

Solidarity in The Way, The Truth, and The Life

Thanksgiving Day

Text: John 14:6

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Someone who has become a good friend, Rabbi David Hartman, who has been in Muskegon on three different occasions in that full-day dialogue sponsored by the West Shore Committee for Jewish-Christian Dialogue, has sent me his most recent book, an autographed copy, and the title is the title of his lecture here a year or two ago - *A Heart of Many Rooms*. It's a wonderful image; a heart of many rooms is a heart that can receive and accommodate diversity of opinion and various perspectives on the truth. As I was reading the introduction, I realized that it is really a statement of David Hartman's life and passion as he lives in Jerusalem, having moved there from this country in order to be a part of that emerging Israeli experience, the living community of Jews returned to Jerusalem. In the introduction, he mentions an experience that he had back in the 70s. The Six Day War was going on and David Hartman was terribly distressed and recognized that the nation, Israel, was in jeopardy, and he said, "Oh, Lord God, if we are to experience another Holocaust, I'll not be able to do it. How long," he says, "could we continue to be witnesses to the silent God of history?"

Well, Israel won that war and feeling compelled to go there, he visited Israel and he found that, in the wake of the victory of the Six Day War, the Jews were dancing in the streets of Jerusalem. There was a mood of jubilation. He was a Rabbi in a congregation in the Bronx or Montreal at the time, and he returned home on the ninth of Ab. Ab is a Jewish month in the Jewish calendar, and the ninth day of the month Ab is the day that the Jews traditionally mourn the destruction of Jerusalem that occurred by the Roman legions back in 70 C.E. The ninth of Ab every year they gather and they mourn the destruction of Jerusalem.

So, he leaves the jubilation of the streets of Jerusalem, the living Jewish community, and he comes to his own people in his own synagogue and they are in mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem. The incongruity of it struck him, and he writes that it seemed like a parent who prays for the recovery of a sick child and the child recovers, and the parent continues to pray for recovery because he or she has fallen in love with the prayer. He announced to his people

who were in mourning in traditional fashion for what had happened nearly 2000 years ago, that the people of Jerusalem were dancing in the street! That's one of those deep human experiences that has a way of changing one's thinking or at least jarring one out of traditional patterns and thought. David Hartman, from that moment on, began to ask himself, "What does it mean to engage the God of history in the present? What does it mean to engage the God of history in a live community, here and now?" That became the passion and the mission of his life. Eventually, he moved his family to Jerusalem and formed the Shalom Hartman Institute for the study of peace, trying in that living community itself to live out a vital Jewish faith, not now waiting for Messiah to come, but seeing in the concrete realization of that Israeli community the action of God in the midst of history, trying to interpret it and trying to live into it.

As he reflected on that, he realized that, as a traditional, observant Jew, he had been living between *history remembered* and *history anticipated*. In the meantime, it was a time of passive waiting, which, in the Jewish experience, was explained as the time of the silence of God. Where was God when six million Jews suffered death? Where was God through all the centuries of history and the struggle and the suffering of the Jewish people?

As a Rabbi, David Hartman had celebrated the great Jewish festivals which celebrated God's past action, and one of those festivals, the Passover, had an eschatological (future) dimension. The liturgy for Passover ends with "next year in Jerusalem." Thus Hartman realized he had been living with a "symbolic history" which "remembered" and which "hoped," but missing was the sense of the immediate presence of God acting here and now. God was "silent."

That triggered lots of thoughts with me as I thought about the first Sunday in Advent, today, and coming to this table of our Lord for we, too, today have experienced again participation and ritual and the sacrament, and the sacrament has called us to remember and to hope. That same eschatological note is in the sacrament. Jesus says in Luke's gospel, after having shared that meal, "I will not do it again with you until the kingdom fully comes." Paul, in the institution in I Corinthians 11, says that, "As often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." So the Christian experience, very much like the Jewish experience, is lived in the meantime, between the mighty act of God in Jesus Christ, and that mighty act of God in Jesus Christ in the coming again to judge the nations. So we have action past, action anticipated. We remember and we hope and, in the meantime, we don't really take very seriously the active engagement of God in our history.

If you want to know what's going on, you go to Washington or Beijing or Moscow or Paris or London. If you want to know what's going on, check the Wall Street Stock Market. If you want to know what's going on, read the journals. But God is not really very vividly present in our thinking about history, our history, our day, our nation, our world. A kind of passivity comes over the Church.

Oh, we're very good at remembering what God has done; we're very clear about what God will do. Jesus comes for our salvation. Jesus comes again for our full redemption. That's the story, that's the biblical story, that's the traditional Christian faith. And here it is, the first Sunday in Advent, the first season of the Christian year that will bring us into the first season of a new millennium, and we're doing it again.

Traditionally, I would say to you Advent is the time when we remember that the one who came is coming again. Of course, I can't do that anymore because last year I told you Jesus wasn't coming again, and of course, you always believe everything I say. But I don't really think Jesus is coming again. I think that that idea of a second coming permeated the air of the first century. It marked Jewish expectation and the emerging Christian movement; they were expecting the imminent return of Jesus from heaven. *Imminent*. That means right now, very soon.

We've noted here before that the first great crisis and perhaps the greatest crisis of Christian faith is the fact that Jesus didn't return. Nothing happened. Paul had to write his letter to the Thessalonians because they laid off work and were waiting for it to happen. The expectation runs through the whole of the New Testament, and it didn't happen. And of course, if you have an infallible, inerrant Bible that you have to defend, you're in real trouble, because what you have to do is say that it will still happen. It just hasn't happened yet. But, if you can hear that scripture witness as the testimony of those who were giving witness to their deepest faith and conviction in the only kind of terms that they could understand, the conceptuality of their own context and history, then you can simply say they got it wrong. What they were expecting didn't happen and, if it didn't happen, there is not any reason to think that they were simply wrong in terms of a couple of thousand years, but rather, their understanding of what God had done in Jesus Christ was wrong.

Well, yes and no. They got the core of it right, for they saw in Jesus Christ the embodiment of God. They saw in Jesus Christ the word made flesh. They experienced the presence of God in Jesus Christ, or, as our good Bishop Spong said here, the God presence. That's what the scripture lesson is about in John 14. Jesus says to them, "You know where I'm going," and Phillip doesn't know. He said, "We don't know the way. We don't know where you're going; how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." And, of course, he went on to say, "No one comes to the father but by me." At least that's what John wrote decades after the event because that was what John felt, being a leader of a small persecuted minority movement. John wasn't talking, about whether or not the truth of God is held exclusively in Jesus Christ or that the whole world has to become Christian in order to come into communion with God. That wasn't even in the purview of what the writer was saying; the writer was trying to give witness to that which was the deepest experience of his life. He said, "In Jesus, my God," and so, we have that sixth verse, "I am the way, the truth,

and the life." And rather than some final, dramatic, divine intervention to right all the wrongs, to bring all things to consummation, to damn the wicked and rescue the righteous, I wonder if that wasn't something put on Jesus, but that Jesus himself was simply living out the God life so that those who encountered him could say, as John writes in this gospel, "If you've seen me, you've seen the father. How much plainer can I make it? In my flesh, this is the embodiment of God; this is what God is; this is what God is about; this, my way, is the way. This, my truth, is the truth. This, my life, this is life."

I wonder in this season of Advent if, rather than the passivity that has marked us – waiting for the final act, I wonder if we really took Jesus seriously we might start a contagious consciousness of what, after all, we are called to be, so that it wouldn't simply be for us coming to this table remembering and hoping, remembering what God had done, anticipating what God would do, but rather, coming to this table understanding ourselves becoming the companions of Jesus.

Bishop Spong also said that word, *companion*. I looked it up; he's right. It comes from the Latin - *com*, with; *panis*, with bread. To be a companion literally is with bread. You break bread with your companion, with your friend. You have a meal with your friend. Human relationship and human community is built in the meal. Too bad we have to do it symbolically with a little piece of bread and a little dip in the chalice. Too bad we can't throw out banquet tables and have conviviality. And then, in the midst of the meal, a real meal, experiencing the communion. But, this is all we can do, so we give you just a hint of what it really would be about. But what if, coming to that table was our declaration to be in solidarity with Jesus. That is, solidarity with the way of Jesus, the truth of Jesus, the life of Jesus. What if we really believed that God was in that one, so that that one, in the midst of our history was the pointer for the only hope of history, which is not for some dramatic coming again, but for the likes of us to quit Lolly-gagging through history, and like a David Hartman, saying "I'm going to go and I'm going to live in Israel because I want to experience the God I remember from past action in the present." It might make a difference in our world and, God knows, the world needs transformation.

I mentioned to you Thursday I have been going through the video series of World War II, narrated by Walter Cronkite. I watch those videos of the rise of Hitler. You see the brutality and the violence of the brown shirts. The other night I watched the invasion of Norway and Denmark. I could cry. How can we do that to one another? I remember watching *Schindler's List*, and I thought we ought to get the whole world together and make everyone look at that film. I saw *Private Ryan*, and said if only we could get the whole world to sit down together and then to look at each other across the table and to say we can never, never do that to each other again. The horror of it! The brutality of it! The inhumanity of it! The violence and the destruction that is a denial of everything about the way, the truth, and the life that came into expression in Jesus Christ.

The Dalai Lama, recently in the Golan Heights at a World Interfaith Conference, spoke of the third millennium as the millennium of peace. God knows we need it, rather than our religions fueling the divisiveness and the barriers and the hostility between people. If the world religions, whose core values point to peace, could use all of our energy and all of our efforts and resources to raise the consciousness, the human consciousness of the world to say we've got to stop killing each other, we've got to stop excluding each other, we've got to stop dominating each other, we have to do away with this arrogance, this triumphalism, this tribalism that will tear the human fabric apart.

Think of the marvelous picture of the peaceable kingdom and the prophets, the *shalom*. David Hartman says, "That's not a picture of some future time and place. That's the immediate critique of every moment of history and every structure, economic, social, political, religious. Every structure and every moment of history comes under the critique of that ideal of shalom, of that magnificent picture, that glorious vision when they will not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain."

My God, people, there's something to do! This isn't about some comic strip finality at the end of time. This is about right here and right now, and it's about you and me, companions of Jesus, who is the way and the truth and the life.

References:

Rabbi David Hartman. *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices within Judaism*. Jewish Lights Pub, 2001.