



We had this neighbor who lived down the street from us, who always had to be different. Susan was a Methodist, which doesn't make her "different," necessarily, since the statistics show that there are actually more Methodists in this country than there are Lutherans for God knows what reason, but we Martin Luther-followers will do our best to keep that on the down-low. Now, when she and her husband retired, they wanted to travel the world after raising children and in the midst of being grandparents as

well, but Susan's favorite place to visit was none other than New Orleans, Louisiana, which unfortunately appeared in the headlines for all the wrong reasons in recent weeks.

As most of the world was celebrating the start of the new year, brimming with contagious hope and endless possibilities, a jubilant crowd was doing their own rejoicing on Bourbon Street, the very place most popular for what happens the night before Ash Wednesday. Nevertheless, in the early morning hours of January 1, a man decided to drive a truck into the scores of people, tragically killing 15 of them for nothing more than being at the absolute wrong place at the absolute wrong time. They were nurses, students learning to become nurses, restaurant cooks, maintenance technicians, single mothers, and recent high school graduates. Of course, it isn't just about 15 people: it's 15 sets of families, 15 groups of friends, 15 collections of co-workers, whose lives were forever impacted by hate and rage. And it is in those moments that even with a new year of contagious hope and endless possibilities, remains the same human reality of not having the words whatsoever in response to such unbearable pain and agony.

But maybe Isaiah can hit home. Maybe what we hear from a prophet speaking to a people who were taken from their homes, seized from the lives they cherished, separated from their closest friends, who felt forsaken and desolate as the text so goes. Maybe Isaiah gives permission for the 15 families, the 15 groups of friends, the 15 collections of co-workers to feel their pain and agony that still fester weeks after 2025 did not start out with any joy whatsoever for them. But maybe Isaiah can also hit home with the Gospel: that God absolutely refuses to keep silent in the face of any hate and rage that our humanity is capable for any year of our existence on this earth.

And maybe New Orleans of all places has the most fitting embodiment of God's response to such an overwhelming death. They call it the second-line band, a tradition that started over a century ago, when the area African-American residents were not allowed to buy insurance, and when one's house burned down or someone died, and the family could not afford any kind of a funeral, the second-line band went to work and helped with the fundraising to not just cover whatever funeral proceedings, but to care for the family going forward. It was as if a bunch of boisterous trumpets and trombones with some contagious hope of high steps and endless possibilities of dance moves were the incredibly perfect Resurrection Gospel reminder that no matter what brought on the funeral proceeding, death was never, ever going to win.

As for Susan, who always had to be different, after she died from a courageous bout with cancer, she did the usual Methodist and Lutheran funeral proceeding in a church building. But instead of doing the normal getting into a hearse and having the family follow to a nearby

cemetery, having been so moved by her experience in the Big Easy, insisted on having her own second line band. So, on a sunny Sunday afternoon, up and down our street was this random collection of trumpets and trombones contagiously high-stepping and an endless possibility of dance moves along with it. And not only that, but Susan wanted her family to march along and throw out candy and beads to her neighbors on the sidewalk, as if to convey some most joyous celebration.

And maybe it was. Maybe it was the perfect reminder of the Resurrection Gospel. Maybe the different had to be done to convey the holy and most awe-inspiring difference in the God of the exiled Israelites, the 15 tragically killed, and every single child of God through all times and places. The most holy difference of a God whose love will never be contained, can never be stopped, can never be silenced, no matter what form of death or evil or hate will ever ensue from our humanity. As if the Gospel might just be true after all: that nothing can ever happen in this life to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. So maybe Susan having to be different in loving New Orleans the most, is ultimately because she was deeply moved by the best proclamation of the Resurrection Gospel: that our Lord will not only march with us in this life and into all eternity, but joyously dance with the endless possibility of grace for all the world. And for that Greatest News for Susan, for New Orleans, for all of us, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!