want to say: it's OK to not be OK. We will get through this.

5. For everyone I want to say: we are not fixing things today.

B. Second, while our focus today is on what happened on July 4th at the Highland Park parade, we need to note that the real issue is bigger than that.

1. We are focusing on this event because it happened here. To us. A

a) People from the HP campus and from the Rev 7:9 ministry have lost friends and relatives in the shooting.

b) People have been traumatized by what happened.

c) Children and others from those gatherings – including staff – remain very unsettled. Unable to sleep. Physically ill.

2. We are going to focus on what happened in Highland Park for obvious reasons, but we must note, what happened at the parade is not unique to Highland Park:

a) Last weekend, 68 people were shot in Chicago and 8 were killed in 51 separate shootings; five other mass shooting incidents on July 4th; last night at least 14 killed in mass shooting in South Africa; and depending on your definition of a mass shooting, there have been over 300 in the United States in the first 200 days of 2022.

b) I've read a number of articles about the shooting this week. Some of what I've read was written by pastors and falls into what I'll call the "welcome to my world" genre. Pastors – especially of inner-city churches – who say, "gun violence is an every-week event."

3. I do not share this to try to normalize what happened in Highland Park. To suggest that it is any less horrific and evil than it was. I am just noting it is not as uncommon as we might think.

4. The first thing I want to say is that we are processing not fixing things today; the second is that we are focused on Highland Park, but the story is bigger than that.
 - C. The third thing I want to say is, there are many discussions to be had:
 1. On mental health issues, on gun laws, on drug usage, on societal decay, on the rising number of aimless young men who are isolated and failing – some of whom apparently think it is heroic to murder innocent people. But not today. Those are not my topics for this morning.
 - D. It should be noted that there are people to be recognized and thanked – police, first responders, hospital personnel, good Samaritans. Some of you are in the room. Thank you.
 - E. It should be noted that, if you see something, say something.
 - F. It should be noted that, if you need to talk with someone to process this, please let us know.
 1. We are making counselors available to the HP and Rev 7:9 congregations and staff. If you need help, please reach out to your campus pastor.
 - G. It should be noted that we have Security and Emergency Response teams at all our campuses and we are reviewing our safety and security procedures.
 - H. There are a lot of things that could be and should be said. I am going to stay in my lane. I am a pastor. This is a sermon. I want to turn to the Lord with the question:
 1. How are we to think about this? What does the Bible say?
 2. What insights does God share to help us process this kind of evil.
 - I. To that end, I want to make four points.
- IV. Number one: We face reality.
- A. I asked a half dozen friends to review my sermon this week. I got calls from pastors around the country. They all offer to help. I asked them to pray – and shared some specifics. At some point I said, “if you would read my sermon and comment on it, that would be helpful. A half dozen did. For a while I thought their counsel was very unhelpful. Because they did not agree. For instance – on this first point. I later realized, it was helpful to realize how differently people might respond to what I am saying.
 - B. For what it’s worth, in my first pass I said, we should not be surprised.
 1. The Bible makes it clear – from Genesis 3 on - that this world is broken.
 2. The Bible makes it clear – from Genesis 3 on - that evil is real.
 3. The Bible makes it clear – from Genesis 3 on – that the human heart is dark and deceitful.
 4. We do not like these truths. We think they are beneath us. We think that we are better than we are. Many people today hold on to Utopian fantasies. They have naïve views of life.
 - C. I was going to say: we need to not be surprised.

1. As a pastor, I try not to be surprised. People tell me that: 1) they are addicted to heroin; or 2) that they've been caught embezzling funds or 3) they have an adult child their spouse doesn't know about; whatever.
 2. What I say is, "OK, I did not know that. Most people have secret struggles. I try to not act surprised by the bad choices and private sins.
 3. But I am often surprised that this is their struggle. And I was surprised by the shooting in HP. So, don't be surprised is not exactly right.
- D. But even I decided that was too harsh. I moved from we need to not be surprised to say: what are we going to do: we are going to face reality.
1. Sin is real. Evil is real and society is fragile.
 2. The world isn't what we want it to be; it is not what we wish it would be; we do not get to bend reality to our will. We need to face some issues more squarely than we are prone to.
 3. There are problems here we need to address.
- V. Number Two: We lament.
- A. We need to own our pain and process it so it does not cripple us.
- B. A few months ago, I started studying the book of Lamentations. I did not do this in preparation for a mass shooting in Highland Park.
1. It felt like, enough things had gone wrong or were going wrong that lamenting was appropriate.
 2. And that I could do a better job lamenting - of owning and processing disappointment and grief.
 3. It's not a skill set I have down very well.
- C. Like others – perhaps you - what I learned growing up is that, if you get knocked down, you need to get back up and try harder.
1. Don't let anyone see you cry. Work the problem. Seize the day. It's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog.
 2. I learned a bunch of coping mechanisms that – to be clear - have some value. I am not suggesting they are all bad. But they are not a perfect response to pain. On their own, they are not enough. They tend to err on the side of denying what is going on – in our heart if not on the ground.
- D. So a couple months ago, I started studying Lamentations. As you may know:
1. The book of Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah.
 2. It focuses on the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, when the Jews were overrun by the Babylonians and marched into exile. At the time, it was the worst crisis in Israel's history.
 3. The book unfolds in five chapters, which make up five poems that reflect on this horrible event. It is Jeremiah trying to make sense of things – of the mayhem. Of the men killed, the women raped, the children starving. It's not easy reading.
- E. The Bible actually contains lots of lament - lots of prayers of protests against what is happening. What God is allowing.

1. There is lots of wailing in sorrow. There are many angry cries from people demanding that God wake up and do his job.
 2. Some of you may be feeling that way right now. And that is OK.
 3. Laments are not just found in the Book of Lamentations. They are found in the Psalms, in Isaiah and Jeremiah, and Job. And by definition, laments question God's goodness and control.
- F. And here is my point, they are in the Book - God includes laments in the Bible. God includes angry prayers questioning his goodness in His book. He includes them to help us process our anger and confusion. Lamenting is a skill any person paying attention to what is going on needs to learn. Because if we do not lament, we grow hard hearted and cynical.
- G. Our small group went to Lamentations 1 this week –which is quite profound.
1. It opens: **How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!** It is talking about Jerusalem after it was destroyed, but it sure sounded like ground zero in Highland Park – which was now roped off by police.
 2. We read chapter 1 and reflected on it. And we talked about how we are processing the grief and pain of the last few years – and now of this horror. We talked about our coping approaches - and how we need to lament better so we don't stay angry and let our heart grow hard.
- H. I have been quite taken by Lamentations. There are a lot of things about this book I would like to say.
1. It's worth noting that it has these very orderly discussions about grief – that do not end up answering any of our questions.
- I. I could go on. Let me simply say: in addition to facing reality, we need to lament. We need to grieve. We should not ignore the ugliness of what happened. We should not slap a Band-Aid on this and soldier on. We need to be mad and be hurt and grieve and process this before God SO THAT the horrors of life do not define us.
1. We need to note that we have to work hard if we are going to keep soft hearts.
 2. We need to be aware that if we do not process this well, we will emerge from this smaller. More isolated. More fearful.
 3. We need to note that God gives us words to use to process our anger.
- J. The First thing we need to do is: face reality, the second is to lament – to process our anger.
- VI. The third thing we must do is be shaped by the Gospel.
- A. It turns out, we need to be defined by a horrific event. We are supposed to have our life upended by an unthinkable wrong – but it's not this week's mass shooting in Highland Park, it's the crucifixion of Jesus. And it shouldn't make us bitter it should make us caring.
- B. Men and women, understand, our heart will be shaped by what we focus on. Pick the right thing to focus on. Do not be defined by the actions of Bobby Crimo. Be defined by the actions of Jesus Christ.

- C. Do not be defined by fear or hate. Be defined by the grace of God extended to you by Christ. Be defined by the fact that God so loved the world that He gave his only son – that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have ever lasting life.
- D. Be defined by eternal life. Eternity changes everything.
- E. Your life needs to be defined by a tragic event. Not the shooting on July 4th, but by the death of Jesus Christ. His love for you should change you. It should free you to live above the circumstances you face.
- F. It should free you up to be able to absorb some of the pain that is out there.

VII. The final thing I will mention is we cannot grow weary of doing good.

- A. We cannot back down. We cannot give up. We cannot withdraw.
- B. In Galatians 6, the Apostle Paul – who was not naïve about what we are up against.
 - 1. He wrote during a period when Jews and Christians were suffering under the oppressive occupation of a cruel and authoritarian Roman Empire. Where people did not have rights.
 - 2. He wrote many of his letters from prison cells because he kept being beaten up and imprisoned.
 - 3. He wrote about disappointing racial strife; he wrote about spiritual forces of darkness that lined up to do him ill.
- C. He was not naïve about what life was like. But in Galatians 6:9 he said: Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.
- D. I have no intention of giving up. I have no intention of stepping back.
 - 1. Yes, we need time to grieve. We need to process. This week has been a blur. We have done little other than respond. We need time to debrief and assess and adjust.
 - 2. But then we need to reach out. We need to serve others. We need to care.
 - 3. We need to stand strong in the face of evil. My intention is to be at the Highland Park Parade next year – and I do not live in Highland Park.
 - a) In the hours after the shooting, I thought, “Oh no. Does this mean the end of fourth of July parades?” And I immediately thought about the Boston marathon – and how it survived the bombing of 2013. I loved the phrase Boston Strong, and was heartened to see a Highland Park Strong T-shirt at one of the prayer gatherings.
 - 4. Yes. We cannot cower. We cannot play it safe. We cannot let darkness push back the light. We are to be the light of the world.

VIII. We need to face reality; we need to lament; we need to be shaped by the Gospel and we need to not grow weary of doing good.

IX. On top of these things, we also need to pray. And so, we are going to do something we do not normally do. I am going to close us in prayer, and then I am going to ask you to join me in a collective prayer of lament.

- X. Closing Prayer:
- A. Heavenly father, we are asking for your protection: against senseless violence and evil.
 - B. Heavenly father, we are asking for your protection against fear.
 - C. Lord, we ask for your protection against hearts that grow hard.
 - D. And we pray for insight
 - 1. For the ability to see those that are spiraling into the darkest places so that we can stop them and help them.
 - 2. We pray for insight to see ways to address our growing polarization.
 - E. Lord, we pray for those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. And we pray for those who are grieving the loss of innocence.
 - F. And we pray for those who are – even now – fighting for their life and their health. Father, we know that you are not the author of evil, but you are the master of all things. In ways we cannot begin to imagine, work good - work blessing out of this horror. We are asking for you to intervene.
- XI. I ask you now to stand and join with me. What follows is something I cobbled together. I borrowed from several sources. I freehanded other parts of it.
- A. If you study Psalms of Lament, you come away thinking:
 - 1. We are not to suffer in silence – we need to voice our anger and confusion.
 - 2. We are not to rush through this. There is one imprecatory Psalm – those are the darkest Lament Psalms - that doesn't turn a corner. It ends in darkness.
 - a) So we are not to rush this.
 - 3. But we are also not to deny the glimmers of hope and resolve we already feel. Almost all the Lament Psalms end with the Psalmist in a better place. You will see that in this Prayer.
 - B. And this will set up a soft close. We are going to give you a chance to pray with someone. Paul will explain more of that in a moment.
- XII. Please stand:
- A. O God, what has happened to your creation?
 - B. What kind of world is this in which the innocent die?
 - C. Why don't you stop the killing?
 - D. How long will you wait while rivers of blood flood your streets?
 - E. How long will you let the innocent die and the guilty go free?
 - F. O God, where is your holiness in the face of this hell?
 - G. By your power Lord, bind evil and heal our land.
 - H. By your power Lord, stop those who intend us harm.
 - I. By your power Lord, heal all those who have been wounded by this horror.
 - J. By your power Lord, stop the ugliness that is malforming us.
 - K. We ask that you give us lives of joy and peace.
 - L. Empower us by your Spirit to push back the darkness.
 - M. May we rest in peace today and live in your eternal shalom forever. Amen

