

Sermon :: 07-June-2026

Proper 5 (also Gun Violence Awareness Sunday), Year A

“ [Abram] grew strong in his *faith* ... ,
being fully convinced that God was able to *do* what God had *promised* ”

I don't know how many times I played it back when I was a senior high youth group advisor ... or whether kids still play it *today* ... but 'back in the day,' as they say, it was all the rage: If you were stranded on a desert island, what ten books ... or ten albums (assuming you had something to play them on!) ... or ten items ... would you choose to have with you? We played this game on countless Sunday nights ... many mission trips ... and every weekend retreat I can remember ... because, I think, the question is compelling: If *fate* dealt you an unimaginable *hand* ... what would you want to have *with* you, to help *cope*?

It's a question—what to have *with* me?— we might imagine *Abram* (whom God has not yet renamed *Abraham*) asking himself ... for God has dealt Abram an unimaginable hand: called him to come out of retirement (he's seventy-five, after all!) ... leave his homeland ... journey to a distant new land, filled with strange and menacing people ... in order to make a “great nation” for God and to “bless” God's people.

Now, Canaan isn't, of course, a literal 'deserted island' ... but it may as *well* be ... for Abram has no *land* there ... no *friends* or *relations* there ... maybe not even a firm grasp of where Canaan even *is!*¹ And while Abram's gotten to bring along his *relatives* and household *possessions*² ... at the end of the day, how are *they* going to help him contend with the thousands ... *tens* of thousands ... maybe even *hundreds* of thousands of Canaanites who are firmly rooted and *prospering* there? Will any of *them* be of a mind to *share*—let alone to *forfeit*—their land ... just because some random god named “Yahweh”—whom, by the way, no one's ever heard of before—has a 'plan'? If *we* were in Abram's position, I imagine we'd seek leave to return home to raise an *army*, like Joshua's at Jericho ... or we'd implore God to give us a 'Rambo' like mighty *Samson*, who slays a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass ... or a *secret weapon* like young *David*, who fells a giant with a slingshot.³

But, as St Paul underscores in today's epistle lesson, Abram *doesn't* 'muster' an army ... *doesn't* 'procure' a battery of cannon ... *doesn't* 'amass' a stockpile of munitions. Instead, he proceeds solely by *faith* ... trusting in the *goodness*—leaning on the *steadfastness*—of the Lord. While Paul's making a bigger, broader—and also very important—point about Jesus, Who is God's *new* covenant with us ... Paul's discussion of “the [L]aw”⁴ also boils down to *this*: We do not have it *within us* ... not physically, not intellectually, not morally, not even *spiritually* ... to achieve our *own* salvation, let alone the salvation of the *world*. Rather, we must proceed ... first, foremost and fully ... by *faith*: in the giving *God* (and not *ourselves*) the *glory* ... and by relying upon God's *grace*: believing that “God [is] *able* to do”—and *will* do—“what [God] has promised,” in Christ.

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¹ Do you remember the old bit of Bill Cosby's, back in the 1960s, about God's calling Noah to build the ark? (“Who *me???*”) Cosby might almost as easily have made it about Abram!

² Including, alas, the enslaved people whom Abram owned.

³ Of course, none of these things has yet taken place in Abram's time.

⁴ Meaning the Jewish Torah, which didn't exist in Abram's day ... and wouldn't for centuries yet to come.

Today is Gun Violence Awareness Sunday—hence, this special orange stole I’m wearing. And how fitting: Just three weeks ago, our anguished disbelief was once again provoked ... and our loving hearts once again grieved ... by, yet another mass shooting: another shriek of hateful intolerance; another eruption of inflamed bigotry and perverse fear ... this time almost literally in our own backyard.

As horrific and sickening as these incidents are, however, mass shootings ... which account for only *one percent* of all U.S. gun deaths ... are just the tip of the iceberg of the gun violence problems in America today. They do not indicate—and maybe even help *conceal*—the true ‘grip of the gun’ around the throat of our country ... and our culture. ¶In the United States,⁵ there are something like *390 million* privately-owned firearms: fully *one-half* of *all* privately-owned weapons *worldwide*.⁶ ¶This averages to about 115 firearms for every 100 persons living in this country: the highest rate of private gun ownership anywhere in the world. (As a point of reference, the *second* highest is 62 firearms per 100 residents ... and that’s in the Falkland Islands.) ¶Americans are twenty-six times more likely to be killed by a gun than in any other high-income nation. ¶And every single day, on average, 327 people, including 23 minors, are *shot* ... and 117 *killed* ... by guns⁷ ... including 91 who are *unintentionally* shot with firearms stored insecurely in their own homes.⁸

I am not, of course, talking about people who own and responsibly handle guns for hunting, target-shooting, collecting and other hobbies ... or people who make a living on the land and use guns to protect their livestock and crops. But in a 2024 nationwide survey of gun owners, 91% cited *at-home* protection as a reason for their owning a gun; 83% cited protection *away-from-home* protection: against dangerous people, or to carry at sporting events and concerts; and 59% cited protection in the event of ideological conflict, such as while voting or attending rallies ... or against people holding differing political views.⁹ For some gun owners, these reasons may be ‘offensive’: getting a ‘one-up’ over the ‘enemy’; for others, they may be ‘defensive’: protecting against their already-armed-up neighbors. But *whatever* the reason ... all these purchases of all these guns are nothing less than a *private ‘arms race’* taking place *within* the American population.

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When I look at the sheer *availability* of guns ... the sheer *pervasiveness* of guns ... the *idolization* of guns ... the *fantastication*¹⁰ of guns: what owners *imagine* their guns will enable them to *do*: the *false* (and often *dangerous*) sense of power, status and invincibility they provide ... I, personally, can’t help but see a nation that has lost its *faith*: not necessarily faith in the Judeo-Christian *God*

⁵ An observational aside: The few statistics I cite here are somewhat dated—all a couple of years old. Compared to the last time I preached a sermon about gun violence in America (in 2022, I believe), the relative dearth of data available currently seems to reflect the present administration’s policy not to study the role of guns and gun violence in our society.

⁶ <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/law/gun-ownership> (accessed 27-May-2026).

⁷ <https://www.bradyunited.org/resources/statistics> (accessed 27-May-2026). And tragically, 60% of gun deaths are suicides, while only 37% are homicides. (The remainder are law enforcement involved shootings; unintentional shootings; and those that were undetermined.) *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Ward, et al, “Reasons for Gun Ownership Among Demographically Diverse New and Prior Gun Owners,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2024), Table 2. Ninety-two percent of respondents cited hunting and other recreational activities as a reason for gun ownership, as well.

¹⁰ “Fantasticate.” *Merriam-Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/unabridged/fantasticate> (accessed 27-May-2026).

(although, yes, that, *too*) ... but *certainly* faith in the laws and policies that are intended to keep us *all* safe, healthy and protected ... faith in the institutions and officials who create and carry out those laws and policies ... and most assuredly—and also most troublingly—faith in our common, God-given *humanity*. And without faith in *something*—or *someone*—beyond *themselves* ... people conclude, whether consciously or unconsciously, that it's all up to *them* ... that *they* have to take matters—quite *literally*—into their *own* dominant *hand*.

American gun-owners increasingly perceive themselves as being *apart* and *abandoned* ... as being 'stranded' on a 'hostile,' 'deserted' island and needing the 'security' of a gun—or *ten* or *twenty*—to keep them 'safe,' all by *themselves* ... rather than as being part of the *whole* and *leaning in, collectively*: ¶working to *repair* this country, to make it a more just—and more law-abiding—place that better balances the rights and the well-being of *all* who live here ... rather than bewailing decline and attempting to build some *personal fortress* to keep it at bay; ¶getting to *know* our neighbors ... making '*space*' for those who differ ... seeking *common ground* with those who disagree with us ... rather than seeking to defend ME and MINE, with ever greater, ever more-deadly *force*; ¶understanding that *guns, amassed, erode* happiness rather than foster its pursuit ... that *bullets, fired, destroy* safety, rather than guarantee it; ¶and above *all* else, embracing the idea ... the admittedly *humble, admittedly trusting,*¹¹ admittedly *faithful* idea ... that buried deep within the DNA ... the psyche ... the *spirit* ... the *soul* ... of humanity ... lie *both a yearning and a pathway* for peace: for tolerant coexistence and mutual flourishing.

Society may call this idea *many* things ... but we *Christians* call it *Christ*. And however one comes to know or name Him—to embrace *His* will for this world; embody *His* ways for humanity—it is *faith*. *Faith* in the *God-goodness* of our *neighbor*. *Faith* in the *God-goodness* of the stranger. *Faith* in the *God-goodness* of *shared* power and *mutual* regard. And, ultimately, *faith* in the *goodness* of the *God* Who has made us a "great nation"; the *God* Who has "blessed" *us* ... and now longs for *us*, like Abram, to *live* by that faith, *alone* ... trusting that *God* is able ... and *will do* ... for *us* ... all that *God* has *promised*, in *Christ*.

THE REV DOUGLAS S WORTHINGTON
All Souls' Episcopal Church
San Diego, CA

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¹¹ Some may say "innocent" or even "naïve."