

Is There Easter After Auschwitz?

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Job 2:1-10; Matthew 7:12

October 4, 2009: World Communion Sunday

I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak about my recent trip to The Czech Republic with Walter Ziffer, a Holocaust survivor who has preached for us before, and who has become one of my closest friends. Walter's chief reason for traveling was to visit his hometown—where he was born, raised, educated, and forcibly deported during World War II's "purity campaigns." On June 29, 1942—not long after Joseph Goebbels, Adolf Hitler's propaganda minister, came and incited Walter's neighbors into a frenzy of nationalism and racial purity—almost 1,000 Jews from his town, including Walter and his family, were herded to the train station and put on trains. Within 24 hours, most were dead at Auschwitz.

Over three years, Walter survived an incredibly delicate but ever-lucky chain of events, any of which could have ended his life as a teenager. He sent one of the stories from that time to *The Reader's Digest*, but it was returned, with a note: "We don't publish fiction." It is a statistical miracle that his entire nuclear family survived those years (1 in 40,000 did). And it is a miracle of unknown magnitude that his story and mine have intersected in Asheville, Mars Hill, and now his hometown of Cesky-Tesin, whose history and real estate straddle both The Czech Republic and Poland. Auschwitz, Poland, is about 50 miles away.

Walter returned last month to his hometown to take part in an amazing Reconciliation Conference organized by a few Christians (and there are only a few in this part of Europe). His task was to tell the descendants of his friends and neighbors what it was like to grow up as a minority amongst them. It was but one more testimony in a long, long history that has brought Jews and Christians together in faith, in fellowship, and in fratricide. It is a history of occasional unity, but one dominated by separation, wherein Jews are on the "wrong side" of history because they have been considered wrong in matters of theology and of faith. One more instance of a majority feeling entitled.

Walter made a huge impact on this conference, attended by more than 200 persons. One could say that he was its hero. Just telling his story, he brought witness, conviction, and authority. His life testifies to a huge gulf that has reigned between his faith and mine.

Two weeks ago today, I preached in the church that sponsored this Reconciliation Conference. So did Walter. His message from the Christian covenant, and mine from the Hebrew covenant, were but modern variations on an ancient dance—the two of us at a single pulpit—on how we are to be related. For we are. We just don't always know the steps. How did this dance begin?

In the first century of our Common Era, a tiny sliver-minority of people launched a new faith, believing it fulfilled and held true to an old one. This new faith launched, however, with an open wound. These earliest proto-Christians added one tiny, but oh-so-crucial, phrase to their faith context, which energized their new ranks. It was a phrase that scandalized the old-school folks: the Jews.

The new Christians distinguished themselves by saying "The Messiah has come." It was a magnificent statement. On this belief, Christians have built a religious system of what seem to us coherent, reinforcing ideas, practices, and institutions. But to advance this faith, we have had – whether consciously or not—to distance ourselves from our closet spiritual relatives, the Jews. Jews still believe the Messiah is coming. And in this distance between the Messiah-already and the Messiah-not-yet, we have enabled so much tragedy and grief.

"Did the Messiah really come?" This remains an ongoing, never-resolved question that has defined and empowered—but also disenfranchised and hung over – the parent-child relationship the two faith expressions must share. We are bound up in this Messiah question to the end of time. The ways this Messiah question has been phrased and answered have become, in various times and places, more than mere matters of faith, more than theological discussions over coffee, but matters of life and death. For the child has become large—not just larger than its parent, but the world's largest-ever faith. And powerful.

At critical times, Christians have disowned, or disrespected, their parent, declaring that the parent is out of date, not "with it" or cool, not in step with modern times. In our differences has come danger. The early differences over the status of the Messiah grew as large as the exploding Christian populations. For every Christian conversion has hinged upon a relationship to a Messiah-already, who has come.

Such matters have defined a now centuries-old relationship. The centuries have seen little change, especially when you get church fathers to mouth the poisons. Martin Luther's Collected Works includes a horribly anti-Semitic piece entitled "The Jews and Their Lies."

Rarely did anyone on the Christian side interrogate the relationship. Christian behavior and attitudes toward Jews in the past twenty centuries have changed in fewer ways than white attitudes toward blacks in the past four. For many Christians, Jesus has never been a Jew; was not conceived to be a memorizer of the Psalms in which God's mercy endures forever; was hardly an understander of Isaiah's and Amos' sharp senses of contrasting justice, and never a lover of the majority of our Bible he must have read.

Ask almost any Christian, and Jesus is the founder of Christianity ... a feat impossible for someone killed for being king of the Jews. The very name Christian has Christ in it, which means Messiah. And we say that without a thought about the theological hardships it has caused. How did such begin?

In the first century, after Jesus was murdered by state execution, there emerged a tentative group of Jewish people—people that Jews for Jesus and other Messianic Jewish groups today try to imitate. They felt a tension in their faith. Their intensely strong experiences of Jesus caused them to begin to ask quite legitimate questions about whether this Jew was The One who was predicted of old to come. These new groups felt they could remain entirely Jewish and still study Jesus. They would still observe Sabbath, circumcise males, celebrate Jewish holidays. But they felt that their experience of Jesus was so, so, so strong that it bordered on the unique and the unrepeatable.

Some of these groups wondering about the identity of Jesus morphed into what would later become Christianity. But what happened is that the Christians could not move forward without showing a real difference and distance between themselves and the Jews. From the earliest decades, it seems, the newer groups of Christians were able to make huge strides in membership and social and political power by one statement, which they assuredly believed: The Messiah had come. Past tense. It took several centuries to work out the kinks, the details of which I'll spare us, but they eventually came to believe Jesus was the Messiah, God's only son; he had come.

"Christ has risen. Christ has risen indeed." Words that we say with ease are words that hide a huge gulf. To say "Christ," you know, is to say "Messiah." To say "risen," as from the dead, or "resurrection," based Christian authority in a real-time miracle. And it is difficult to argue against a miracle, especially when lots of people believe it to be true.

And ever since, we Christians have had to explain this miracle. We use atonement theories, blood hymns and sermons, and even our Mel Gibsons, who depict it graphically. Such flow from the tragedy of what happened to Jesus, who was misunderstood, who couldn't get a fair trial for something he did not do.

Like the Romans of his day, and the Sanhedrin, we still don't know what to do with Jesus. We know what to do with Christ, but not Jesus. It is easier to consign him to the miraculous than to make him a real flesh-and-blood Jew. So we neglect his humanity by focusing mainly on the bookends of his life—his birth and death—as we wring out of him any vital human characteristics. We tend to forget the small-p passion that drove him to be who he was—an ardent advocate for justice—a passion that brought on his murder in what we call his capital-P Passion.

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By neglecting the real and hard material conditions of his life that made up the crucible of his small-p passion, Christians have been able by-and-large to get away with relegating him to the ghettos of divinity—his Christness before his Jesusness; his post-Easter theology more than his pre-Easter life; his Messiah-ship more than his prophetic drive.

Does my/our view of Jesus as God tend to estrange us from legitimate Jewish views of who he was? Does my Christian Christ-lens disable me from seeing the Jewish Jesus?

What Christian belief has enabled me to do is abandon the Jews. By focusing on the person of Jesus as the second person of the Trinity, dead yet resurrected, perhaps I have been able to lose my peripheral vision of Jesus' own life, teachings, and the very people from whom he came. Through theological negligence, have I, by words first and deeds second, abandoned the Jews?

Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapters 9, 10 and 11, makes a tortured argument about the placement of the Jews in the covenants God has cut with humanity. Even though, he concluded, Jews may have abandoned their covenant (Well, who hasn't?), God has not abandoned God's promises. God's gifts and calling are irrevocable.

Irrevocable. The covenant with the Jews has not been recalled or been subject to amendment at the coming of Jesus. God's first and last words are mercy, not exclusion, chosen-ness, not abandonment.

However, this endless unity of God's covenant became a stumbling block for Christians, who could not convince their Jewish neighbors that their Messiah had come. "No," the Jews would say. "For when the Messiah comes, death, illness, and injustice will disappear. Look around, how can you say these have disappeared?!"

Not able to hear this rather sound logic, we abandoned the Jews like we have neglected the Jewishness of Jesus. The two are perhaps the same brainwave. What began with a positive statement, "The Messiah has come," trended into an indictment of Jesus' people, who were depicted time and time again as blind to what we saw as obvious about Jesus. These early separations via theology led to separations of worship, worship houses, houses themselves, then of neighborhoods. Like a couple in a relationship who stop talking about vital things, we drifted apart, and then we blamed the other for the separation.

Unchecked, habits of mind lead to habits of heart. Habits of heart lead to custom. Custom leads to culture. (Can anyone say, "Pavlov's dog?") Culture leads to ways of right thinking and wrong thinking. Which lead to laws. Laws tend to get enforced.

Adolf Hitler did not invent anti-Semitism. He did not need to. The Crusades did not invent anything. The attitudes against the Jews had already been cooking—like my compost piles—for centuries in the Christian basement, where in its dark rooms negatives got developed, and Jews were either not in the picture, or resided in the shadows. Neglect led to separation, which led to loss of rights, which led to loss of life. A short story, multiplied by six-plus million.

So a Holocaust after centuries of anti-Semitism, persecutions, pogroms, Crusades, and ghettos should not surprise us. The price of privilege and duty of power is absolute integrity, and even as we the privileged and powerful have abandoned or not kept faith with our own tradition, we abandoned and did not keep faith with those who were not able to join it. Jews became "the other," viewed with increasing certainty as "not us," with no password like "The Messiah has come" to gain entry. The ghettos into which they were compressed were just the physical expression of the spiritual ghettos into which we had already consigned them. Until kingdom comes, we'll always be before some Auschwitz. Auschwitz happened, it is happening still; it will continue.

So what? Let me respond to the question asked in such circumstances: Where was God at Auschwitz? One famous preacher has re-written The Lord's Prayer to reflect this question: Our Father, who art in heaven ... thy kingdom come, thy will be done, except during 1939-1945.

This question, however, is cowardly because of a misplaced subject. For it seems to place God as the subject in charge of what happened at Auschwitz. The proper subject, however, is us. Where were we at Auschwitz? Or rather: Where were the Christians before Auschwitz?

We were right there. It's not God who is dead. I am. By not seeing the Jews as legitimate faith partners, co-builders of God's vision and reign, we could more easily build the barracks, legitimate the crematoria, rig the barbed wire, and actively ignore those who did. We had already settled the Jewish question by settling for less. It was comforting for us, but murderous for the Jews. And I'm here to say, "No more."

"Were we there at or before Auschwitz?" is a relative to another question we Christians sing, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The answers are the same, for the exact same reasons: an existential, if not time-stamped, yes. But at each place, did we bear our cross enough?

If I have free will (and that's another sermon!), no matter how much I abuse it, then I am without excuse. If there is Easter hope after Auschwitz for me, it comes in a renewed Christian moral imperative to wake up to my checkered tradition, make material amends for its failures, and constantly-constantly-and-constantly-without-ceasing always stay awake to the plights of those going down to the next holocaust. For undocumented immigrants, those without health care, Darfurians, sex trade workers and human slave traffic, and homosexuals, the truism "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing" is true.

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“Where was God at Auschwitz?” is a cowardly question. If we constantly badger God to do our difficult human work for us—and then God does—then how can we claim to be human?

Maybe, just maybe, we can see how our inaction—our non-humanity—advances a Hitler’s cause. Leave God out of it. Please. If we insist on sticking to our training wheels when we are meant for balance and going places, then we can’t blame God for Auschwitz, Rwanda, Cambodia, apartheid of whatever brand, or any other human failure.

What can I preach as a Christian to other Christians, after Auschwitz? How does one proclaim Easter, now, with Jewish friends present, in the historical shadow of Auschwitz? Is there Easter after Auschwitz, when Auschwitz is just Golgotha times the 1.5 million murdered there?

For are not the murders of 12 million “undesirables” by Hitler of the same class-action suit as that of a misunderstood Jesus, who was falsely accused, wrongly arrested, tried in a kangaroo court, and wrongly executed by an imperial state? Is not every death/murder one more crucifixion that we allow, because we haven’t yet made the connection that they are all, in some severe and irrevocable ways, Jesus?

In his memoir of Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel relates an incident in which he witnessed the execution of a young boy. It was a particularly troubling execution—even the Nazi guards seemed disturbed at the prospect of hanging a boy in front of the other prisoners. Let’s pick up the narrative:

All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him. The victims mounted together onto the chairs ... their necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. “Long live liberty!” cried the two adults. But the child was silent. “Where is God? Where is He?” someone behind me asked. At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over. Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting. “Bare your heads!” yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping. “Cover your heads!”

As the remaining prisoners marched by, they beheld the victims. The two adults were dead. But the child was not—he remained suspended, struggling in midair for air, for more than half an hour. We pick up Wiesel’s words again:

Behind me, I heard the same man asking, “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice from within me answer him: “Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows...”

Christians, when pressed, say they are in relationship with a risen Lord. This Lord, or Messiah, accompanies them. “He walks with me and he talks with me,” goes the hymn. So if there is Easter after Auschwitz, it must be that the millions killed must remain as alive, walking with and talking with us, as we claim Jesus to be.

We have the freedom, but do we have the will, to live in close conversation with the victims, who have more right to a last word than I? Can we at least learn the name of one victim as well as we know the name of the victim at Golgotha? Can I, following Elie Wiesel’s directive, never say anything else about God that I could not say over a pit of burning babies?

We’ve made religions—idolatries, really—of the cute baby Jesus and the conquering risen Christ, avoiding some good stuff in between. Can we not at least make an ethic of the dead at Auschwitz, resurrecting them into our consciousness, our consciences, our conversations, our concentration? Letting them live again, and speak truth to our history?

What is the Easter story but hope wrung out of the crucible of the tragic? We’ve done it once, and so we must again. It’s the only hope that makes sense. The only kind that is not vapid. On this World Communion Sunday, perhaps this is a good start. Bring in the living, the dead, the forgotten, the victims, the disregarded. If they are not at this table, then how can the Jesus we know show up, too?

The story of Jesus is—has to be—the story of the world. Or we’ve got nothing—nothing!—to preach. May we live accountably in this community of the dead and resurrected! The dead we celebrate, and the dead we forget, live only as we allow them. Easter happened. Can it happen still?

Amen.