

Meditation given by John H. Kemp
Pilgrim Congregational Church
Duluth, Minnesota
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A MEDITATION

Psalm 55:1-8

Words from the cantata just sung and the Psalm from which they came speak uncannily to my experience last week: "My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me." Those feelings must have been in the hearts of untold Jews a half century ago; they were in mine Tuesday. The difference is clear: theirs was the real thing; mine was a brief visit to the past, a past that must not be forgotten.

Thanks to the generosity of a Minneapolis benefactor, 150 Minnesota religious leaders spent the day at the Holocaust Museum in Washington. For six hours we were immersed in the horrendous reality of Nazi Germany's "Final Solution." Despite the large crowds pressing around you, you were alone, totally alone in the haunting silence of the place.

Powerfully, the story was told: briefly, the centuries-old history of anti-semitism; the rise to power of Hitler; the slow but inexorable growth of anti-Jewish persecution in Germany in the 30s; the decision to exterminate all Jews in Europe; the transformation of prison camps into death camps; the hideous efficiency of those camps; the complicity of those who remained silent, including *our* government who, bending to our own anti-semitism and isolationism, admitted but a trickle of refugees; and the survivors, for, indeed, there *were* survivors.

I left the museum exhausted - and filled with images - not just the staggering statistics, not just those ghastly photos we've seen on TV in these 50th anniversary weeks. Even more, these: the massive pile of thousands of worn, dirt-caked shoes from Auschwitz; the story of the ocean liner St. Louis, filled with over 800 refugees no country would take, plying in vain between Havana and the Florida coast, at last returning to Europe where most finally were accepted by Belgium and Holland, only to fall victim during the German occupation.

The Lithuanian village whose four photographers had taken photos of most everyone in town; in two days nearly every Jew - three thousand in all - would be shot to death at town's edge. The photos line the inside of a three story replica of a crematorium chimney. You stand at the bottom and look up the tall chimney, surrounded by images of smiling children, happy young couples, proud families, dignified elders.

Image of the whole thing evolving in a nation proud of its rich culture, because no one said *no* when they could - not the citizen, not the corporate executives, not the educators, not even most of the churches. All remained silent as the crystal shattered, as rights were taken away, as Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and other undesirables were marched to the trains. And six million perished.

What a thin veneer this thing called civilization! We know racism and anti-semitism lurk at *our* political extreme. We know what those extremists would do with gays - little removed from an earlier "final solution." And we know how Muslims are first to be named and blamed when evil happens. And we remain silent, assuming the lunatic fringe will always stay that way, noisy but harmless on the fringe. Can we be so sure?

I share these lines from a service we held Tuesday before returning to the plane home: "A dark cloud of silence filled the world. When will that silence end? When will we speak out on behalf of our suffering neighbors? Not until we affirm God together; not until we acknowledge that we are *all* God's children. From the silence of uncaring, let us move on to the silence which is the search for God, the search within ourselves. Then we can affirm the one God; we can proclaim God's name to the world!"

Today we have witnessed right here the joy when this happens - the pure blessing of new life, Hallie Marie, daughter of Jew and Protestant Christian, baptized with blessings from Muslim, Jewish, and Roman Catholic friends. We *have* affirmed God together, that we're *all* God's children! So out of our different traditions, we celebrate one family, *God's* family, to which every human being in every place belongs. In a world too filled with hatreds, let the love shown here today witness to the way the God of us *all* would have us live.

May we be bold to believe that each one of us *can* make a difference *if* we live as though our neighbors, whomever they are, were our sister and brother. Then we will not remain silent before evil in our time. We will live not in fear but with confidence, guided by the prophet's word: "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?" Amen.