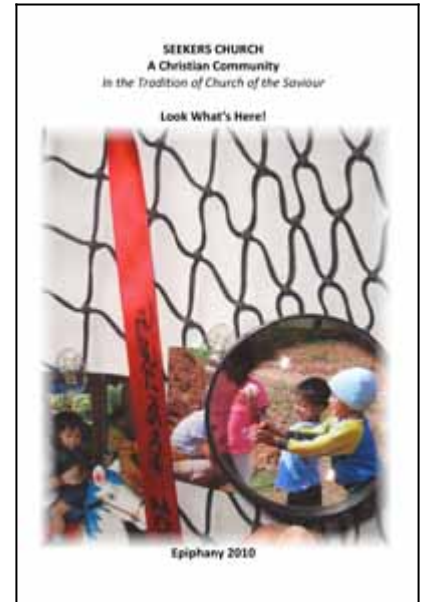


“A Time for Shouting” by Mark Braverman



Exodus 34:29-35

Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 19:37-40

It's so good to be here with you today, and I want to thank Deborah in particular for inviting me. But you know, she's very crafty! She choose hymn 24, which is a translation of "Yigdal," straight from the Jewish liturgy for the Sabbath. Deborah knows that I have issues with the synagogue right now – and so she has found a way to bring the synagogue to me. Thank you, Deborah, I am really touched. And thanks to all of your for honoring me by asking me to be here with you and to offer these words.

Sometimes you open the lectionary and think: this is a piece of cake! Prophets talking about justice. Paul talking about

love. But today's readings are difficult. And they are difficult not only because the texts themselves are in places opaque and confusing, but because of the differences between them. And, as David remarked earlier, today's reading from the Epistle is not exactly conducive to interfaith dialogue. But the texts today are perfectly suited to my theme, because I am going to talk about difficult things. I am going to talk about the relationship between the Jewish faith and the Christian faith, and what we are facing, each faith community, because of two stunning events in modern history: the Nazi Holocaust and the State of Israel. We like to think of interfaith dialogue as a good thing, a pleasant thing, a mutual getting to know you, mutual respect, etc. But we don't get to have that now, and it's a challenge, and our texts take us right to that.

Exodus 34:29-35

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside.

We can talk about what these texts might mean, both standing on their own and here in juxtaposition. But to get to the heart of it all we have to do is talk about Paul himself. It had not gone well for Paul in Corinth. Apparently – and of course we only get hints from the letters and from Acts – he had his struggles with the church he had established there. And missionaries from another Jewish-Christian group were interfering. The Jews gave him a hard time. And in general the Jews gave him a hard time, that in some ways is the story of his life. And, in typical fashion, he is saying several things, not all in sync with one another, and this is evidence of his inner conflict and his struggle. He's tough on the Jews here, it's a different tone than Romans, for example, which we read next week. There is no grafting here, no trunk and branches. Here Paul is very clear: the old Covenant is good only to be set aside – he is not softening this, there is no bridge building to the parent faith. Earlier in this same letter he describes the stone tablets that Moses carried down from Sinai the “ministry of death,” compared to the new law of Christ, which is the “ministry of the spirit!” And not only that – Paul goes out of his way to make his point, playing, as he sometimes does, fast and loose with the Hebrew scriptures. For this scene from Exodus, although a bit confusing itself, is in its essence and impact very clear. Moses has just been up the mountain to receive God's law! You don't get any closer! It's clear what the shining of his face is about, and the people can't handle it, and we understand that! But Paul turns it completely around: he has the people putting up the veil so as not to see Christ. That's not what's happening at Sinai. Sinai is about seeing God face to face, Moses is about seeing God face to face. And Sinai is about the inability of the people to handle it.

But look at what Paul does here – he frames it not as the

people hiding their face from the radiance of God – not the familiar, repeated story in the Old Testament, about the people's own fear and limitation, the familiar tension between Moses' fierce and undivided vision and the shortsightedness and fearfulness, and even faithlessness of the people. Rather, Paul makes it about the contrast between the old covenant and the light of the new, of Jesus' salvation. What's going on here? We only get hints from these letters and from Acts, but it's fairly clear that he was struggling with the trouble caused by Jewish groups moving onto Corinth to interfere with the church he was building there. So there are tears, and anger, and frustration for Paul here, and we may be seeing it leaking out here. It's payback – it's his pain and frustration talking.

But let's dig deeper, let's get beyond the theological politics to the core of Paul's experience. Paul really is searching for how to remove the veil. He is trying desperately to pull down the barriers that block getting through to his people and promoting his vision, the truth as he knows it. Isn't he talking about his own journey, his own awakening, his own liberation from the strictures and the blindness and the limitation of his own background, his own past? How compelling is this for us! How important a model for our own journeys, for, if this is not what our journeys are about, then what? What else could they or should they be about, to be worth the trouble, to be worth the trip? And how much we must try to emulate Paul's courage, his persistence, his doggedness, and, even, and perhaps most important, his seeming willingness to double back on himself, to twist and turn as he attempts to find the way through, through his own emotional and spiritual struggles as well as those of those he is ministering to? We see Paul sometimes as someone who, if he were to suddenly wake up and find the way clear and open to him, might intentionally and purposefully turn to the more

difficult, thorny path. For it is down that path, Paul is telling us, where you find the spirit. There is where Jesus is waiting for you.

So today we read about Moses, and we read about Paul. Both were trying to bring something new, something, well, blinding. Something that prompts us to hide our eyes. But the times cry out for the veil to be pulled away, even if, and especially when, it hurts.

I am a Jewish American, the grandson of a fifth-generation Palestinian Jew. My grandfather was the direct descendant of one of the great Hasidic Rabbis of Europe, a family that later settled in Safed and then Jerusalem in the mid 19th century. As a young man he left the Holy Land for America – but the heart of the family remains in Jerusalem. Zionism was mother's milk to me, a Zionism framed in religion. I was born in 1948 – a month before the State of Israel; I was taught that a miracle – born of heroism and bravery – had blessed my generation. The State of Israel was not a mere historical event – it was redemption. In every generation, so said we every year at Passover, tyrants rose up to oppress us, and the Lord God stretched out his hand to redeem us; Pharoah, Chmelnitsky, Hitler – and, of course, let us not forget, Gamal Nasser. All of Jewish history was a story of struggle, exile, oppression and slaughter that had culminated in a homeland, again, and at last.

I first visited Israel as a boy of 17, and I fell in love with the young state. I was proud of the miracle of modern Israel – of what my people had done, creating this vibrant country out of the ashes of Auschwitz. My Israeli family – religious

Jews – warmly embraced the grandson of the renegade who had left. But even as I embraced them in return, I realized that the way they talked about “the Arabs” in the same way that whites talked about black people in the pre-Civil Rights Philadelphia of my birth. I knew then that something was fundamentally wrong with the Zionist project, but my love for the Land stayed strong. After college, I lived for a year on a kibbutz, ignoring the implications of the pre-1948 Palestinian houses still in use and the ancient olive trees standing at the edges of its grounds. Returning to the USA, my concerns about Israel increased in direct proportion to the pace of illegal settlement-building. Still, I held to the Jewish narrative: the Occupation, although lamentably abusive of human rights, was the price of security. Then I went to the West Bank.

Traveling in Israel and the Occupied Territories, my defenses against the reality of Israel’s crime crumbled. Witnessing the Separation Wall, the checkpoints, the network of restricted roads, the assassinations, midnight raids and collective punishment, the massive, continuing construction of illegal Jewish settlements and towns, the vicious acts of ideological Jewish settlers, words like apartheid and ethnic cleansing sprang to my mind, unbidden and undeniable. I used to chafe at the word Nakba, Arabic for the Catastrophe of 1948 – we Jews call it the War of Liberation. I bristled not because I rejected the idea of a catastrophe for Palestine, but because it discounted the Jewish reality: was not 1948 a war of self-defense, a war to prevent yet another extermination? Didn’t they attack us? Didn’t they reject the 1947 UN Partition Plan and by so doing bring the Catastrophe upon them themselves? I now see that responsibility for denial and distortion lies equally, if not more, with us. What they didn’t teach us in Hebrew School is that we started the cycle of violence. We arrived on their shores, took their

land, played geopolitics to establish our political presence, and have worked steadily to achieve dominance – political, economic and demographic. The 1948 War, although undoubtedly protecting the Jewish population of Palestine from hostile Arabs, morphed into ethnic cleansing, a campaign to banish the indigenous Palestinians from their homes in historic Palestine. Israel's actions since 1948 have been a clear continuation of this plan. This is being documented by Israeli historians and a growing chorus of Israeli journalists and writers. The truth is slowly, inexorably surfacing.

When I returned I made three discoveries. The first was that the synagogues were closed to my message. Sadly, tragically in my view, the organized Jewish community is not ready to confront the urgent issues raised for us as a community by the actions of the State of Israel. It is not ready to re-examine political Zionism in the light of the clear evidence of what our national homeland project has brought us to. Second, I discovered, to my delight, that the doors of the churches were wide open. I discovered the broad and deep social justice agenda of the church, and the fact that when I spoke in churches, people were open to and even grateful for my message that yes, of course as Christians you know what to do when you see this injustice, and that I am here to reassure you that it is not anti-Semitic to question the actions of the State of Israel! But the third discovery was that the reluctance among Christians to challenge Israel was also deep and wide. It would not be so easily dispelled. And that there were powerful historical reasons for this.

65 years ago Christians stood before the ovens of Auschwitz-Birkenau and said, "What we have done?" There ensued a project to rid Christian theology of what one prominent theologian has called "*The Christian sin:*" anti-Semitism. In

traditional Christian theology, sometimes called displacement theology, the Jews were depicted as the cursed of God – scattered over the earth as proof that they had rejected God. Modern Christian thinkers realized – correctly – that this theology had set in motion the great evil of Jew hatred over the millennia, and that it had to be corrected. In the new theology, the Jews were seen no longer as the darkness but as the light. No longer displaced by the “new Israel” of Christianity, the Jews were now reinstated as God’s elect – the original covenant between God and Abraham was in force. Generations of theologians and clergy have been educated in this revised theology. But in the current historical context, there is a problem with this theology, in particular with respect to the issue of the land promise.

In the Christian reenvisioning, the worship of God was no longer tied to a geographical location. The land was lifted out of the original tribal context, becoming a symbol of a new world in which God’s love is available equally to all of humankind. You can understand Jesus’ image of the stones of the Temple coming down in this way. It’s no longer the Temple – my body is the Temple! Meaning, God lives in all of us, in this community, in this church we are building, in the bringing of the Kingdom. But the new theology tells us that this message of Christianity was wrong because it was a repudiation of the covenant with the Jews. By spiritualizing the land, he claims, Christians were depriving the Jews of their birthright. In other words – and this is widespread in Catholic and Protestant thinking today – the fact of the State of Israel has theological power – God has returned the land to its rightful owners. This to me is an astonishing argument. The whole point of spiritualizing the land was to transform it from a key clause in the covenant between God and one particular people into a universal symbol. This is not to say that Christians at different times in history have claimed

the land for "their" exclusive God. But that is the point – that was wrong. If it was wrong for Christians then it is wrong for Jews today.

It's a tragic irony. Vigilance against anti-Semitism has come to trump commitment to social justice when it comes to the plight of the Palestinians. This goes against God's will. This theology is wrong. God requires justice. The times call out for the prophetic.

I find myself saying to Christians who seek a devotional pilgrimage to the Holy Land: Yes! Go! Walk where Jesus walked! For, if you do go and indeed see what is to be seen, you will not only walk where he walked but you will see what he saw. You will see land taken through the imposition of illegal laws and the tread of soldier's boots. You will see the attempt to destroy community and family through the taking of farms and the destruction of village life. But you will also see nonviolent resistance represented by demonstrations against the separation wall, by families of Palestinians and Israelis who have lost children to the conflict gathering together, by Jewish men who have taken off their uniforms and joined with Palestinian men emerging from Israeli prisons who pledge themselves to reject violence and enmity.

So the church is – or should be – right at home here. The imperative for universal justice permeates the American church – it's not a hard call! Except for the interfaith issue. That makes it difficult. I know. I know what charges you open yourselves to when you dare to criticize the State of Israel. But I say to you: do not let yourselves be held captive to our struggle. The Jewish people, by claiming a superior right to a territory shared by others, whether that

claim is made on religious or political grounds, are heading straight for disaster, not only political, but cultural, psychological, and spiritual. So yes, honor the painful process that we Jews must go through as we begin to look in the mirror and consider what we must do now to be OK with God. Love us as we confront the awful consequences that have resulted from our nationalist project. *But do not wait for us* as you pursue your work for peace based on justice .

Today, Jewish Christian interfaith dialogue is too often been confined to polite, careful encounters that avoid the tough issues and observe strict rules against criticism of Israel. What we need is not *dialogue* but *communion*, common cause in the pursuit of justice.

Jim Wallis has written that when diplomacy and the political process alone fails, broad social movements emerge to change the wind: to push and to direct the political process. It is up to us, at the grassroots, to change the wind. Here, today, as we in the U.S. confront the reality of our government's responsibility in this struggle, I submit to you that it now falls to the church to lead. Without this movement, led by and located within the church, a church freed up theologically to go forward and to raise its prophetic voice, our President will have very little chance to do what he wants to do in the Middle East.

Here's another example from scripture of what happens when the veil is removed. People make noise. From the Gospel of Luke, describing the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem

Luke 19.37-40:

*As Jesus was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, **the very stones would shout out.**"*

I find how Jesus expresses himself at that moment so powerful – whether praise or protest, you cannot suppress the cry of strong feeling. And what was the praise about, after all? It was the spontaneous response of an oppressed, occupied people – a cry of love, adoration, and sheer joy for the miracle of Jesus' ministry – his power to heal, to inspire, to lead. It's a wonderful moment, and so captures Jesus in his idiom, his unstoppable response to the stifling, spirit-killing, life-denying voice of established authority. "You can't stop this!" he is saying. "Nature itself, even these seeming inert stones, resonate with the joy and life force emanating from these people."

It's time to do some shouting. It's time to remove the veil, see what is in front of our eyes, and to do some shouting. God loves that shouting. As Paul wrote to his people that day so long ago, bring us to that hope, let us see clearly, and let us act boldly.

Amen