



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

## THE IMPERATIVE OF REMEMBRANCE

Yom HaShoah  
Holocaust Remembrance  
April 7, 2013

Again and again, almost like a pulse, the Tanakh, the Old Testament, commands its readers to do one thing above all things: Remember. Remember. Remember. Remember the God who brought you from the dust. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. Remember that you were liberated, that you wandered in the desert, that through Moses you received the Law, that you inherited a Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey. Remember that you were blessed; remember that you failed; remember that your rulers sometimes raised you up, and sometimes let you down. Remember that you were in exile. Remember that you were oppressed, and overcame oppression. Remember that, in all this, God was with you, in dark times and in good times, in a hostile environment and in your own land of promise and plenty. Remember to teach all this to your children. Remember it all. Trace through your remembrance the presence of God in it all. Remember to remember. Because, if you do not remember, you forget who you are, and whose you are.

Today, we are called, Jews and Christians, to remember again and anew. Today is Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, established by the new state of Israel as an annual observance in 1953 to remember the most horrendous and unspeakable catastrophe of all, the deliberate, ruthless murder of about 6 million European Jews by Germany under Nazi rule, in an effort to eradicate Jews and Jewishness from Europe, and from the world, for all time. Today, in line with biblical wisdom, we are again called to remember.

For Jews and Christians, though, today is perhaps the hardest day of all, the hardest remembrance of all. For Jews, because of how many were lost, how much was taken, how incomprehensible is the enormity of such destruction, such hatred, such wickedness and violence: in the heart of Europe, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, through initially democratic means, using the advances of science and technology. For Jews, it is hard to remember, and we should all remember that for some the possibility of faith itself, belief in any kind of God, still less a guiding, redeeming one, has been taken away by the scale of the killing and the scar it leaves, not just on families and individuals, but on the remnant Jewish community.

It's hard for Jews to remember too that all this took place with the consent, or even co-operation, of so many non-Jews who had before been friends, and neighbors and fellow citizens, and who lent a hand, or turned their backs, or averted their eyes, as scapegoating turned to exclusion, and marginalization turned to violence, and violence finally begat genocide on a scale previously unimaginable.

It is for that reason mainly that today is a hard day for Christians to remember too, or should be. It's a day on which we must recall the total, abject failure of our faith and our tradition. It's a day when we must remember how centuries of anti-Jewish sentiment, from the Gospel of John to the sermons of John Chrysostom, from the crusades of Pope Urban II in the 1090s to the ghettos of Pope Pius VII in the 1820s, from the writings of Luther and the *Institutes* of Calvin, to the journal of Wesley and yes, even the anti-Jewish sermons of Hitler-resisters like Karl Barth, fuelled the fires of Nazi hatred. It is charged to us today to remember German Protestants, forming the pro-Nazi Reich Church, to remember the weak intransigence of the Vatican under Pius XII, to recall the way in which Lutherans worshipped the *Führer*, Catholics upheld an unjust agreement and remained silent, and almost everyone colluded with evil, so as not to be convicted of disloyalty.

For Christians, we can't today just cling to Bonhoeffer, or recall Bishop von Galen, both of whom in fact drank in this anti-Jewish theology with their mother's milk, for all their later heroism. We can't turn away or hide from it. We must remember too, today, the way in which a religion which rests its understanding and belief on a Jew from Palestine and on Jewish scriptures and worldviews, failed, utterly, to stop this from happening, in the heart of its territory. We must remember the faithful, churchgoing Christians, people like us, policemen and soldiers and SS officers who shot and bombed and tortured and gassed and murdered millions, told to believe they were about a noble, even a godly, cause. And we must remember that the leaders of their churches condoned, or stood by silent, as they did so. If we Christians fail to remember today and in the days to come, we too, and we especially will be guilty of another and perhaps even graver sin.

Remember. Remember. Remember.

Probably, this sermon should end there. There is no easy comfort to find, no glib route back to feeling safe again with our traditions of faith. And I want to do nothing this morning to short-circuit the careful, painful, truthful process to which all Christians are called, of remembering the Shoah in all its horror and shame. I mustn't prevent us from appreciating how much the Christian churches contributed to the perpetration of genocide. It's only when we fully understand how abject was our failure that we can even think about beginning to rebuild what has been lost, and renewing all that was found wanting.

And yet no less a figure than Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, in his Nobel Prize lecture, reminds us that "just as [we] cannot live without dreams, [we] cannot live without hope." In the face of the scale of the Holocaust, survivors like Wiesel have often commented that it is in the small things we find any purpose for carrying on. They may be tiny pinpricks of light against the infinite blackness of the sky, but still, they represent the possibility of the continuance of life, of faith, of belief, of hope, of meaning. German-Jewish philosopher and Holocaust survivor Emil Fackenheim forbids us to allow Hitler any posthumous victories, including abandoning our hope for a world free of wickedness and the faith of our ancestors. And, for that reason too, we remember today. We remember those whose example might suggest that Truth, and Goodness, and Love may not have been utterly vanquished.

I remember our family friend Judith today. Judith, a German Jew, came to live with my great grandparents in rural England in 1939. She was one of the ten thousand Jewish children brought to Britain under the *kindertransport* scheme. Like many of them, she alone survived the devastation, never seeing her family again. She lives now in Washington, DC, with her husband Tom, defiant, generous and beloved, a pinprick of light in this dark sky. And as I remember her, I remember the

simple goodness of my great-grandparents, a goodness based on their Methodist Christian convictions, not concerned with Judith's race or religion but concerned with her welfare and her safety and dignity as a fellow child of God. While Protestant denominations, eminent theologians and self-important prelates turned their backs, simpler, wiser folk opened their homes and their arms to refugees. One small point of light.

And I remember my dear friend, Magda today, whom some of you have heard speak at AU. Magda has her own tales to tell of how simpler, wiser Christians in her Hungarian town helped Jews in the ghetto: a Catholic lay woman who risked her life to smuggle food under the barbed wire; a nun who continued to correspond and to do what little she could to help. But Magda is a source of hope for me amid the darkness for more reasons than that: for her simple kindness; her unstinting generosity; her blank refusal to bear malice or carry bitterness in her heart; her indefatigable dedication to tell her story to new generations of students and children so that they in their turn might remember; her commitment to let the rest of her life, rescued from the flames by her beloved American servicemen, be committed to reconciliation and peace.

Magda participated in a documentary a couple of years ago, telling the story of Hungary's Jews in the terrible year of 1944. At the screening of the premiere, two of her friends from Auschwitz, also in the film, were flown over from Europe. They hadn't seen Magda for several years and it was a touching reunion. As the three of them, now frail, elderly women, embraced at the end of the screening, I was moved to tears by them. This was a day they were not supposed to see, a life Hitler did not intend them to have: and yet here they were, a living affront to his ideology and a full-hearted rebuke to his hatred. A momentary pinprick of light: maybe, just maybe, love is ultimately stronger.

The Holocaust produced very few Christian heroes, and some of those we celebrate as such weren't always quite as flawless as we like to make them seem. But, I remember a genuine saint today too, another flicker of light amid this darkness. Angelo Roncalli worked for the Roman Catholic Church in the war. He was in fact the Apostolic Delegate – papal ambassador – to Turkey and Greece. In that role, recognizing from the outset the vile barbarity of Nazi policy towards Jews, he gave himself to doing whatever he could to help them. He helped refugees arriving in Istanbul to places of safety; he intervened to get Jews out of Bulgaria, Slovakia and Romania and away from harm; he schemed to prevent Jews being deported from concentration camps to the death camps in Poland.

In 1958, to everyone's surprise and especially his own, Roncalli was elected Pope. As John XXIII, he immediately set about renewing the corrupted Christian tradition that had laid the foundations for and colluded in mass murder. He changed the way in which Jews are referred to in the Church's worship, famously interrupting Good Friday services publicly to reprimand a priest who insisted on using the old formula which called Jews "perfidious". A dressing-down he likely didn't forget. I hope not.

And John called a great Council, Vatican II, which began 50 years ago last October, and which for the first time began the process I'm describing, of remembering the abject failure of the Church's past in order that renewal and hope could slowly emerge from the wreckage. One of its pivotal documents, *In our Time*, puts the case firmly, over-ruling the false teaching of the past:

*We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man's relation to God the Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: "He who does not love does not know God" (1 John 4:8).*

*No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned.*

I remember Pope John today, because he gives me hope that great statesmen of the Church can also be simple Christians, imbued with the love, wisdom and understanding that were in Jesus, the Galilean Jew. I remember him, and I know we all pray for his successor Francis, who seems to breathe a similar spirit.

You see, there is a solemn purpose to all this remembering. Dealing with the pain and dislocation of exile and the triumph of their enemies, and beginning to think about the return home, the Israelites famously asked "how then shall we live?". In the face of the Holocaust, it's an urgent question indeed. And to answer it, I remember one more pinprick of light.

Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch Jew, has left us a set of remarkable diaries, written while she was imprisoned in Westerbork transit camp. She writes with clarity and dignity of how in each generation there must be people who in some sense take responsibility for God: for letting faith be at work in us in such a way that others are drawn to, and not rejecting of, the God whom we represent. "There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times", she wrote. "And why should I not be that witness?" Though she died in Auschwitz in 1943, her witness remains real. So does that of Magda Brown. Asked by my class where God was in Auschwitz, she simply said, by some miracle: "*with me*. I never doubted it." Asked by them 'how then *they* should live', she replied: "resist the deniers. Protect your freedom. And think very carefully before you hate."

How then shall we live? So that in future generations our narrowness or hatred does not cause others to stumble. So that others may not use our ideologies or beliefs or convictions as weapons of division and pain. So that we allow Hitler no posthumous victories. So that we are living, defiant resisters and rebukers of all prejudice, intolerance and fear. In a way that takes care not to hate.

Why then do we remember? To allow these pinpricks of light to begin to break the darkness. To honor those with no graves at which we might mourn. And to take responsibility for God in our own difficult generation. May that God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Magda Brown and Pope John and Etty Hillesum, grant us wisdom, courage: and a very long memory. Amen.

--The Reverend Dr. Jonathan Dean  
Aurora University, Aurora IL