

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Reflection at Temple Beth Rishon • January 4, 2020

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Joseph Schattauer Paillé, and I am the pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Wyckoff. I want to begin by thanking Beni, Ziona, Vadim, and Michael for the invitation to speak here tonight. It is always an honor and a privilege to be together.

My denomination takes its name from an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther who famously (and perhaps apocryphally) posted a list of 95 Theses to a church door in 1517, sparking the Reformation in the process. Thesis number one posited that the entire Christian life is one of repentance. In Hebrew, *t'shuwab*. To repent simply means to turn around. To go another way. We repent of our sins. We repent from all that draws us from God and God's people. And we have also had to repent for the errors of our ancestors, including Luther himself. In 1543, three years before his death, Luther wrote a tract entitled "The Jews and Their Lies." Frustrated by Jews' unwillingness to convert to Christianity, Luther began advocating many blatantly anti-Semitic actions.

It is tempting for many Christians to write off such anti-Semitism as an outlier, a few writings that never amounted to much from the end of an otherwise respectable career. But we know that's not true. When the National Socialists went looking for a theological rationale for their anti-Semitism some four hundred years later, they didn't have to look very hard or very far. All Christians bear responsibility for repenting of anti-Semitism, but Christians who call the Lutheran expression of the faith home bear a unique responsibility for repenting of its evils.

It should be self-evident that anti-Semitism is morally wrong. You don't need me to tell you that. But it might be helpful to understand why, from a Christian point of view, anti-Semitism is so theologically detestable.

We believe that we worship the same God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. One of our core shared theological beliefs is that God's covenants, God's promises, are never revoked. They are permanent. The covenant God made with Abraham didn't erase the covenant God made with Noah. The covenant God made with David didn't erase the covenant God made with Moses. And as Christians, we believe that the covenant God made with all creation in Jesus Christ does not erase any of God's prior covenants with the Jewish people.

When God made a covenant with Abraham, what kind of covenant was it? "An everlasting covenant." Anti-Semitism says you can't believe that. When God told Moses how the people would be liberated from slavery, what did God promise? "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God." Anti-Semitism says you can't trust that. And most important, when God says that you have inherent dignity and worth as a person that no one can ever take away from you because you are made in the image of God. *B'tzelem Elohim*. Anti-Semitism says you can't trust that either. Anti-Semitism is wrong not only because it traffics in hatred, but also because it assumes that you can't trust God's promises.

But I am not here tonight simply to repent. I am also here tonight to make you a promise. Because it is not good enough to simply not be anti-Semitic. Your Christian neighbors need to redouble their efforts in fighting anti-Semitism. Because the worst evils of anti-Semitism have been enabled by people who had misgivings but stayed quiet instead of speaking out.

In the 1930s, Martin Niemöller was a Lutheran pastor just like me serving a parish in Germany. And when the Nazi government first came into power, Niemöller did nothing. He thought things would calm down. He thought he had more time. And then he realized he didn't. Niemöller became an outspoken critic of anti-Semitism, but only after trying to compromise with it for years. After the spending seven years seven years in a concentration camp, Niemöller famously wrote:

"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

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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.”

My promise to you is that we will do better than our ancestors. While we can never undo the harm our ancestors have done, we will repent of their old ways and not repeat their same mistakes. We will recommit ourselves to building a more just, equitable, and accepting world for all of God’s children. And second, we will speak out. If someone wants to hate you, they will have to hate us, too. If someone wants to hurt you, they will have to hurt us, too. And if someone wants to come for you, they will have to come for us, too. There will always be someone here to speak for you.

May the design of God’s great love shine on the waste of our wraths and sorrows. And give peace in our world, peace in our nation, peace in our homes, and peace in our hearts. Amen.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor