

(The Lighting of the Menorah- Richard Klein)

Isaiah 40:1-11

40:1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

40:2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

40:3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

40:4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

40:5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

40:6 A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

40:7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

40:8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

40:9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

40:10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

40:11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1-8

1:1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

1:2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;

1:3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

1:4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

1:5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

1:6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

1:7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

1:8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Communion Meditation

True Story- a story about a boy named Isaac Schnitzer from Billings, Montana.¹ He is twenty-eight years old now, but in 1993, Isaac was only seven. That was the year something happened to Isaac that he will never forget.

Isaac: My name is Isaac Schnitzer. It was the third night of Chanukah, the night that I liked best. Because on the third night our family gives special gifts to each other... gifts we make ourselves.

I was just a little kid, only seven, but I remember how I had worked long and hard on the gifts I made for my parents. The special Chanukah pillow I sewed for my mom. And the tie-dyed Chanukah boxer shorts I made for my dad.

"These are great gifts," I said to myself as I took wrapping paper, scissors and tape up to my room. In every room of the house, in every window, there were beautiful menorahs. Big ones, small ones, animal ones, and even one that looked like a train. And each one had their candles lit for the third night.

I remember how I stopped and looked at the beautiful lights. But, just as I taped a big blue bow on my mom's package, I heard this crashing sound. Pieces of glass flew around my bedroom and my beautiful menorah, the one with the Ten Commandments behind these two little doors, was in pieces on the floor. A round black rock landed right on my bed.

I stood in the middle of the floor.. stunned. Suddenly, when I realized what had happened, I raced down the stairs, screaming for my mom and dad.

We held hands and as we headed back upstairs. Mom grabbed the phone and called 9-1-1.

The police came immediately. The officer said, "This isn't the first time we've had a hate crime. Unfortunately ugly messages were spray painted out at Indian Reservation. They said awful things about Native Americans. And one African-American family had trouble, too. Last month somebody vandalized their house."

At first I had trouble understanding what the grown-ups were saying. Hey, I was just seven. But then it finally hit me. Like a rock. Somebody threw a rock through my bedroom window, aiming right at my menorah... and the reason they did this... was because we're Jewish!

After the police officer left, my parents talked late into the night. "We've got to do something," Mom said. "We can't let this go."

"What can we do about it?" Dad whispered. "Anything we say might just hurt Isaac. He's the only Jewish kid in school. I don't want it to get any worse for him."

But Mom was determined and like lots of Moms do, she won out. The next day, before the window was fixed, Mom invited the newspaper out to take pictures. A reporter asked us all about Chanukah and how we felt about what happened.

The next day at school wasn't bad at all. All my friends treated me like some kind of hero.

They asked me about the rock and the more I talked about it the bigger it got.

My teacher showed the newspaper to the class. It had a picture of my bedroom in it with Mom standing by the broken window.

"Hate crimes will not be tolerated," my teacher read. "Look right here, the Chief of Police says that this kind of thing has got to stop. People cannot be harassed because they are Jewish."

"Jewish?" "You're Jewish?" "Hey, Isaac, you never said anything about being Jewish?" "What's Jewish?"

"Wait." It was Teresa Handley. She was in my reading group and one of my best friends. I was glad she was the one talking. Until I heard what she said.

"Wait, Isaac. I remember last year in first grade. When we all got to bring to class one gift that we got. You brought a helicopter. But you said you got it for Christmas."

I wanted to die right there. I knew what Teresa was talking about. I brought the helicopter but I didn't want to say it was a Chanukah present. No one else had Chanukah. Only me. I said I got it for Christmas so I wouldn't seem so different from the other kids.

At home, I thought this whole Chanukah thing was over until the phone rang. It was Teresa's mom, Mrs. Hanley, calling our house. And the next thing I knew, Mom was grabbing her car keys and running out the door.

I went over to my Dad who was taking a nap. "Dad, wake up. I've got an idea. Let's take all the menorahs down." My Dad looked shocked.

"Or at least let's get them out of the windows. If they don't see the menorahs, they won't know we're Jewish. Then they won't throw another rock."

My dad got up and hugged me. "Don't worry, Isaac. Don't be scared. We'll straighten this out."

My mom was still not home so dad and I ate dinner together. The house was dark without the menorahs lit. Finally Mom came home.

"Come on, you guys. Let's get going. I have something to show you."

I didn't feel like going anywhere. So I said what the big kids say when they don't want to go out with their parents. "I can't Mom. I have tons of homework."

"You do not. You're only in the second grade. Now get your coat and let's get going."

My dad was worse than me. "Ruthie, it's December and this is Montana. It's freezing out. Isaac's right. Let's stay inside."

But Mom wasn't having any of it. She practically pushed us out the door. And slowly, very slowly, she drove down our street.

"Look," she said. "Look at the windows."

I looked up and I couldn't believe my eyes. In every window, in every single house, there was a picture of a menorah. Big ones, little ones, red ones, blue ones, orange and green ones. They had candles drawn on them with bright yellow flames! I started to count but I stopped at 67. There were hundreds and hundreds more. I couldn't count that high! Everybody in the neighborhood... everybody in the whole town of Billings, Montana had made menorahs and put them in their windows!

"Mom, whose idea was this? Who did this?"

"Everybody did it, all together. But it was Teresa's idea. Your best friend, Teresa, and her mom and dad."

"But they're not even Jewish," I said. "And she never said she was going to do anything like this..."

And then Mom said, **"You know, honey, hate can make a lot of noise. Love and courage are usually quieter. But in the end, its love and courage that are strongest of all."**

All the way home I looked at the menorahs in the windows and all the way home I thought about what my mom said. "Wait here, " I said and I ran into the house right up to my bedroom. I put my menorah in the window and plugged it in. Four lights were shining for the fourth night of Chanukah.

And then I took out my markers and made a sign. "Happy Hanukkah to Everyone in Billings Montana. I love you. From your friend, Isaac Schnitzer."ⁱⁱⁱ

(END)

What we have to understand is that many residents of Billings, MT, are descendent of the Danish Reformed Church. They knew what it was to be persecuted because of their faith.

In Isaiah the Lord says, "Prepare the way of the Lord." And John, the forerunner of Jesus, quotes him. The prophet speaks of a highway in the desert, a path, to bring God's people to an everlasting peace. Mountains made low, and valleys lifted up. Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed to all people. The messenger brings good news or gospel, good tidings.

In Mark's gospel, it reads, "The beginning of the good news..." When we see the world around us, we can see the need for good news, and know that God's peaceable kingdom has not arrived. We know that a Jewish rabbi named Jesus walked the earth to teach us of the kingdom of God, but know while we see glimpses, it is incomplete. We are still wandering through the wilderness, looking for a way through. Jesus was the beginning of the good news, but it is not yet complete.

On Thursday night a few of us attended a prayer vigil hosted by Abel Baptist church to listen and pray for our community and nation particularly for law enforcement and those who experience racial violence and discrimination. The Pastor, Rev. Flemming, and a rep of the NAACP called us to take personal responsibility and to work for justice. Our Clemson police Chief, Pickens County Sherriff, and Clemson University Police chief spoke openly and honestly about the challenges they face while they are working to protect and serve. I was moved when the university police chief set aside his notes, and confessed honestly, "I am hurting tonight..." In one way, we were all confessing the sin of the world, seeking repentance. What I learned is that we all: officers, citizens, and clergy, black, white, orange,

and Jewish, Christian, Muslim, have more in common than not. And we have work to do together, to be messengers of good news, to make a path forward.

Sheryl WuDunn, quoting the prominent Chinese writer Lu Xun, writes, ⁱⁱⁱ"**Hope is like a path in the countryside. At first there is no path but as more and more people walk again and again, a path appears, meaning a solution appears.**"

We follow a God who makes a way, a path, when there appears to be no way. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, may have been the beginning of the good news, but his followers must walk that same path. At the end of the vigil, Deacon Young passed out full size candles asking us to take it home as a symbol and we sang, "This little light of mine" before Rev. Roman prayed us out.

Another prophetic voice once cried out in the wilderness, saying,

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." That was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

We are all called to be like John, preparing the way, walking the path, and inviting others to join us, until the path is well-worn. We are called to be like the families of Billings, Montana, who stood against hate and bigotry in Jesus' name.

Instead of cursing the darkness, we light candles, whether around an advent wreath or a menorah or in prayer vigil. Remember the words of Isaac's mom:

Hate can make a lot of noise. Love and courage are usually more quiet. But in the end its love and courage that are strongest of all.

Laura Smith Conrad
Fort Hill Presbyterian

ⁱ This story appears in its entirety in the award winning children's book, "The Christmas Menorahs: How a Town Fought Hate," by Janice Cohn and Bill Farnsworth

ⁱⁱ Telling adapted from Rabbi Barbara Aiello, Sinagoga Ner Tamid del Sud, Lamezia Terme (Calabria), Italy writes, " And that is the true story of Isaac Schnitzer and his family ... As the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth night of Chanukah approached, more and more menorahs could be seen in the homes throughout Billings. And everyone, Christian, Jew, Muslim, and Bhuddist, learned the true meaning of the holiday. The miracle of Chanukah for Billings, Montana is that the town continued to fight against acts of hatred and when the hate mongers realized that the town stood together, they gave up. They were no longer welcome and the hatred was gone. So from all the way across the ocean in southern Italy we say to Billings, Montana... Thank you. Thank you to a town that said, "Never again will we just accept bigotry and think, Oh well, that's just the way the world works today. Instead we thank you for reminding us that working for religious freedom isn't only an ancient story. We thank you for reminding us that if we are willing, we can be like you because each one of us has it in us to be a Macabbe soldier, too. As you light your Chanukah menorah this year think of our friends in Billings, Montana. Chanukah menorahs all over the world send the same message. They speak of tolerance, acceptance, and appreciation. They light the path toward pride in our traditions and love for our heritage. May they illumine our hearts forever, as we remember the words of Isaac's mom:

Hate can make a lot of noise. Love and courage are usually more quiet. But in the end it's love and courage that are strongest of all."

ⁱⁱⁱ Sheryl Wudunn in *Half a Sky*, written by Wudunn and Nicolas Kristoff.