

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

All Saints Sunday • November 3, 2019

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18 • Psalm 149 • Ephesians 1:11-23 • Luke 6:20-31

Eric Lidji has worked as the director of the Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives in Pittsburgh, part of the Heinz History Center, since 2017.¹ Despite its long title, the center itself is pretty small. Lidji is the director of the program as well as its only permanent staff member. In his first year on the job, Lidji spent most of his time archiving Yiddish theater posters from before the Great Depression and organizing records from small synagogues in the hills of western Pennsylvania, objects that likely felt insignificant to the people who created them but are indispensable to people trying to understand their experience.

Since the mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue last October, Lidji's work has changed dramatically. Instead of hunting for hidden away artifacts that tell the story of generations past, Lidji has begun archiving objects that tell the story of the present generation. Recently, a mother and her young daughter went to Lidji's archives to donate a protest sign. When the daughter asked why they had to give it away, Lidji tried to explain how he preserves things that are historically significant. But the girl's mother simply said, "It's so you can bring your granddaughter to look at it someday."

At first, Lidji's struggle was getting people to see the value in these seemingly insignificant objects that would usually be thrown away or forgotten about. Cardboard signs from a protest. Notes left at a curbside memorial site. Stickers from the upcoming midterm elections. They are just things, of course. But they are also more than that. One of Lidji's most prized objects is a bulletin from a bar mitzvah that happened down the street from the shooting. When the family found out that eleven people had been killed, they decided to stay and finish the bar mitzvah. The bulletin is just a piece of paper, but it's a story of resistance.

Now that the community sees the value of his work, Lidji has a different problem. How can you preserve a seemingly infinite number of stories? As a historian, Lidji knows he only has access to a fraction of people's lives. He wishes that generations past had kept more diaries, taken more pictures, maintained better records. But in his new role chronicling Jewish history as it happens, everything seems worthy of saving. A few days after the shooting, Lidji went to a protest to collect remnants of people's anguish. And surrounded by thousands of people, he was overcome by the depth of grief and the seemingly endless sea of people. He says, "It felt like... archiving the ocean." In the passage of time, there would be some artifacts, some names, some stories that would be lost.

We know that experience of loss. Sometimes we feel that loss because of death. A loved one dies and you realize you'll never have another conversation with them. Sometimes we feel that loss because of time. You travel back to a place that was meaningful to you and realize that everything is different. And sometimes we feel that loss because of distance. You go somewhere new and it feels like you lost a part of yourself along the way. Whatever the reason, the experience is the same. That there's some reality we can't access anymore. It's over. And when we try to explain it to other people, this person, this place, this time that was so meaningful to us, it never captures quite what it was. Trying to capture what it meant feels like "archiving the ocean."

The author of Daniel knew something of that sense of loss, too. About two hundred years before Christ was crucified, Antiochus Epiphanes, the Greek king and ruler in Judea, undertook a campaign to Hellenize the Jews. This meant that Jews were not allowed to observe their Torah rituals, and their Temple was converted into a shrine for Zeus. The Judeans had no rituals, which

¹ Emma Green, "Will Anyone Remember Eleven Dead Jews?" *The Atlantic*, October 25, 2019.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/10/archivist-squirrel-hill/600637/>

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

meant they had no history. They had no future, which meant they had no hope. They couldn't worship properly, which meant that they had no God. And they had no leadership, which meant they had no kingdom.

It's into that historical context that the prophet Daniel speaks. Beasts and kings, the seemingly powerful forces may rise from the earth, he proclaims, but "the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever."

It's a meaningful promise of a better future, but it's more than that. We often make a mistake when we read apocalyptic literature like Daniel. Daniel's first readers may have made a similar mistake. We assume that it is talking about some event off in the future. Something that is going to happen later. When we talk about apocalyptic literature, we assume it's talking about the end of the world. Something for some other generation of people.

But that's not quite right. Apocalyptic literature is really about an unveiling. It's not trying to predict something; it's trying to reveal something. As Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, recently put it, apocalyptic literature "pulls the curtain back and you can really see what's going on."² This is not talking about some event that's going to happen in the future to somebody else. This is talking about something that's happening right now to you.

"The holy ones... shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever." When the tyrants of the world, Antiochus Epiphanes for the Judeans, the Roman Emperor Domitian for the early church, say that you don't have a people or a history or a future or a kingdom, God says, "no." The kingdom is yours already.

So if we take Daniel seriously, if we take apocalyptic literature seriously, it should change the way we think about time. As Eric Lidji reminds us, time keeps us apart. It keeps us from truly knowing one another. We are separated from our ancestors. To understand their lives, we have to rummage through tickets stubs and theater posters and membership lists. Maybe you've had that experience of seeing a picture of a great-great-great relative and, even though you recognize they are a person just like you, maybe they even look like you, we have a hard time imagining life from their perspective. We know their names, we have their stories, but their experience remains lost to us.

And we are separated from our descendants. When that mother in the archives told her daughter that someday she could bring her granddaughter to see the sign, the subtext is that the mother won't be around to explain it to her. The best she can do is pass on a piece of cardboard.

To bridge those gaps, to communicate our experience to our loved ones, to be known by the people we have received our life from and passed it on to, feels almost impossible. "Archiving the ocean."

But in the body of Christ, time is held together. As St. Paul writes in the letter to the Ephesians, the body of Christ fills "all in all." Which is a rather poetic way of saying that there is nothing that exists outside of the body of Christ. No time. No stories. No experiences. No generations. No people. It's all present. It's all there. In the body of Christ, we are no longer separated by death or suffering, by geography or generation.

Every time we come to Christ's table to receive and become Christ's body, we don't simply gather with the people who also happened to show up this morning. And we don't simply gather with other churches who also happen to start worship at 9:30. We gather with all the saints who have come before us and all the saints who will come after us. If you want to picture this in your head, imagine that when you come up to receive communion, there is a line of people stretching from all the first disciples back to you, the people you brought you into the household of God. And

² Justin Welby, "Guest Speakers: Justin Welby," Christ Church London, November 18, 2018, <https://christchurchlondon.org/talk/justin-welby/>

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

behind you is a line of everyone who will come after you, who will be brought into nearer communion with God through your work and witness. Even when we are by ourselves, we are never alone.

So the Eucharist is God's way of pulling back the curtain, as it were. Of showing us what is really true. That even when you live under the reign of Epiphanes or Domitian or any other of the world's tyrants, God says that, "we shall receive the kingdom and possess it forever." We have a home, we have a purpose, and, perhaps most important, we have a people.

In a world that wants to pull us apart, the body of Christ holds time, creation, and all of us together. All is present. Nothing is lost.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor