

Preaching about Gun Violence: Now Is the Time

Katie Day

United Lutheran Seminary, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

It has always seemed like a preaching challenge to begin Advent in the ominous apocalyptic tone presaging the coming of Christ against the cultural backdrop of Christmas cheer. Yet this year it is not a stretch to imagine a time after suffering when the moon darkens and the stars fall, to use Mark's language. Indeed, this does seem like an apocalyptic time we could not have predicted last year, in Advent of Year A, which now seems so long ago. We have experienced a cascade of unprecedented crises that have threatened to undo us: the COVID pandemic, the economic crisis, racial injustice, roiling contentious politics, and a planet that continues to get hotter. What is particularly insidious about these crises is that they aren't isolated from one another, but are interactive. So the raging virus exposes and exacerbates the issues of racial inequality as well as the economic crisis, as businesses shutter and jobs are lost. As people of color unfairly bear the brunt of contagion and economic vulnerability, the conditions are ripe for social uprising. The fear and insecurity that this creates in the leadership hardens its underlying white supremacist orientation, which then threatens the rule of law. Of course the growing climate crisis threatens us all, but the poor, again, disproportionately so, as they have less protection and escape from dangerous heat waves, fires, floods, and tornadoes. Going into this season of Advent, there is a shared visceral sense that our health, our home, and the social fabric that binds communities are all in peril.

In the litany and analysis of these crises is yet another *dynamic* which shadows and fuels them — gun violence. At the beginning of 2020, gun violence prevention activists predicted that this would be a “big year for the gun issue.”¹ There was optimism that the presidential candidates would focus attention on the issue; research funding would start flowing after a twenty year hiatus; new laws banning “ghost guns” and instituting “red flag” policies had a strong chance of passing in many states. Yet the unpredicted turns in history derailed these predictions. Gun violence, however, did not go away but continued and increased as a toxic element in the turbulence that has defined America in 2020.

In March, as the Coronavirus spread and states were instituting shut-down policies, the FBI reported a record number of background checks processed since the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) was instituted in 1998. The media showed images of lines of consumers at gun shops as 3.7 million background checks were conducted that month.² By June, as anti-racism marches were occurring all over the country, March's record was smashed: NICS reported 3.9 million screenings had been processed, up 71% from June 2019.³ Handguns accounted for an increasing proportion of the spike in sales, according to Small Arms Analytics.⁴ Clearly, there is not a sudden interest in hunting, and recreational shooting ranges have been closed. It is well documented that the primary motivation for owning a gun nowadays is for personal protection.⁵

If fear of crime was driving the surge in gun sales, this was a misplaced fear. During social distancing and shut-down policies during this period, crime rates actu-

ally went down for the most part. People were at home, so break-ins and property crimes were down. In fact, in 25 large American cities, overall crime was down by 5.3% compared to the same spring months of the previous year—including violent crime. Robberies, aggregated assault, even drug crimes were down. (In Baltimore, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, DC, crime was down by 30%.)⁶ What was up, though, was murder—by over 16%, and when adding 11 more cities, murders increased to 21.8%.⁷ The weapon of choice was guns. According to the Gun Violence Archive, May 2020 had the highest number of mass shootings (four or more victims) of any month since they started tracking data in 2013.⁸ In other words, gun violence was the pandemic within the pandemic, and it was spiking. But why? Before the numbers can be more finely crunched, there is speculation that it is driven by domestic violence, or a drop in drug market, or limited capacities of jails and courts; it is likely that all of these have contributed to the increase in gun violence. But Chicago's Mayor Lori Lightfoot senses more systemic causes. "That's poverty, lack of hope, despair, not enough access to the things that build healthy and strong families and communities," she stated. She adds another factor—there are just too many guns to begin with.⁹ These are cities ruined by "the devastations of many generations," in the words of Isaiah (61:4).

During the spring of the pandemic, gun violence was increasing in another form as police shootings of African Americans re-emerged in media headlines. In March, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old emergency room technician in Louisville, Kentucky, was shot while she slept when police forced their way into her apartment with a "no-knock warrant." They suspected that a drug dealer from another neighborhood had used her apartment to receive packages. Her frightened boyfriend had fired in defense, suspecting intruders. Although she struggled to breathe, she was not given medical treatment for 20 minutes before she died. In June, Rayshard Brooks had fallen asleep in his car at a fast-food restaurant. Police were called and interacted with Mr. Brooks calmly for almost half an hour and determined that he had too high of an alcohol level to safely drive. Although he offered to leave his car and walk to his sister's house, they attempted to arrest him. Mr. Brooks panicked, wrestled with the police, ran, and was shot three times. These high profile cases and others were not anomalies, but reflected a disturbing pattern: African Americans have been disproportionately shot by police, a trend that is increasing according to statistics. Police shootings are on the rise, and 2020 is on track as of this writing to climb above the two previous years. People of color are killed at a much higher rate: 13 out of a million for whites, but for Hispanics the rate is 23 and jumps to 31 for African Americans.¹⁰ This reality fed into the widespread mobilization by Black Lives Matter that had been sparked by the police killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.

Again, the multiple crises swirling in 2020 were intersecting, with each fanning the flames of the others, and guns were the oxygen. This was evident in the public brandishing of weapons in expressing disagreements with officials who were implementing shut-down policies and with peaceful protesters in Black Lives Matter demonstrations (especially if part of the message is to defund police). Openly carrying guns, even legally, amplifies one's message and can be quite intimidating. It is meant to be. So, in this time of crisis, with so many strains on the ties that bind us together as communities and as a nation, the increase in gun ownership and violence is symptomatic of the unraveling of our social fabric. Whether feeling afraid of social unrest or being

immersed in despair that neighborhoods with limited resources cultivate, or needing to maintain control, or wanting to make a strong public statement, guns become the go-to means to solve our problems. Guns did not create the problems of pandemic, poverty, unemployment, crime, despair, or alienation, but many Americans have come to believe that firearms are the solution, which was especially seen in this moment. Ironically, the easy access to guns (both legally and illegally) and the proliferation of ownership does not solve problems, but makes them worse.

The ubiquitous presence of guns did not begin with the COVID pandemic. Gun ownership and violence has long reflected a grim example of American exceptionalism. According to the Small Arms Study, there are around 393 million guns in this country, which accounts for almost half of the firearms owned by civilians in the world. That means we have a higher rate of gun ownership than any other developed nation, about 120.5 for every 100 people, which differs dramatically from the rate per 100 citizens in Canada (34.7), Australia (14.5), France and Germany (both at 19.6), Japan (.3), South Korea (.2), Spain (7.5), the UK (8.3), and so on.¹¹ If in fact guns were a source of protection, we would be the safest place on earth, but we're not. Not only do we have more guns in circulation, but we also have dramatically higher rates of gun violence when compared to other countries, with these rates mirroring the rates of gun ownership above.¹² The US has seen the total number of gun deaths in recent years hovering around 40,000. The majority are suicides (60%), with murders accounting for 37%. What we know intuitively is borne out by a large body of research: when and where there are guns, gun violence is much more likely. This same pattern is being repeated during this year of crisis.¹³ As well as the increase in gun murders, it is expected that suicides will also be increasing in the surge of new gun purchases. The *New England Journal of Medicine* has documented that first-time gun owners are particularly at risk of suicide, especially in the 30 days following the purchase of a firearm.¹⁴ All these statistics can be mind-numbing, but each gun death represents shattered lives, families, and communities.

In the context of this historic moment which rings so apocalyptic in our experience, how should the Word be proclaimed? After all in Mark's gospel, Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away." Those words, that Word, comes in the midst of upheaval and is a disruption itself in the midst of disruption. But, we need to pay attention to what is going on. There is a clear call in the Advent Gospel text to "stay woke."

Given that many clergy have certainly preached at the funerals of too many gun victims, there is a widespread reticence to preach from the pulpit on Sunday about guns. Writer, researcher, and professor Leah D. Schade conducted a survey of over 1200 Mainline Protestant clergy on their practices and experiences of preaching on controversial social issues. This was sent out on the heels of the 2016 election, when ministers were acutely aware that the political polarization that the presidential election had just exposed in the country was reflected in their own congregations. When asked what topics they would *actively avoid* preaching about, "gun violence" came in 6th—behind women's reproductive health, fracking, critique of capitalism, white privilege, and LGBTQ rights. In her book *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide*, Schade discusses some of the other findings of the survey. About a quarter of her sample indicated that they rarely, if ever, preached about controversial issues. The leading reasons given were concerns about creating conflict

and controversy, fallout that could affect one's ability to pastor, being seen as "too political," and receiving pushback. To a lesser extent, fears of losing members and/or income were expressed by a third of respondents. These concerns were justified, she found. Preachers had in fact received angry responses when they had preached on controversial issues such as gun violence; they had lost members, contributions, and relationships.¹⁵ This response is analogous to the experience of many elected officials. Addressing any dimension of the gun issue is the proverbial third rail for many politicians: no matter how compelling the moral moment after a high profile shooting, they know that to engage in public debate on the topic, and possibly supporting legislation that in any way restricts accessibility to guns, will mean an angry response and a loss of votes and financial support from the gun lobby.

Despite the staggering loss of life that is largely preventable, many leaders—both religious and secular—have succumbed to silence and have failed to effectively bring meaningful change to the pandemic of gun violence. Even though a majority of Americans, including gun owners, support having "stricter gun laws," there seems to be yellow tape around talking about guns, gun violence, and gun control from the pulpit. Pew Research has found that there has been increasing support over the last several years for expanding background checks to include private sales and sales at gun shows (88% in September of 2019), banning high-capacity ammunition magazines (71%), and banning assault-style weapons (69%).¹⁶ This is the basis for conversation that we are not having.

Certainly there are gun owners who go to church and many who are packing in the pews. Almost half of mainline Protestants have a gun in their household, and more white Evangelicals do (57%), but African American Protestants and Catholics are much less likely to report this. Further, about one third of white Evangelicals and a quarter of mainline Protestants support concealed carry of guns in church.¹⁷ In my own research on church security, I have heard from many clergy interviewed that they know that some parishioners are carrying on Sunday morning but that they really do not want to know who. The fact that many listeners are armed can be intimidating to preachers, or it can be an opportunity. Perhaps the context of online worship, when carrying guns in the sanctuary is off the table, would be an ideal opportunity to explore the meanings that guns have, for individuals and for society. How should believers think about the guns they own or their decision about acquiring a gun? How should faith communities engage with curiosity and integrity the role guns play in our cultural imagination and social reality?

Narratives around the meanings projected onto firearms have, by and large, been constructed from sources outside of the faith community. The gun lobby frames guns as representing individual rights—our civil liberty is condensed into our ability to acquire arms. For those in hunting cultures, guns symbolize a way of life that is related to interaction with nature, can represent a sense of self-sufficiency, and becomes a marker of masculinity as hunting is often passed down from father to son. Semi-automatic handguns can mean for their owners self-protection as well as the protection of others and power in contexts of vulnerability. These messages can be communicated from sources as diverse as advertisers, films/media, and peers. Curiously missing in interpreting the meaning attached to something so central to our culture and individual lives is our lived theology. How does our faith tradition enable us to understand guns? If it is discussed at all in churches, in an education forum,

or coffee hour, for example, the gun issue is often reduced to simplistically hurling biblical references of Jesus either warning his disciples that to live by the sword is to die by the sword (Matthew 26:52) or to make sure they buy a sword (Luke 22: 36-38). End of conversation.

But exploring more deeply what guns have come to represent is more than a theological exercise; it is vital, especially now, to our survival. Although clergy have avoided it in preaching, it is time to wade in and invite our communities to interrogate the meaning of guns, especially in this time of heightened anxiety. Our collective experience of the crises that have collided in 2020 has created a deep sense of anxiety, if not panic, at the unknown outcomes of threats to our survival and sense of community. For many people of privilege, there has been an assumption of security and control.

As threats multiply from many angles, how then do we understand security in the context of faith? Paul Tillich argued in *The Courage to Be* that anxiety is the awareness of non-being; it is the experience of helplessness in the face of the threat to our very existence. But this amorphous anxiety is different than fear, which has an object. So, Tillich argues, anxiety, which can be overwhelming, strives toward fear to find an object on which to focus. An object of fear then can be faced and engaged. There are many ways that we can then attack the object of our fear, including annihilation of the other which threatens our very being.¹⁸

For Tillich, the courage to be in the face of non-being is the ultimate sense of security—but it too can be almost primordial, found in the God who transcends our ideas about God and is “the accepting of the acceptance without somebody or something that accepts.”¹⁹ Similar to anxiety and fear then, security, which can seem vague and unknowable, becomes distilled into safety. And so in our anxiety about the unseen and overwhelming presence of a virus that threatens our very existence, we then fixate on specific fears that can be addressed, and we develop strategies and mechanisms that will keep us safe. Our anxiety, then, focuses on fears of “tangible” threats of those who are coming into our communities demanding justice or resources in the context of scarcity. In other communities, the very lack of resources and opportunities creates despair as a viable future can no longer be contemplated. In both contexts, guns can become a default means to asserting being over the anxiety of non-being.

The preacher then has the opportunity to reframe anxiety and misplaced fears, and security and our constructed illusions of safety. What meanings, then, do we attach to guns? Rev. Jim Atwood was a Presbyterian minister who devoted a large part of his adult life as an advocate against gun violence. The author of three books (*America and Its Guns: A Theological Expose*,²⁰ *Gun Fundamentalism and Where It Is Taking America*,²¹ and *Collateral Damage: Changing the Conversations about Firearms and Faith*²²), Jim was honored by the General Assembly of the PCUSA two days before he died in June, 2020. In his first book, Atwood (himself a hunter and gun owner) argued that some gun owners have an attachment to their guns that has veered into idolatry. Drawing on Luther’s understanding of idols, many have elevated guns to the status of a god in which we trust, seek our meaning, and find security. But like the golden calf, we find in objects, whether steel or gold, a false sense of security.

When our leaders are absent or fail us; when our God is invisible and from all appearances is absent from our lives; when we don’t know how we

can keep going; when we are consumed by our fears and feel threatened by those who are not like us, those are the moments when new idols are imagined and fashioned and desperate people give them their ultimate concerns, devotion and focused attention.²³

Social research has been done looking at the particular emotional attachments to guns among Christian men during periods of economic challenge.²⁴ The participants indicated among 8 items how gun ownership made them feel: safe, responsible, confident, more valuable to family, more valuable to community, in control, patriotic, respected. The more boxes they checked, the stronger their attachment to their guns. Baylor sociologists found that stronger attachment was correlated with increased church attendance—to a point. As the respondents indicated that they went to church “nearly weekly” or more, the correlation with attachment weakened. The effect was more dramatic for non-white gun owners. Of course, this correlation does not explain what is going on, but it does suggest that an increased involvement with a congregation can have an impact on reliance on guns.

It is not easy to preach on guns at this moment in history and in this cultural context when anxiety is rampant, the future is unknown, and the issue is so highly charged. The gun issue itself is complex, and the public theologian who would navigate it needs to be familiar with the multiple publics who have a stake. That means one has to incorporate the experiences and perspectives of gun owners as well as victims of gun violence; police officers and those who have been threatened by them; those in the medical and legal communities; the gun lobby and gun violence prevention advocates; researchers and parents. The task is daunting and goes far beyond one or two sermons. There are models and resources for creating dialogue that can generate a congregational conversation that then feeds into the preaching. Leah Schade has developed a process based on deliberative dialogue in *Preaching in the Purple Zone*.²⁵ The Presbyterian Church (USA) created a webinar series, “Standing Our Holy Ground,” with speakers addressing a range of dimensions of the gun issue.²⁶

As the pandemic of gun violence continues to grow, what we cannot do is ignore the role of guns which is embedded in our reality to a deadly degree. There will not be a vaccine. It will take a sustained effort to enable people of faith, and all of society, to come to understand our relationship to firearms and to act in life-giving ways.

Notes

1 “2020 Will Be a Big Year for the Gun Issue,” *The Trace* (1/2/20), https://www.thetrace.org/2020/01/gun-violence-2020-election-research-extremism-shootings/amp/?__twitter_impression=true

2 “Gun Background Checks Reached New Record During Coronavirus Surge,” Daniel Nass, *The Trace* (4/1/20), <https://www.thetrace.org/2020/07/gun-background-checks-june-record/>

3 “Gun Background Checks Surged to New High in June,” Daniel Nass, *The Trace* (7/1/20), <https://www.thetrace.org/2020/07/gun-background-checks-june-record/>

4 “Gun Background Checks Surged to New High in June,” Daniel Nass, *The Trace* (7/1/20), <https://www.thetrace.org/2020/07/gun-background-checks-june-record/>

5 Pew Research Center, “Why own a gun? Protection is now top reason,” 3/14/13, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/03/12/why-own-a-gun-protection-is-now-top-reason/>

6 “Crime Has Declined Overall During the Pandemic but Shootings and Killings are Up,” Cheryl Corley, *All Things Considered* (NPR), (7/20/20), <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/20/892418244/crime-has-declined-overall-during-the-pandemic-but-shootings-and-killings-are-up>

7 “It’s Been ‘Such a Weird Year: That’s Also Reflected in Crime Statistics,’” Jeff Asher and Ben Horwitz, *New York Times* (7/6/20).

- 8 “Gun violence grows during coronavirus pandemic group’s data shows,” Heidi Przybyla, *NBC News* (updated 7/21/20), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/blog/meet-press-blog-latest-news-analysis-data-driving-political-discussion-n988541/ncrd1223551#blogHeader>
- 9 “Crime Has Declined Overall During the Pandemic but Shootings and Killings are Up,” Cheryl Corley, *All Things Considered* (NPR), (7/20/20), <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/20/892418244/crime-has-declined-overall-during-the-pandemic-but-shootings-and-killings-are-up>
- 10 “Fatal police shootings in the United States from 2015 to June 2020, by ethnicity,” Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1123070/police-shootings-rate-ethnicity-us/>
- 11 “Estimating Global Civilian Held Firearms Numbers” *Small Arms Survey*, Aaron Karp. June 2018, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-BP-Civilian-Firearms-Numbers.pdf>
- 12 “What the data says about gun deaths in the US,” John Gramlich, *Fact Tank* (Pew Research), 8/16/19, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/16/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/>
- 13 “Early Research Links Coronavirus Gun Sales Surge to Increased Shootings,” Melinda Wenner Moyer, *The Trace* (7/8/20) <https://www.thetrace.org/2020/07/coronavirus-gun-sales-increased-shootings-study/>
- 14 As quoted in “Pandemic-Related Gun Purchases Raise Suicide Risks,” Chethan Sathya, *Scientific American* (6/17/20), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/pandemic-related-gun-purchases-raise-suicide-risks/?print=true>
- 15 Leah Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield), 2019, pp. 14-27.
- 16 “Share of Americans who favor stricter gun laws has increased since 2017,” Katherine Schaeffer, *Pew Research: Fact Tank* (10/16/19), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/16/share-of-americans-who-favor-stricter-gun-laws-has-increased-since-2017/>
- 17 S.M. Merino, “God and Guns: Examining Religious Influences on Gun Control Attitudes in the United States.” *Religions* 2018, 9, 189.
- 18 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1952, 2000. See Chapter 2.
- 19 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1952, p. 185.
- 20 James E. Atwood, *America and Its Guns: A Theological Expose* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books), 2012.
- 21 James E. Atwood, *Gundamentalism and Where It Is Taking America* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books), 2017.
- 22 James E. Atwood, *Collateral Damage: Changing the Conversations about Firearms and Faith* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press), 2019.
- 23 James E. Atwood, *America and Its Guns: A Theological Expose* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books), p. 24.
- 24 F. Carson Mencken and Paul Froese, “Gun Culture in Action,” *Social Problems* 2017, doi: 10.1093/socpro/spx040
- 25 Leah Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield), 2019.
- 26 “Standing Our Holy Ground,” <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/peacemaking/standing-our-holy-ground/>