

Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry of New Jersey
Weekly Witness | February 23, 2018

According to Mark, Jesus didn't have any choice in whether he would enter the wilderness or not. He was thrown there by the Spirit and spent forty days living in that godforsaken place so that the next time someone found themselves in the wilderness, it wouldn't be godforsaken. It means Jesus is here, wrapping his arms of love around those who are gripped by grief. Jesus is here, holding those wounded and dying by gun violence every day. Jesus is here, even as we feel lost and alone in a wilderness of anger, fear, and sadness.

And Jesus invites us to be the body of Christ by entering into the wilderness where others find themselves, to offer God's compassion and love, to offer a witness of God's intention that all children be safe, to offer our voice of conscience to elected officials.¹

This Lenten season we are forced to journey into the wilderness of gun violence as we join with students around the country who are urging elected officials take action. We are called to write to our legislators, to pray for and with victims, to march for an end to senseless gun violence, and to join our voices with those who have gone before us.

And lest we feel dragged down and like we are losing hope, we must remember that elected officials have listened in the past, and they will listen again. The Rev. Robert Moore, Executive Director of the New Jersey-based [Coalition for Peace Action](#), recently recounted a history of gun violence prevention legislation in NJ:

"In the early 1990s Gov. Jim Florio worked with advocacy groups and the NJ Legislature to pass an Assault Weapons Ban, which remains the strongest in the country to this day! But in 1993, the bill was rescinded in the middle of the night in the NJ Assembly. Just three weeks later, the NJ State Senate vote was scheduled and not a single NJ state senator voted to rescind the Ban! A state senator from Mercer Co. was a good example of why. When he was asked, as an NRA supporter, why he opposed rescinding the Ban, he said that he received 2,000 phone calls and 90% said keep the Ban!"

NJ's success at keeping the ban inspired the US Congress to pass a National Assault Weapons Ban the next year, which lasted from 1994-2004. During that time, killings by assault weapons decreased by 75%.

After the mass shooting in Las Vegas, legislation to ban Bump Stocks moved quickly through the State Assembly and Senate, but it was unclear if it would be signed into law. Advocacy groups including LEAMNJ organized phone calls to the governor's office. The Ban was signed by outgoing Gov. Chris Christie on January 15, 2018!"

We may be in the wilderness but we mustn't give up hope, despite the seeming magnanimity of the debate. As Bishop Mark Beckwith recently [wrote](#), "Whether we are fully engaged in and supportive of the gun culture – or have no connection to it, we are all affected by the scourge of gun violence." Both sides have their own temptations and barriers, but as he [writes](#), "Lent is a season set aside to confront temptations." How can we be a community of grace that cares for the safety of all God's people, despite our differences?

We must pray together, study together, and take action together. For resources, visit the [Episcopal Peace Fellowship website](#). And stay tuned for opportunities to gather together to march in solidarity against the torments of gun violence.

¹ Adapted from The Rev. Steve Pankey, Rector at Christ Episcopal Church in Bowling Green, KY from his blog, "[Draughting Theology](#)."