



Kristallnacht: a homily¹

dc 45.1-5

Yesterday and today, November 9-10, is the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, “Night of Broken Glass.” In the course of these two days, at a time when the nation of Germany was experiencing an unparalleled economic boom, hundreds of teams of Nazi thugs spread across the country. Some broke into dozens of Jewish hospitals, attacking patients, including children, and marching them half naked and barefoot into the night over the broken glass of hospital windows. Hundreds of synagogues—their stained glass windows telling the history of the Jewish people, shattered—were burned to the ground while fire departments looked on passively, haughtily, and gleefully. Other teams of political operatives broke into thousands of Jewish homes and businesses, shattering windows needed for protection for the coming winter and ransacking and looting possessions and inventories while terrorizing the inhabitants within. Hundreds were murdered. Many more hundreds, unable to endure the hate of others and their own hopelessness, committed suicide, many jumping out of the glassless windows of their second, third, fourth floor apartments.

Those of us who are a little older will remember the famous commentator, Paul Harvey, who would tell us “the rest of the story.”

Not a single individual was ever arrested for the atrocities committed during these vicious rampages, while some thirty thousand Jewish men were arrested and sent to the first of what would later become dozens of concentration camps. Consistent with Joseph Goebbels’ openly stated doctrine—“If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come

to believe it... It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State”—consistent with this doctrine news sources that attempted to accurately report and lobby for accountability for the events of Kristallnacht were attacked as *Lügenpresse*, “fake news.”

Thus, many German citizens, including, shamefully, a majority of German Christians, remained willfully ignorant, refusing to see what was plain to see right in front of their faces. One such citizen, Peter Fritzsche, reported, “Today, the morning after, I watched my fellow passengers on the train. Only a few people look up and out the window to see the burning synagogues.”

The economy was booming.

Over the following months, Jews, by the tens of thousands, vainly sought to leave Germany. Finding it nearly impossible to obtain visas in or be granted asylum status by dozens of countries, including the United States, many thousands of Jewish parents, desperate to save their children, became separated from those beloved children as they sent some 50,000 of them, unaccompanied, into strange and unwelcoming nations. Here, often, the children, having their single backpack of meager possessions confiscated, found themselves locked in cold metal cages for months with nothing but a thin mattress under them and a thin blanket over them. Here, they waited; waited to be placed in a strange new home, a new home where strange care-providers could not even understand their language, could not understand or comfort them when they awoke and wept in the middle of the night wondering when they might again see their beloved papa and mama.

Millions of these beloved parents, of course, never again held their babies in their arms or whispered ‘I love you’ in their ears. Millions were never seen again, except as tiny specks of ash floating in the sky to land on German towns and villages as snow.

That’s the rest of the story. A piece of the world we have inherited.

WHO... WILL... WE... BE? What will history have to say about us?

My mind has been drawn to this night of infamy and its aftermath, I suppose, because of the dramatic rise in anti-Semitic hate crimes committed in the United States over the past two years, including, a near 90% increase in vandalism against Jewish property, and, of course, the recent tragic attack against Jewish worshippers in a Pittsburgh synagogue, the deadliest attack on Jews in American history.² No doubt, children locked in cages, asylum seekers demonized and scapegoated, and the shameless masquerade of lies for truth, have contributed to my mind's turning toward the very real and very dark history of our planet, a history that began with the murder of a younger brother at the hands of his elder brother.

A century before these events, the great English novelist, Charles Dickens, wrote one the most famous opening lines in all of English literature

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way....”

We might be forgiven for feeling that much the same could be written about our own day. It seems so full of potential—both for good and for evil. We know that, finally, good will prevail, but, it doesn't seem such a stretch to feel that in the intervening years evil will have its say and its sway. No doubt, it will often do so with a claim of inevitability and an arrogant swagger. “There is none who dares molest or make afraid,” boasts evil's greatest champion—think of it, so upside down is he and his that he and they consider anyone who dares challenge their perversion as molesters!

But however dooming evil's boasts, or however many its temporary victories, we need not succumb to evil's blasphemy. A millennia and half before Dickens penned his inspired opening line, the apostle Paul assured the beleaguered saints of Galatia that the Lord Jesus Christ, “gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world...” (Gal. 1.⁴). The deliverance of which Paul writes certainly encompasses our ultimate entrance into a far, far

better and eternal inheritance through the redeeming power of the atonement and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, it seems clear from Paul's writings that his assurance of deliverance includes a deliverance from the evil that is present in this world in the here and in the now. Through Jesus Christ we can be delivered in the here and now from the evils of our age, no matter their number or the extent of their world dominance.

Jesus has many means at his disposal by which he can deliver us from our present evil age. None of these means, however, are greater than the magnificence of his own character and the example that it shines into our darkened world and into our yearning souls.

I recently had the opportunity to teach a class of dedicated seminary students. The text for the day was Doctrine and Covenants 45.1-15. Inasmuch as there are principles here that, I think, address how the Savior can deliver us from our present evil age and its blasphemies, I would like to spend a moment examining these verses.

Section 45 begins with a trice repeated invitation to "hearken."

First, the audience.

"Hearken, O ye people of my church."

Second, the speaker, the one to whom we are to hearken.

"Harken... to him who laid the foundation of the earth, who made the heavens and all the hosts thereof, and by whom all things were made which live, and move, and have a being."

Third, the reason we are to hearken.

"Hearken... lest death shall overtake you; in an hour when ye think not the summer shall be past, and the harvest ended, and your souls not saved."

No doubt, the God of heaven has many things to which he would have us "hearken." All of them

are important. But, at least in the context of section 45, it seems that there is one thing to which we should hearken above all other things.

“Listen,” pleads Jesus, “to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him”

So, here are the words of the Lord, the words the section has had in mind as it has admonished us to “hearken.”

“Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin,
in whom thou wast well pleased;
behold the blood of thy Son which was shed,
the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified;
wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name,
that they may come unto me and have everlasting life” (DC 45.⁴⁻⁵).

This plea, representing the Savior’s advocacy for us, if heard, will surely heal each of us individually. This is our first response and our common focus as we consider the unbounding generosity that these divine words reveal. But such gracious advocacy is intended to work even greater miracles. It also has the power to reshape our individual lives. It has the power to reshape society. It has the power to deliver us from the present evil age.

I recently read the complaint of one who thought of themselves as Christian. “People think we’re not good people if we don’t feel sorry for the poor and immigrants and Syrian refugees. But I am a good person and I don’t feel sorry for them.” Another, perhaps more succinctly announced “I am told that I should feel sorry for them. But I don’t *want* to feel sorry for them.”

These individuals went on to confess their intention to face forward, looking upward at those above them on the socio-economic ladder, and striving for a similarly lofty status, rather than looking backward at the vulnerable who were “behind them in the line.”

As I contemplated such attitudes, I thought of Jesus’ advocacy. I wondered if such individuals had ever heard Jesus praying for them. I wondered if they knew what it meant, what it called

them to be and do.

Mostly, I wanted to ask them, “Which way does Jesus face?”

Where would I be if he had not turned around to look behind and below him. Who would I be if he had not searched me out behind him and felt compassion for me in my lowly state?

“I cannot say the smallest part that I feel.... Who could have supposed that God would have been so merciful” (See Alma 26.¹⁶⁻¹⁷).

But such personal gratitude for such divine largesse is not enough. The Savior’s invitations are myriad.

“Come, follow me” (Luke 18.22).

“Love one another; as I have loved you” (John 13.³⁴).

“Be ye therefore perfect [or, as Luke has it, “Be ye merciful”], even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect [or “merciful”] (Matthew 5.⁴⁸ and Luke 6.³⁶).

“Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27.²⁷).

We can legitimately acknowledge the difficulty of such lofty invitations, but must never deny their reality, or the Lord’s serious intention that we strive after them.

The Lord Jesus loved us by and because he looked at us, searched for us, behind and below him. We faced backwards. We would be nowhere without his generosity. His largess is for us personal. It is intended to heal us, individually.

But then it is expected that we will follow his example. We will go out and do as he has done. We will turn backwards and search out those who may in some way be behind and below us.

And, having found them, we will be there for them as advocates in an uncaring, vicious, and violent world.

One wonders what might have happened on Kristallnacht, had those for who Jesus had advocated acted as bold advocates for German Jews.

We will never know, for they failed in their calling to be a “light unto the world” and thus lighten the dark night of Kristallnacht.

If we see in Jesus’ backward turn and hear in the Savior’s gracious words of advocacy only his compassion and advocacy for us, we have not truly “hearkened” unto him. If we do not hear in his advocacy for us a call to become, ourselves, advocates for the vulnerable behind us, we have missed something vital. If we do not turn backward and become advocates for the poor, the elderly, the orphaned, the foreign, the sick, the prisoner, the religious minority, and others vulnerable in a variety of ways, we are not his disciples. We become as salt that hath lost its savor. We remain subjects of this present evil world.

“And remember in all things the poor [economically poor, yes, but those poor in other ways as well—the orphan is “poor” in that they are destitute of a loving parent] and the needy, the sick and the afflicted, for he that doeth not these things, the same is not my disciple” (DC 52.⁴⁰).

“Therefore, if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion, according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment” (DC 104.¹⁸).

“But inasmuch as they keep not my commandments, and hearken not to observe all my words, the kingdoms of the world shall prevail against them. For they were set to be a light unto the world, and to be the saviors of men; And inasmuch as they are not the saviors [advocates in the broadest sense of the word] of men, they are as salt that has lost its savor, and is thenceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men” (103.⁸⁻¹⁰).

Indeed, if we do not hearken to and imitate the advocacy of the Savior, we stand opposed to the very God of heaven and his purposes.

“For the oppression of the poor,
for the sighing of the needy,
now will I arise, saith the Lord;
I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him. (Psalm 12.⁵)

But, if, on the other hand, we hearken to the Savior’s gracious words of advocacy and respond by becoming, ourselves, advocates, the promises and glories are immeasurable. Through such advocacy we truly become citizens of Zion, city of God

“And the Lord called his people ZION, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7.¹⁸)

But we only become citizens of such a glorious inheritance in relation to there being other citizens. Through our advocacy for “those behind and below us” we bring them into the city with us.

Oh, what privileges and glories await those who respond to the Savior’s call for advocacy. We become partners with God in one of his greatest hopes, both for us and for this present evil world.

“And also that you might be honored in laying the foundation,
and in bearing record of the land upon which the Zion of God shall stand;
and also that a feast of fat things might be prepared for the poor;
yea, a feast of fat things,
of wine on the lees well refined,
that the earth may know that the mouths of the prophets shall not fail;
Yea, a supper of the house of the Lord, well prepared,
unto which all nations shall be invited.
First, the rich and the learned,

the wise and the noble;
And after that cometh the day of my power;
then shall the poor, the lame, and the blind, and the deaf,
come in unto the marriage of the Lamb,
and partake of the supper of the Lord,
prepared for the great day to come” (DC 58.⁷⁻¹¹).

May we all become the kind of advocates in the lives of others that Jesus was in ours. By doing so, we can exterminate such nights as Kristallnacht. By doing so we can deliver the world from this present evil age. By doing so we can help establish the Zion of God, which dwells in the bosom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Let us, then, advocate and work as he advocates and as he works to “appoint unto them that mourn beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness...” (Isaiah 61.³)

¹ Unlike most of my homilies, which are written only, this one was delivered on November 10th at an adult session of stake conference.

² “The Anti-Defamation League has tracked anti-Semitic incidents since 1979, drawing on reports from victims, police and news publications. The worst year was 1994, with 2,066 incidents. By 2013, the total fell to 751. It has been rising ever since, with the biggest all-time annual jump coming last year [2017], when the tally climbed 57% to 1,986.

“The majority of those incidents were harassment, which rose 41% to 1,015 incidents, including 163 bomb threats against Jewish community centers and synagogues. Vandalism rose 86% to 952 cases.”