

It is 1937, and an orphan finds herself in the adopted home of a couple in a small town in Germany. Liesel will not be the only person needing refuge to come through the Hubermanns' door. Liesel was broken and needed to heal. Her balm came through the gentle hospitality of Hans and Rosa. Her liberation came when they taught her how to read and she discovered the power of words.

This is the opening of Markus Zusak's novel, *The Book Thief*.

The next refugee to come to the Hubermanns' door was a Jew named Max. Max's father had saved Hans' life in WWI, and as Jews were beginning to be persecuted and rounded up under the Nazi regime, Hans returned the favor when he and Rosa allowed Max to stow away within the block and chinking of their basement. As the Third Reich began pressing down on its own citizens, the Hubermann family—as well as Max—began to feel the danger of what their radical hospitality could cost them.

As time passed, their town became a passthrough for Jews who were being force-marched to the concentration camp, Dachau, which unbeknownst to them, was being used for the systematic genocide of people who didn't fit the Aryan norm—this just outside of what had been their quiet, peaceful hamlet. As line after line staggered past them, Hans could no longer hold back his compassion, and he offered bread to one of

the men in the macabre parade. He was beaten for it, and the family knew that it wouldn't be long before Nazi soldiers searched their house. All parties agreed it was best for them to send Max away. While soldiers never searched their house, they sent Hans to the front lines of the war, which he miraculously survived.

As the parades continued, Liesel always kept an eye out for Max, in case he had been captured. On one occasion,

Liesel and (her friend) Rudy ... scattered bread along the road and then hid in a forest of pine trees to watch. The Jews spotted the bread quickly and ate it. When the soldiers finally realized what was happening, they told their prisoners to stop moving. One of the soldiers saw Liesel and took off after her. Rudy ran in a different direction. Liesel was kicked from behind and shouted at, but otherwise got away and met back up with Rudy.

(adapted from [CliffsNotes online](#))

The children sacrificed their bread, and risked their lives, in order to provide some succor for the Jews who suffered so intensely. Even if it did nothing to prevent mass annihilation, it was what the children had the power to do; they acted.

Zusak's chilling portrayal of what happened in a typical German town during the rise and fall of Nazism is a reminder (and a warning) to us of what can occur when the fervor of religious nationalism is allowed to take root and gain power.

Shockingly, this 20th century story has reverberations from the story of Esther from which Jill just read – some 2600 years earlier! A class of Jews have been taken into exile by the Assyrians and are dwelling in the city of Susa. When the king searches for a new wife, Esther, a young Jewish woman, is selected out of a lineup of other young women. The Assyrians did not know she was Jewish. While Esther was living in the palace as one of the king’s wives, an Assyrian leader with an ax to grind connived a scheme to commit genocide against the Jewish people. As chapter 3:13 explains,

The order commanded people to wipe out, kill, and destroy all the Jews, both young and old, even women and little children. This was to happen on a single day{ —the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (that is, the month of Adar)}. They were also to seize their property.

As shocked as non-Jews in Nazi Germany were to observe Jews haggardly parading through their town, the story of Esther reports “the city of Susa was in total shock.”(3:15) However, the biblical narrative reports one important intervention occurred. Esther’s cousin Mordecai saw a possibility for the genocide to be prevented. With Esther in a position of power and privilege, he encouraged her to seek an audience with the king and inform the king of the fullness of the plot. It had already been decreed that no one, under any circumstance, should take the initiative to visit the king without being properly summoned. It

would be a huge risk for Esther to ask to speak with him. But as Mordecai replied to her—as both warning and encouragement,

4:13 “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 14 For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

As the rest of the story goes, Esther heeds her cousin's warning. It is important to note that it is after three days of fasting (and prayer?) that Esther discerns her course of action. She would speak to the king, and by doing so, her intervention spoiled the plot, and gave her people relief ...this time.

It would be 200 years later when the Jews would be overcome by another foreign power...the Greeks. Then another 300 years by the Romans. We'll get to that story in a moment.

There's a fascinating phrase in Mordecai's words to Esther: “if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place...” In bible study on Thursday, Pat Baker encouraged us to understand these words as testimony to the presence of God, and God's capacity to bring deliverance or salvation one way or another. In Mordecai's mind, the most direct opportunity for relief was for Esther to take the courageous act to present herself to the king and seek his

intervention. Had she not, as Mordecai forewarned, Death may have visited a large number of Jews—including, perhaps Esther’s family—until some other form of deliverance showed up. Thankfully in that instance, Esther chose to step into that space and advocate for her people. However, it made me wonder about how many lives did she save? How many would have been slaughtered had she decided it wasn’t for her to step in, and until someone or something else intervened?

Returning to the pogrom of the Nazis, I was reminded of the famous question posited by Martin Niemoller:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

I called this a question raised by Niemoller, because ultimately that is what is for each of us. It would appear there were no Esthers whose words could prevent the slaughter of millions of people during the Nazi occupation. Unfortunately it took deliverance in the form of guns and bombs I call Niemoller’s words a question, because they should serve as

a mirror reflecting our own motivations, and allow us to ask ourselves for whom or for what am I willing to put my life on the line? Also, in our bible study, Gene offered the reflective insight, "If you're not willing to die for something, what's the point of living?"

In my last sermon, I shared with you all the opening lines of the *Prayer for Conscience and Courage* by Sister Joan Chittister. The story of Esther cries out for me to share the remainder of the prayer:

God of light and God of darkness,  
God of conscience and God of courage,  
lead us beyond fear, apathy and defensiveness  
to new hope in You and to hearts full of faith.

Give us the conscience it takes  
to comprehend what we're facing,  
to see what we're looking at  
and to say what we see  
so that others, hearing us,  
may also brave the pressure that comes  
with being out of public step.

Give us the courage we need  
to confront those things  
that compromise our consciences  
or threaten our integrity.

So, what's this have to do with Advent and Christmas, you may be asking yourselves? Recall the way of the world 2000 years ago. The Jews were occupied by the Romans. Their religion had been hijacked by a group of leaders who would not say no to their oppressors. "Rome First" was the mantra of the time and to those who wouldn't give allegiance to Caesar, the gruesome presence of crucified bodies made a compelling argument to forsake the law of God.

God intervened.

First came the baptizer calling upon people to rethink their understanding of the world, to change their hearts and lives, and to remember the covenant God made so long ago. The baptizer was followed by the anointed one who fulfilled what the faithful follower of God, Simeon, proclaimed as he held Jesus in his arms. He said,

29 Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, 30 because my eyes have seen your salvation.

31 You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples.

32 It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel. (Luke 2)

Jesus was the conscience of God in the flesh held before the people. Jesus challenged the people of his time to observe the way of the world around them; to examine their own lives and to speak honestly and openly about what they understood to be true. For some it was confession; for some it

was confusion; for others it was an understanding of their true identity as a child of God despite what they had been told by church and culture. This intervention of God gave people the option to claim their salvation, and held them accountable for living a life that was worthy of that calling.

Our lives are no different. I will close this sermon with a chilling observation that was shared with the clergy group with whom I do lectionary study every week. Unfortunately it brings this sermon full circle. The Rev. Sharon Grace Budin, who is pastor of Bethany Presbyterian Church in the Gordon Square neighborhood of Cleveland, and whose husband is Jewish, told our group that real conversations are being held in Jewish households right now about making the decision to leave the United States because it is becoming less safe for Jews to live here. The rise of Christian Nationalism has caused a commensurate rise in anti-semitism. And while it is hard for me to fathom, this threat is real, and we must be prepared to share our understanding of the Christian faith, which is firmly grounded in love, and denounces hate.

Esther spoke her conscience.

Jesus spoke his conscience.

Niemoller spoke his conscience.

Sharon Grace Budin spoke her conscience.

There are many who came before us who risked their lives to speak their conscience. We, too, must be prepared to do the same. If we cannot,



then we are missing a major part of this season that we so joyfully celebrate this time of year. I close by calling on the words of one other saint from our tradition, Christian mystic Howard Thurman and his *The Work of Christmas*

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among others,  
To make music in the heart.

As we prepare to receive the bread which gives us succor, let us make music together with *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*.