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## *What Endures?*

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*Isaiah 40:1-8*

We don't usually hold memorial services on Sunday morning, but All Saints Day comes close. We gather and remember those who have gone before us, we read their names, we give thanks to God for their lives, and we proclaim that death is no match for the power of God's love.

Given all that has happened in our nation in recent days, it feels as if a memorial service this morning might be appropriate. The murders of 11 Jews as they worshipped in Pittsburgh in their synagogue last week and two African-Americans at a grocery in Louisville, as they shopped - both by white extremists - call us to national grief.

When we gather for a memorial service we want to do three things. First, we want to name the sorrow felt by those whose loved one is now gone. Second, we want to tell the story of the person's life. Third, to declare a word of hope about the love of

God that remains strong from everlasting to everlasting: the love that endures even in the face of death.

Sometimes a memorial service leans more in one direction or another. When the life of a young person has been cut short, for instance, and there are no memories of a long, full life, giving voice to the anguish of the family is important. I've led memorial services for infants and young children, and grief is about all there is, tempered by a touch of gratitude, even for the short life of a child.

Ten days ago the world was introduced to little Amal Hussain, the seven year-old whose emaciated body has come to incarnate the awful tragedy of the war in Yemen, where thousands are at risk of starvation. Now Amal – whose name in Arabic means *hope* – has died. The anguish of her parents runs deep. In an interview her mother said, simply, “My heart is broken.”

Children so often bear the brunt of the violence of adults. They don't have a stake in the conflicts fueled by the fear or hatred or ambition of adults. Children don't take sides in those conflicts. Yet, they're very much on the receiving end of the fights between adults.

Perhaps death like that seems distant and unconnected to us. But we are not innocent when our policies and our weapons are used to inflict violence on the people, *the children*, of other lands.

And closer to home, we are not innocent when we refuse to consider ways to curb the ease with which people can acquire the guns that kill nearly 100 people every day in America.

And we are not innocent when we do nothing to stem the growing racism and violence that sometimes lead to death for people of color or differing faith traditions or other nationalities.

A rabbi in New York City this past week sent an email to his congregants and I received a copy of it. The rabbi said he views the Central Americans heading toward our southern border to seek asylum as no different from the Jews who sought asylum here in the 1930s when they faced death in an anti-Semitic Germany. We turned them away from our shores then; have we not learned anything in the ensuing years?

Every anti-Semitic assault in America is an attack on all of us, and every racist assault is an attack on the values at the heart of our democracy. What makes us to be a good people is shattered by those attacks. All of us are affected by them. We cannot let them go unanswered. We cannot let vitriol carry the day.

That's why so many came together last Sunday afternoon at synagogues across the country, including Temple Israel here in Minneapolis. The 1500 people who gathered there wept together in sorrow for the senseless loss of human life. The service began in silence, and then worked its way through the Hebrew Scriptures: the voice of Job, the lament of the psalmists, the cry of the prophets.

It was important for the city's Jews to gather, and they did, from all three major branches of Judaism. Rabbi Zimmerman noted that the Reform and Orthodox and Conservative movements of American Judaism rarely meet together, but they did last Sunday. They came to lift their collective voices in an outpouring of anguish, and in memory of their common history: *it had happened again.*

It was important that our Jewish neighbors not be alone in their grief. Hundreds of people from other faith communities and people of goodwill came, as did our two U.S. senators, and other elected officials and candidates from both parties. I was grateful to see so many Westminster members there. We came, first of all, to weep with them. It was a memorial service, and it did not paper over the heavy sorrow.

But when people of faith gather for a memorial service there is more at work than grief. Healing begins even in the midst of the anguish. We felt and saw that last Sunday at Temple Israel. As we named our sadness and shed our tears and lifted our lament, something else began to emerge.

The cathartic moment came when we stood to hear the names read aloud. The 11 Jews killed in Pittsburgh called to us, called to those assembled in that synagogue and in others across the country, summoning us to shared purpose, to renewed commitment to what this country stands for. Their deaths and those of the two Black Americans in Louisville would not be in vain if we could find our way back to the things that bring hope,

the things that make us a resilient people, the things that endure. We left that service on Sunday resolved to change our communities and our nation, to work for reconciliation and renewal within the human family. We don't have to live like this.

"The grass withers, the flower fades," the prophet Isaiah says, "But the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

That word called out to us last Sunday at Temple Israel. It was a defiant word that would not let hope be stifled, would not let us be cut off from the promise of light in the darkness. By the end of the service the entire sanctuary was singing and dancing and holding on to one another. The atmosphere in the room had shifted from despair and defeat to confidence, confidence that there are things that endure, that are stronger than hate, more powerful even than death itself.

We saw that same hope two nights ago, many of us. We went back to Temple Israel. It was the first Shabbat service in synagogues across the country since the shooting in Pittsburgh. At Shir Tikvah in south Minneapolis people came from the community and formed a circle of candles around the building as protection to worshippers and to push back the darkness. At the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh the building was closed still, but the faithful and their allies gathered anyway, outside to sing and pray and share the light of God, the light that endures.

And at Temple Israel on Friday the Twin Cities Justice Choir, including many from Westminster, sang as worshippers entered

the building. We sang of resilience and strength, of courage and working for justice, of resistance against division and hatred. As the congregation that had been gathered there listening to us moved into the sanctuary for Shabbat service, we sang “We Shall Overcome,” and they sang it, as well. With people of faith and good will across the land, we sang of things that endure, of hope, of community, of love.

At the conclusion of Shabbat services worshippers always recite the Kaddish, the Mourner’s Prayer. We did that at Temple on Friday. It’s the custom before reciting Kaddish to read the names of those in the congregation who have died recently, as well as the names of those who died one year ago. This Shabbat they added 11 more names, those who died in the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

The Mourner’s Prayer, the Kaddish, recited in memory of the dead, surprisingly, does not mention death. It speaks, rather, of things that endure. It’s a prayer dedicated to the praise of God, and it concludes with this line: “May God who makes peace in the heavens make peace for us and for all Israel.”

And with that last line, the worshippers at Temple Israel lifted their hearts in song and rhythmic clapping and warm embraces as they headed out into the night.

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

Our faith as Christians is built upon the claim that God's love, as we know it in Jesus Christ, endures. The church bears that affirmation in its very life – not only here, but as we go out into the world to be church wherever we find ourselves. God's love endures.

So, at every memorial service, we name the promise again: *the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...*

On All Saints Sunday as we read the names of those who have died, we say it again: *weeping may tarry for the night but joy comes with the morning...*

And as our nation passes through this time of turmoil and distress we say it again: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelled in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.*

The things that endure, *the things that endure*, draw us to this table today, to this memorial table, where we eat the bread and drink the cup. In doing so we remember Jesus, hung by injustice and malice on a tree, and left there to die.

But we do not linger long in despair at the table. Instead, as we do at every memorial service, we rejoice in the life that conquers death. In the life that overcomes all that would stand in the way of God's grace and mercy and love.

We may have come grimly to worship today, through the rain and the grayness of the world, struggling through the anxious shadows of our time, but we can go forth in joy, because God is Lord – and *if God is Lord of heaven and earth, how can we keep from singing?*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.