

Before the U.S. invaded Iraq, Wendell Berry asked, "How many children do I want to have killed so that I can maintain my freedom? How many children should die so that I can maintain my comforts and my lifestyle?" As a Christian, my answer is none. Zero. Not one child. Wendell Berry's questions should be our questions. How many children should die so that someone can own a gun? How many children should die so that corporations can make billions of dollars? How many children should die so that politicians can retain power another two or four or six years?

According to the Children's Defense Fund - More children and teens die from guns every three days than died in the Newtown massacre. 1 American child dies from a gunshot every 3 hours and 15 minutes. That's 7 children every day, more than 20 every three days and 51 children every week. The media always wants to know the mental state of the murderer after a mass shooting. But the more pertinent question is: what is *America's* mental state? Why do we allow this to happen?

In one sense, our lives - yours and mine - are eons away from the time when Isaiah spoke. He lived nearly 3,000 years ago. We live in such a different world, but I feel that Isaiah's deepest longing for a peaceable kingdom is so closely linked to our own. Isaiah lived, as we do, in a time when hope was being tested and was in short supply.

We live in a country that accounts for less than 5% of the global population, but owns an estimated 50 percent of all civilian-owned guns in the world. The most recent estimate of U.S. civilian gun ownership is as high as 310 million, about one gun per person. More American families own guns than own dogs. And these guns in our homes make the likelihood of homicide, suicide and accidental death so much greater. For every time a gun in the home injures or kills in self-defense, there are 11 gun suicides, 7 criminal assaults and homicides with a gun, and 4 unintentional shooting deaths or injuries.

When people are more likely to bring a gun into their home than a pet, we know how far away we are from a peaceable kingdom. Isaiah's vision may seem nothing more than an impossible dream...wishful thinking. But -- it probably seemed the same in Isaiah's time. And yet the prophet's hope was not shaken. Old Testament scholar Fred Gaiser notes that "David's family tree looked bleak in the eighth century - a mere stump of its former glory - under attack by the Assyrian hordes that would take captive much of the northern kingdom and turn the southern kingdom into a vassal state. But stumps can grow even in nature, and the more so in a creation guided by the active word of God. [Isaiah knows] God will not take back God's everlasting promise."

And so Isaiah describes a vision of the outgrowth of that stump, a portrait of the reign of the Messiah. The vision didn't come true in Isaiah's lifetime. The truth is that centuries later, even among us who believe Jesus was the Messiah, many would say that even though Christ has been raised, salvation to the peaceable kingdom is ongoing. Jesus Christ came to earth but the work of Jesus Christ is ongoing today. We are called as Christians to keep this vision of a peaceable kingdom at the forefront of our faith. Yearning for that place where the wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; a place where no one will harm or destroy; a time when the earth will be full of the knowledge of God. Contemplating the many ways that it can be played out today might mean changing Isaiah's poetry a bit - paraphrasing with modern metaphors. Dreaming of a time when Palestinians shall dwell with Israelis. The pacifist will lie down with the NRA enthusiast. A place where weapons do not exist but a Congress working effectively for positive change does.

Maybe the absurdity of such a vision makes it seem even more impossible. Depressing us so much that we don't even dare go near it. Or – maybe the more distant we are from the reality of a peaceable kingdom, the more urgent it becomes. It is not accidental that the most enduring hope comes out of those places and moments that most of us would identify as hopeless. Perhaps it takes an encounter with great darkness before we begin to long for the light. Maybe it takes a discovery of the ultimate weakness of even the strongest nation before people will yearn for the kingdom of God.

And we must start yearning for that kingdom. We must recognize the darkness that engulfs our country and the need for change in gun laws. We can start locally – pushing for stronger gun laws in Virginia and then urge those laws to be adopted nationally. As soon as the body count was confirmed at the Navy Yard shooting two weeks ago the NRA pointed out that Washington, DC is home to some of the strictest gun laws in the country. And they are right – DC requires a 10-day waiting period on gun purchases and both carrying a gun openly and concealing it is illegal. But Washington, DC's laws did nothing to stop Aaron Alexis from allegedly entering a gun shop in Lorton, VA and walking out armed. Our state prides itself on conducting criminal background checks and keeping a complete record repository. But our state also requires no waiting period for gun purchases.

The stark difference between DC and Virginia is part of our nation's disparate gun laws, and the gun-rights lobby is clear about wanting to keep it that way. States that require waiting periods for gun sales are vastly in the minority — only 10 states and D.C. have waiting periods for the purchase of firearms. And a similar patchwork approach exists in gun permits. Lobbying for universal background checks and gun laws would be a tremendous step toward a peaceable kingdom. As would banning all assault style weapons making gun trafficking a federal crime. Our vigilance to press for stricter gun laws in the country must not be deterred by the inability of our Congressional leaders to muster their courage and stand for righteousness. We must be vigilant in our efforts to hold them accountable.

I know that it seems Isaiah's vision is nowhere in sight. That it seems impossible and unattainable. But we are called to actively work to achieve it. We can commit ourselves to keeping our children safe, to stand up to violence. Standing together, joining our voices with each other and with God who makes possible this vision of peace, hope, healing and transformation. I invite you all to join Episcopal Peace Fellowship who is dedicated to working for change. This vigil is one of dozens that have taken place in Episcopal Churches around the country this month as part of EPF's Make a Noise about Gun Violence movement. Episcopal Peace Fellowship also began a Gun Free Zone campaign after the 2012 Episcopal General Convention passed resolution naming all Episcopal churches and institutions as gun free zones. Churches are invited to put up decals on their property: Reading No Guns in God's House. The Episcopal Public Policy Network is seeking support to pressure politicians to at least limit semi-automatic weapons and make it harder to buy guns. The Presbyterian Peace Fellowship has created an incredible educational resource for congregations to use that is available online.

In any number of ways, even after the centuries have passed between our times, we are not all that distant from the hopes of those who first heard Isaiah's prophetic promises. Jesus came. The Messiah graced the earth; the light has come into the darkness, full of grace and truth. But we wait still, for our own final redemption... for the lion to dwell with the lamb and the leopard to lie down with the kid.

We wait for that day... that day when God will be present among us. We long for that day, even when its fulfillment seems but a distant promise. And in the meantime, because we believe the vision is true, we know we have work to do. A work that calls us into a future together, into the peaceable kingdom of God.