

Gunman Kills 26 and Wounds 20 at Small Texas Church

In the News

Last Sunday, during its 11:00 a.m. worship service, a Southern Baptist church in the rural town of Sutherland Springs, Texas, suffered the deadliest church shooting in U.S. history when a lone man walked in and sprayed the congregation with gunfire, firing about 450 rounds, killing 26 worshipers and wounding 20 others. Several of the dead were children.

The killer, a 26-year-old man, exited the church after the shooting. A neighbor, 55-year-old plumber Stephen Willeford, heard the shooting, grabbed his own rifle, confronted the murderer, and shot him, wounding him twice. The murderer dropped his rifle and fled in his vehicle.

Willeford flagged down a passerby in a vehicle, Johnnie Langendorff, and the two men followed in a high-speed chase, keeping in cell phone contact with the 911 dispatcher. The murderer lost control of his vehicle and crashed. Police found him dead with gunshot wounds, one of them self-inflicted. (Both Willeford and Langendorff have testified to their Christian faith when interviewed about their actions.)

According to some reports, the attacker may have been motivated in the shooting by some kind of domestic situation between himself and his in-laws who attended that church but were not present that day. One of the victims was his father-in-law's mother. Most of those killed and injured, however, had no known connection with him.

Pastors at other churches in the surrounding area, regardless of denomination, soon came to counsel and pray with people affected by the tragedy. Most of these pastors found that members of their own congregations were deeply affected as well, as many were acquainted with the victims.

Recent Sundays at the church have drawn about 50 to 75 attendees, so the dead equal at least one-third of the usual attendance. It happened that the church's pastor, Frank Pomeroy and his wife Sherri were away that day. The fill-in pastor was one of the first to be killed. The Pomeroy's daughter, Annabelle, 14, was there and was among those slain.

Sherri Pomeroy, read this statement to reporters on Monday: "Our church was not comprised of members or parishioners. We were a very close family. We ate together, we laughed together, we cried together, and we worshiped together. Now most of our church family is gone, our building is probably

beyond repair. And the few of us that are left behind lost tragically yesterday. As senseless as this tragedy was, our sweet Belle would not have been able to deal with losing so much family yesterday."

The pastor added, "I don't understand, but I know my God does."

Mike Clements is pastor of a Baptist church in nearby Floresville. He told a reporter that the members of the Sutherland Springs church, "don't have a lot of money, but they are always willing to give. These people are merciful people. A lot of them will be forgiving with what happened."

After Texas, do fear and caution have a place in church?

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Psalm 84:10

... I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness. (For context, read 84:1-12.)

The psalmist was writing in praise of the temple as the "dwelling place of God," the location where divine worship took place. Apparently, the psalmist was not able to be at worship in the temple as often as he would have liked, and so he longed for it, recognizing worship of the Lord there as the ultimate source of strength and joy. Such was the draw of this house of the living God that the psalmist said he would rather be there even in a position of service to the temple -- a doorkeeper -- than live in the self-serving way of the wicked.

The duty of the temple doorkeeper is described in 2 Kings 12:9 as "guarding the threshold" of the temple. Following the shooting last Sunday, some are suggesting that churches need to employ security staff or use armed church volunteers to literally guard the door of the church.

Questions: Ability to "provide security" does not appear in any of the New Testament lists of spiritual gifts that God places within various members for the good of the church. Should it be added? Why or why not? How might this practice affect the faith practices of a congregation, if at all?

Isaiah 11:9

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (For context, read 11:1-9.)

For ancient Judah, God's "holy mountain" was Zion, the hill upon which the temple sat. But here, the prophet Isaiah endows the term with a wider

meaning, the dawning of a great new age when God's reign would be recognized by the whole world. Subsequently, Christians have taken this verse and the passage in which it occurs as a prophecy of the kingdom of God yet to come.

And "yet to come" are the crucial words here. In that kingdom, no security will be necessary because "they will not hurt or destroy" there. But that kingdom has not yet come, and thus, in the Lord's Prayer, we continue to pray for its advent: "Thy kingdom come."

Questions: Since we are still this side of the kingdom, how should we apply this verse to our churches? To our daily lives?

Matthew 10:28

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (For context, read 10:1, 16-31.)

This verse is part of a passage where Jesus is preparing the Twelve to go out on a teaching and healing mission throughout Palestine. As part of their preparation, Jesus warns them about persecution they may encounter. Jesus assures them that, though they may not be rescued from the persecution they will face, their spiritual survival is guaranteed.

In the context of the text, Jesus' remarks are aimed at helping these disciples fulfill their mission of proclaiming the gospel. He did not want them to hesitate to speak out due to fear of bearing public witness. In essence, however, Jesus' comment is about preferring eternal security over temporal security when the two are in conflict.

Questions: In what ways do Jesus' remarks to his disciples speak to our fears about earthbound threats, specific to how we worship? How do our concerns for security in this life mesh with our Christian belief in eternal security?

Habakkuk 3:17-19

*Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.*

*God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights. (No context needed.)*

The prophet Habakkuk had lots of questions about why God allowed unjust suffering and evil in the world, and he confronted God with them. God responded, not so much with answers as by providing the prophet with renewed vision and the promise that the righteous will live by confidence in God's trustworthiness. The outcome of the renewed vision is the prophet's readiness to wait in hope for the day of divine deliverance.

The verses above are the last words in the book and are from Habakkuk. He declares that no matter what happens, he will rejoice in the Lord, who is his strength.

Questions: In what ways do you can identify with Habakkuk's questions of God? Are there any ways in which you identify with the prophet's words above?

Prayer for Protection (BCP p.832)

Assist us mercifully, O Lord, in these our supplications and prayers, and dispose the way of *thy* servants towards the attainment of everlasting salvation; that, among all the changes and chances of this mortal life, they may ever be defended by *thy* gracious and ready help; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*