



Remember. Yom Hashoah: Holocaust Remembrance

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Richard L. Ullman
The Second Sunday of Easter ~ April 19, 2009*

I was born in 1939, the year Hitler invaded Poland. World War 2 was daily present as I learned the childish joy of asking “What?” and “Why?”.

What's a Victory Garden, Mother?

Why do we take old tins cans back to the grocery store?

What's a war?

Why are we fighting?

The answers became very personal for me. I grew aware that the war was being fought to make the world safe for Jews and Jew-lovers – precisely people like me and our family, Daddy being a Jew and Mother a Christian. Even at four or five years old, I was aware that Nazi rule meant Granddaddy Leo and my Ullman aunts and uncles would have to go to death camps if we lived where Nazis were in charge – while Grandma Nellie and my Taylor aunts and uncles, being Christian, would be safe. I also knew that the Nazi Race Laws would have sent Mother and Daddy and my sister and me off to Concentration Camp where we would have been separated, tortured, starved and killed.

Our house was in the middle of an acre of ground on a country road. Mother would send me down to the mailbox to fetch the mail. One day I brought back a sheet of paper that was brilliant yellow, with large black letters on it. I could not yet read, so I asked Mother what it was. She skimmed it, shuddered, and told me it was “those dirty, filthy lies put out by that horrible man.”

“*What lies, Mother? What horrible man?*” It was flyer that quoted from the vigorously anti-Semitic writings of American industrial hero, auto tycoon Henry Ford. I learned that even in our own country there were people who had the same ways of thinking as the Nazis.



Yom Ha-Sho'ah, Holocaust Memorial Day, began to be observed in the 1950s. Senator Jack Danforth, who is an Episcopal priest, authored the Federal law that provides an annual week of commemoration in the U.S. It falls a week after Passover, which means it usually occurs in the week after Easter. We are invited to remember and to reflect upon the Holocaust... no, the invitation is larger than that: the annual commemoration bids us never to forget the Holocaust, and to conform our lives and the life of our nation accordingly.

So I begin with some childhood memories. Others have more painful, more searing memories... such as that shared by Elie Wiesel in our First Reading just now, moments in the coldest circle of Hell, eternally frozen moments which murdered his God and his soul.

Many of you have memories, as well.

I hope you are in touch with them.

I hope you can find ways to bring them forward to share with others. For there is great power in the sharing. “Ah!” say some. “Why go there? Why go to such pain, such unspeakable, inexpressible, silencing pain?” The cry arises within me even as I answer that, in human terms (how dare I speak in any other?) only in awakening memory can life be born of the great pain of the eternally frozen coldest circle of Hell.



My friend George and I spent the summer of 1959 in youth hostels and a beat-up car, touring in Europe. We went to the small town in southwestern Germany from which my great-grandfather Emanuel emigrated when he was eighteen: Buchau am Federsee. Our goal was to visit Frieda Ullmann, widow of a distant cousin I had never known. We stopped at a local tavern to ask if anyone knew her and where she lived. Our inquiry sparked a flurry of conversation, leading to a small contingent of Buchauers happily, eagerly escorting us to the door of a row house on Judengasse. I brought her gifts from my family. She invited us into her very humble home.

She spoke no English, and I had but a schoolboy understanding of German. But her hospitality was clear, as was her eagerness to communicate. Though our visit was unannounced, and late in the day, she insisted on preparing us a meal. She fed us some eggs, bread, and wine, and we sat with her for two hours as she spoke in simple sentences children could understand.

I heard from cousin Frieda’s lips how the Jews of Buchau am Federsee, her family, and she were treated under Hitler. She was then the only Jew in a town of formerly 150 Jewish families, who had lived side-by-side in peaceful community with an equal number of Christian families. She told of the terrible times the Jews had, beginning with the burning of their synagogue on Kristallnacht in 1938. Her three sons and husband were all done away with by the Nazis. “*Done away with*” I recall, was her turn of phrase. She herself was in concentration camp for three years. For one year she acted as a nurse there, and she said that 200 people died of starvation every day! She herself had a loaf of bread and a bowl of thin cabbage soup each week – that was all the food she had. She confessed to a guilty conscience, telling us that her food ration was far more generous than others received, because of her function as camp nurse. The Russians, Frieda told us, freed their camp just a few hours before the Nazis were going to poison everyone there with gas!

It was now dusk. George and I had to leave, tears in our eyes and hers. We embraced Frieda. Neighbors joined her in smiling and waving at us as we departed, feeling deeply privileged by the two hours spent in her home, and by all we had experienced there, chiefly her quiet courage, her warmth, her life-affirming passion.



The mother of one of my summer Virginia Beach neighbors died not long ago. Anne Friedman was born in 1929 in Belgium. She and her younger sister Mina suffered greatly when the Nazis conquered Belgium, and narrowly escaped the fate of her parents, who perished in the Holocaust. Her obituary records:

Anne was a survivor of the Holocaust who lost her parents at an early age. Despite this tragedy, she had a positive outlook on life and was always grateful for the gift of life and family. She gave freely of her time educating others about the tragedies she and her sister experienced by speaking to countless schoolchildren over the last 30 years.
(The Virginian-Pilot, February 2, 2009)

Entering deeply into her own deep pain, Anne arose from Hell to become an agent of life and peace on earth. Though her journey was singular, hers alone, yet it is parallel to the journeys of others: Elie Wiesel, from whom we have briefly heard and who has become teacher and peacemaker at a world level. Frieda Ullmann and many known only in local communities, or only within their own families. Even another Anne, Anne Frank, who survived the Holocaust not in her body but only in her famous diary.



Remembering is what we in churches and synagogues and mosques and temples and shrines do. When we religious people are at our best, we are remembering the deepest pain, and shaping our lives in ways that preserve us from replicating the conditions from which the pain arose.

It is urgent to remember. Not to do so risks that we shall dis-member. It is urgent to remember.

“This do in remembrance.” The words are inscribed here at St. Peter’s over the Lord’s Table, behind the cross.

Remember:

You are made in the image and likeness of God. You and every mother’s daughter and son are made in the image and likeness of God. Remember!

Genesis 1:27

Remember, say Buddhists:

Siddhartha was a royal prince, born to privilege and pride and power. But he chose a different way, grew enlightened, Buddha. And so can you. Remember!

Remember, say Muslims:

Abraham's first son was Ishmael—God hears, our forefather. He almost died in the desert, but God preserved him. Allah al akhbar. God is Great. Remember!

Genesis 17:3-11; 21:10-21

Remember, say Jews:

You were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore keep God's holy and gracious law. Remember!

Deuteronomy 5:15

Remember, say Christians:

On the night our rabbi was betrayed, tortured, and executed he took bread and broke it, wine and poured it out, and said, "This do in remembrance of me." And he died with forgiveness on his lips. Three days after, his tomb was empty. Here, put your fingers in the wounds. If you live in him, he shall live in you. Remember!

1 Corinthians 11:23-24; John 20:27; 14:19

Remember:

We have been weak, in disrepute, hungry, thirsty, homeless. Yet when reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. Remember!

1 Corinthians 4:10-13

Remember:

We know we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. Little children, love in truth and action. Remember!

1 John 3:14-18

Remember:

In the lives of many of us here present, the deepest, death-most circle of Hell came here, into our own cultured world. And good men and women were silent then. And millions then suffered unto death. Remember, and conform your life, help me conform my life, help conform the life of our nation that, by God's grace, Hell shall be forever banished from the earth.

Niemöller, Wiesel, Friedman, Frank, etc.

Remember.

Remember.

In the name of God... remember.