

0 Little Town of Newtown

0 little town of Newtown, how still and sad we see thee lie.

Newtown. About 100 miles from the little town where I grew up. That Connecticut bedroom village where local industries long manufactured fire hoses and folding boxes. The town where the game Scrabble began. The bucolic community where pizza places have names like Carminuccio's and elementary schools names like Sandy Hook. The New England hamlet where streets describe its pastoral landscape: Head of Meadows and Boggs Hill and Deep Brook.

Newtown, the little town where streets became dark a year ago.

Along with countless others around the world, I found incomprehensible the merciless slaughtering of 12 little girls, 8 little boys and 6 caring educators, all women. And at Christmastime? Why, for heaven's sake? I keep asking this question, hardly alone.

As I ask, I recall a halting line from the Christmas carol "0 Little Town of Bethlehem." Tucked in those verses is a phrase recalling the pain inseparable from life, darkness coexisting with light: "Yet in the dark streets shineth/The everlasting Light/The hopes and fears of all the years/Are met in thee tonight."

Darkness and fear mingling with hope and light.

The streets went dark in the southwest corner of Connecticut last Christmas. And they were just as dark in Bethlehem after Jesus was born. Matthew's **Gospel** talks about it in chapter 2:

"When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi" (v.

16, NIV).

Our temptation is to fast-forward past this graphic tale of Herod's cold-hearted soldiers knocking down doors in the middle of the night and dragging toddlers out of their beds while parents were restrained. I don't even want to imagine what happened next. Think about it too much and it's stomach-turning.

Part of me wishes someone had plucked these verses from the Bible. Why did Matthew have to include this grave, chilling, macabre incident in the story of Christmas?

But there it is, right in the Bible. Not by mistake. Not because Matthew was trying to get all PG-13 on us. On the same streets where Jesus was born also lived families who'd soon lose their innocent little boys at the hand of the desperate despot Herod.

The hopes of a new mother, Mary, juxtaposed against the fears of mothers hiding their children as soldiers pounded on the doors of their homes. Inconceivable.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan, an intellectual agnostic, poses a hard question to his spiritually sensitive brother, Alyosha: "But what about the children? How will we ever account for their sufferings?"

He goes on to say that he gets why many adults suffer. They make bad choices. It's a matter of justice for them to suffer. But the children, he goes on, "Their tears must be atoned for. ... How is it possible to atone for them?"

It's an unavoidable question in a world where massacres like Newtown can happen. How will we ever account for the suffering of children? Pain at times seems random and unfair, forcing us to shake our heads in disbelief or turn our heads in horror.

I suppose the mothers of Bethlehem had questions to ask when

they realized that the birth of a Savior cost them the lives of their little boys. I suppose if they knew that Joseph had been warned by God in a dream to flee Bethlehem and dodge the sword of Herod, they would have asked, "Why didn't God send us a dream too?"

When we try to answer this question, more questions surface.

Even Dostoyevsky admitted that when he wrote his dialogue between Ivan and Alyosha, he wasn't sure he would be able to answer Ivan's questions either.

Why did **Jesus** get away, protected by the angels and rescued through a dream?

Jesus got away so that He could later atone for the blood of those children and their mothers' tears. Christ came *amidst* the pain of life in order to *redeem* the pain of life.

As wicked, evil, unfair, random and deep as the pain may be, even in this country today, in Christ we have hope that the pain will one day be removed. We have hope in life because we have hope in Christ's death. N.T. Wright says that Jesus went "solo and unaided into the whirlpool [of evil] so that it may exhaust its force on him and let the rest of the world go free."

Dostoyevsky was able to answer the skepticism of Ivan through the words of a godly monk named Zossima, comforting a grieving mother: "Don't you know how bold these little ones are before the throne of the Lord? ... Weep, but every time you do, remember that your little son is ... looking down on you from where he is now, that he sees and rejoices in your tears and shows them to God. ... You will shed a mother's tears for a long time to come. But in the end your weeping will turn into quiet joy."

When we sing about Bethlehem, we cannot overlook the phrase that says "hopes and fears" come together on its dark streets.

In the eternal framework of God's sovereignty, in the dark streets of pain and injustice shineth an everlasting Light.

The hopes and fears of all the years meet in Christ Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. This is the hope we have. This is the promise we must remember, especially for those this Christmas whose ledger is more on the side of fear than hope, darkness than light.

The first-century mothers and fathers of Jerusalem whose children were victims of Herod's egomaniacal jealousy knew darkness and fear. And last year's mothers and fathers of Newtown mourned greatly and wept bitterly because 20 of their children were mercilessly killed, children with names like Emilie and Dylan and Caroline and James and Jack and Grace. And like the town of Bethlehem, caskets far too small were carried to Newtown's burial grounds.

In all the twists of the Christmas story and for all its crushing contrasts between life and death, joy and pain, fear and hope, Christmas is and ever shall be a reminder that on dark and fear-filled streets, an everlasting Light will shine.

Everlasting. Imagine that.

Barry Corey is president of Biola University. Follow him on Twitter at @PresidentCorey or visit him online at .