

+Episcopal Arkansas

A Letter from Bishop Benfield

How Will We Respond?

Monday evening, I, along with a number of members of the clergy, attended the service at Temple B'nai Israel to remember the people killed by an anti-Semitic terrorist at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh this past weekend. The crowd was large, the members of the congregation thankful that people outside their own religious circle came in support.

It did not register with me until I walked out of the building in the midst of police officers that it now has to be frightening for our Jewish cousins here in Arkansas to pray in their holy spaces. They can clearly see what evil looks like in this country, the sort of evil that many of their forebears fled in Europe. And, let's face it, the same sort of evil they have had to flee for many generations every time a new pogrom starts in the name of someone else's sense of superiority.

Sadly, we are all beginning to see what evil looks like. Honesty, integrity, and compassion for one's fellow humans are no longer virtues that are even thought about outside the doors of religious houses; way too many political ads and policy statements play to the darkest of human emotions. Instead of Isaiah's call to lower mountains and raise valleys, today's emphasis seems to be on digging valleys even deeper and raising mountains higher. We are not preparing the way of the Lord.

I pray that seeing such evil makes us change how we live. "Thoughts and prayers" are the currency of politicians. What the church needs is a strong witness that evil in the form of racism or bigotry or naked greed is not the currency in which we will trade. We will continue to speak out for the dignity of every human being, for the Christian commitment to see the risen Christ in all people. We must act in consonance with what we pray. Prayer, after all, is essentially our response to God. Thus, to pray is to dare to act.

The service Monday ended with the Mourner's Kaddish, a prayer of praise in the face of death. It is said by the living on behalf of the dead, in that the dead cannot speak the words. I went away wondering how we will pray our prayers—how we will respond to God—on behalf of all among us whom this world fears, ignores, or hates. What actions will we take so that evil itself has no more place to stand on the high mountains?



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