



Charles Lyons, Pastor
Armitage Baptist Church
Chicago, Illinois

The Story Behind the News

“A 3-year-old child has been shot on Peter Avenue while riding the Big Wheel he just received for Christmas,” the reporter on my TV screen said. Even being used to urban horrors, this newsman seemed jarred by the ugliness of this breaking story.

“Oh, Lord God,” my spirit groaned just as an ailing, aching child groans, “Mommy.” I was going through my Saturday night routine; shining my shoes, getting ready for Sunday, watching the news. The phone rang. A torrent of emotion hit my ears and rushed to my heart. Sally was on the line. Sally had a way of communicating in accented street jargon that often left you wondering what she was trying to say. With a few clarifying questions, I discerned that the child I had just heard about on the news was her nephew. He was, at this moment, fighting for his life at St. Thomas Hospital. Could I come? “Of course,” I said.*

It was the Saturday following Christmas. It was one of those gray, in the mid-40s kind of days; warm enough to beckon people from the warmth and comfort of their apartments to the street for errands, chats, and strolls; warm enough that any little kid with a new Big Wheel was going to badger mom until she let him get out there on the sidewalk to ride his new toy. Little Juan lived on the third floor of a four-story building on one of the most notorious corners in Chicago, surrounded by a seething neighborhood rife with gang violence and an incredible volume of drug traffic. In fact, it was one of those corners that saw a steady stream of suburbanites driving by, making their buys, and racing back to the freeway and home.

It seems that a Disciple at the east end of the block, the gang turf boundary, was shooting at a Cobra on the west end of the block. Mind you, this is in the middle of the afternoon. Either not seeing little Juan riding his Big Wheel, or not caring, the gang member fired at his rival, blowing a hole in Juan’s chest and throwing him off his Big Wheel. A few days later when the shooter was arrest-

seeking. Sally caught my eye, leapt to her feet, and rushed into the hall. With tears streaming down her face, she sobbed, “Pastor, pastor, he’s dead. They couldn’t save him. They shot the baby.”

She led me back into the conference room. The wailing rose and fell among the parents, extended family, and a few friends. Though surrounded by constant violence, though barely a

...you figure it’s going to be okay.
Then your baby is shot.

ed, his mother vowed when interviewed by a reporter that her son had nothing to do with gangs. A quick check of the records found the 21-year-old had a long history of gang violence and arrests.

This sad holiday saga made even this sin-hardened city stop and gasp for air. The combination of violence, the innocence of a child, the Christmas holiday, and a Christmas toy made for great headlines and not a little reflection.

I would later discover that Juan’s mother and father were drug users. In fact, they probably bought drugs just outside the door of their building from the very gangs involved in the violence that took their son’s life.

I raced to the hospital, parked my car, jogged to the emergency room door. Entering, I looked this way and that searching for any familiar faces of family members or friends. Even as I stood in the hall, another ambulance unloaded yet another victim of violence. I saw no police. I saw no hospital personnel. I wandered down the hall, glancing through a door, finding the family I was

day goes by without someone getting killed in their neighborhood, somehow, until now, it had not been this bad this close. When you live in a neighborhood like this and see no way to get out, do you worry about your children? Of course, but every day that passes with the kids landing safely in bed at night, you figure it’s going to be okay. Then your baby is shot. The awfulness of it, the hopelessness of it, is enough to sweep you away.

What can I say? What can anybody say? I read a scripture. I shared the gospel. I prayed. I hugged desperately hurting people. I stepped back outside. The temperature had dropped. There was a bite in the wind. In another siren screaming in the distance, I hear demons howling, racing, claiming the streets as their own.

“God, I hate this.” I thought.

“Son, so do I.”

“But why don’t you do something?”

“I sent you.”

*names have been changed