

# Saint Paul's Parish

## The Episcopal Church in Malden

[www.stpaulsmalden.org](http://www.stpaulsmalden.org)

### "START THE APOCALYPSE WITHOUT ME!"

*Homily for the Third Sunday of Advent*

16 December 2012

The Rev. John R. Clarke, *Priest-in-Charge*

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*John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

*And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"*

*In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."*

*As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*

*So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.*

Luke 3:7-18

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The end of the world this coming Friday, December 21? Or the end of dreams and possibilities, the end of life itself for 20 children and seven adults in Newtown, Connecticut, two days ago, Friday, December 14?

Whoever thought — in the countdown to December 21 — that an apocalypse inflicted by a lone, delusional young man on an intimate New England town would overtake an army of delusional ranters banking on global Apocalypse?

And yet, they are connected.

Take global Apocalypse. On the off chance you're not up on pop culture's latest bogus science, the world, it appears, will come to an end — precisely — this Friday, December 21, 2012. That's when a 5,125-



year cycle in the Maya calendar supposedly comes to a cataclysmic close.



What will this *faux* Apocalypse look like? The poster for *2012: The Movie*. A Buddhist monk — the edges of his saffron robe flapping in a gale of biblical proportions — stands alone as a tsunami surges over ... Long Island? The Florida Keys? San Francisco? No! The Himalayas!

(Spoiler alert: No mention of the film's other bumps for humanity: the earth's surface waxing molten, the atmosphere fried, Yellowstone blown to smithereens.)

And splashed across the poster's storm-clouded sky? "WE ... WERE ... WARNED!"

So, it's bad news for humanity. Good news for the box office, where *2012* grossed worldwide \$770 million.

Take out the box office, keep in all the end-of-the-world apocalyptic bits, and what's left? Good news to John the Baptist!

That's because he's been heating up the atmosphere himself with even hotter rhetoric. All "wrath to come." All ax. All fire — "unquenchable fire!"

Shades of *2012*. Read: Bad news for humanity.

But Luke the Evangelist tells us: "So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people."

Good news? Start the Apocalypse without me! Where's the good news?

Look for it on John's business card: "John the Baptist. Prophet."

So?

It's the prophet part. And the difference between *predicting* the future ... and *changing* the future.

Meaning: Biblical prophets aren't fortune tellers. They're truth-tellers. They don't predict the future. They bend the future toward God's justice.

In other words, they're in the business of "if": "If you keep on behaving like you don't 'love God, love neighbor,' bad news will happen — obviously to your victims, but also to you. You'll get your own customized Apocalypse.

"On the other hand ... if. If you course-correct, good news all around! You've been warned!"

Faced with the consequences, then, is anything but "course-correct" an option? It's a no-brainer!

Not necessarily. Because John correctly anticipates his audience's response: "Bad news for us? No way! We're God's Chosen. We're golden."

In other words, they're betting God runs a protection racket. Read: You can protect yourself against the "wrath to come" if you've got the right family tree, the right DNA, the right religion.

Their reasoning? In terms we would use, guns before butter. Guns before human life itself.

That's because John's audience had this idea that their identity as God's People guaranteed them a decisive, ultimate military victory over their enemies, namely, the Romans and their puppet regimes. And they're itching for a fight. "Tanks, start your engines!"

But John calls this mindset for what it is: myth: "If you're really God's people," he says, "act like God. Take the money you're investing in guns, and clothe people. Tax people — all people — fairly. Organize government — organize your society — to be just.

"And if you choose instead to bet the farm on your pistol-packing hardware? Don't be surprised when Apocalypse — the 'wrath to come' — bites you in the hind quarters!"

In other words, "It's your *guns*, stupid."

And that's John's take, I suspect, on the 800-pound gorilla in the room here this morning: the Newtown Apocalypse ... compelling us to pivot to the people's response to John's message: "And *we*, what should we do?"

John's answer? Create good news: Act now. → Change your future.

That means: Be aware. Be honest. Be responsible.

First: Be aware.

There are facts related to this tragedy of which you simply must be aware. And they all point to John's message: "It's your *guns*, stupid."

Fact: In the United States last year, 9,000 people were killed with guns. Compare that to Germany: 170 killed with guns. Or Canada: 150. Sure, they're smaller than we are. But fact is — at 3.1 deaths per 100,000 people — we have, by a wide margin, the highest per capita rate of deaths from gun violence than any other industrialized nation.



Fact: In the US alone, gun massacres — most often of children and students in our schools — are

happening with hideous regularity.

Why? "It's your *guns*, stupid."

That is, other industrialized nations — those that suffer hundreds, not thousands of gun deaths each year — have reasonable gun control laws, most of which have come in response to massacres like that in Newtown.

But here? After each massacre, we *bulk up* — egged on by the gun lobby — and their cynical gun industry backers — who say, "You've got to protect yourself."

This argument — with its track record of viral violence — is blatantly repugnant to the Gospel of Jesus Christ — Jesus, who — unarmed — said, “Allow the little children to come to me,” and took them up in his arms.

Do you really, then, want to introduce an arms race into our schoolrooms, theaters, malls, hospitals, and — as some advocate — our churches, this very room?



And speaking of arms races, fact: In this country, we already have — by far — the highest rate of gun ownership in the world: 88.8 guns per 100 people. That’s 300 million guns. 312 million people.

Sound too inflated to be true? Now, I usually avoid bolstering an argument with just one data point, but, fact: Adam Lanza had two handguns on him plus a semi-automatic assault rifle when he stormed the school. And investigators have recovered at least three more guns — semi-automatic rifles — he had available.

Yes, they were purchased legally and owned by his mother. And in light of her murder, it would be too glib to suggest, “Live by the sword, die by the sword.” But the sheer number of weapons available not just to Adam Lanza, but to the majority of people in this country — weapons with suped-up hyper-firepower — we’re beyond hunting deer, marksmanship as sport, and the so-called “right to bear arms.”

Some counter that, unlike most gun owners, Lanza was likely a highly-disturbed individual. Nevertheless, he had access to the weapons.

And that brings us beyond being aware, to being honest.

A reasonable request: I want those arming-up to be honest with the rest of us. Sure, you say you like to hunt. But semi-automatic assault rifles to take down Bambi? Gentlemen ... ladies ... it’s just not sporting.

And multiple 100-round gun clips? To protect you and your family against intruders? What’s *really* behind that?

Afraid the UN is going to over-run the country ... or the Iranians ... or the North Koreans ... or the not-our-kind-dear “Kenyan socialist” and his ilk? Afraid queers like me are going get too uppity for our own good? Want to keep your options open for armed rebellion when a lawful election doesn’t go your way?

C’mon ... be honest. Just admit it. Arming yourself to the teeth? It’s not pleasure. It’s not protection. It’s paranoia. Or politics. But the least you owe us is honesty.

And finally, be responsible.

For example, I think it’s irresponsible to suggest that God had anything whatsoever to do with the massacre at Newtown.

Take Mike Huckabee — please! He blames the massacre, in part, on restrictions on school prayer and the pesky way the Constitution

respects the wall of separation between Church and State. He's saying basically, "Drive God from public schools and what can you expect? Carnage."

The utter illogic — the utter theological *bankruptcy* — of that analysis is jaw-dropping.

But Huckabee has been outdone by Bryan Fischer of the American Family Association. He says that because we've banned public prayer from our schools, God refused to protect the victims of Lanza's rampage. He puts words in God's mouth: "I don't go where I'm not wanted."

Why would you ever believe in a petty, cold, impotent God like that?

So, let me be clear: God does not sacrifice innocent children — ever — to make a point!

So, bringing your rickety 1950's school-prayer politics into this tragedy? It's irresponsible.

But to be responsible — as followers of Jesus Christ — what, then, should we do?

Act now. → Change the future for our children.

Read: Lobby our elected representatives to enact — now! — reasonable and comprehensive gun control:<sup>1</sup>

- Reinstatement of the assault weapons ban that Congress allowed to expire in 2004, because military-style weapons? They belong in the hands of the military — maybe in the hands of police officers. But in the hands of civilians?
- Ban high-capacity bullet clips. In the hands of people like you and me — in the hands of a deranged gunman like Lanza — they are — literally — overkill.
- Require criminal background checks on gun buyers at gun shows.
- Improve instant background checks to prevent guns from falling into the hands of people with histories of mental illness.



So, there's work for us to do as we face the challenges of this unspeakable suburban Apocalypse, because today, we are all residents of Newtown. There's work, then, to perfect mourning our lost neighbors by preventing the next Columbine ... the next Virginia Tech ... the next Aurora ... the next Newtown ... the next

slaughter of the innocents ... by remembering:

"We ... were ... warned!"

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<sup>1</sup> Based on gun control legislation recommended by Congresswoman Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY). On December 7, 1993, Rep. McCarthy's husband was killed and her son severely injured when a gunman opened fire on a Long Island Rail Road commuter train.