

“Tree of Life and Sea of Glass”  
 Proper 26B (All Saints Sunday; November 4, 2018)  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put *our* hand on *someone's* shoulder, and let it matter. Amen.<<

The Garden of Stones memorial at the Cornell Plantations is an exhibit on loan indefinitely from the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City.<sup>1</sup> The Garden is comprised of four, large granite stones ranging in weight from four to eight tons. One of those stones is in tact. The other three have a fire-seared hole bored through their middles, and growing out of each hole is a dwarf chestnut oak tree. The plantations exhibit is a smaller version of the exhibition in New York. There are eighteen granite stones and dwarf chestnut oak trees at the Museum of Jewish Heritage.

The artist who designed the stones and trees piece is Andy Goldsworthy, a professor at Cornell in the early 2000s. According to the plantations' website, Goldsworthy wanted to create a memorial for the victims of the Holocaust. He chose granite stones, because, in his words, they “have had a long and, at times, violent past.” “The stones, formed by fire within the earth, traveled up to the surface where they were carried and worn down by glaciers, moved by New England farmers, and trucked to New York City and Ithaca.” Dwarf chestnut oaks were selected to fill the hollowed-out cores of the boulders, because they can live for hundreds of years. They grow to about 10 feet, but their roots will eventually fuse to the stone, and work their way down through the open cores and into the ground below. Goldsworthy, the artist, said, “The stones are not mere containers. ... The partnership between tree and stone will be stronger for the tree having grown from the stone, rather than being stuck in it.” “The exhibit,” said the director of the plantations, “serves as a very powerful symbol of how art and nature can be combined to remind us of our common humanity and our often-difficult history.”

Sue and I visited The Garden of Stones this week. It was muddy but beautiful. The most powerful thing for me after reading up on how the exhibit came to be is the realization that it was designed to blend violence and life: stones violently forged in fire, worn down by glaciers, fire-seared holes bored into their centers to become anchors for fragile dwarf chestnut oak saplings, whose roots will eventually fuse to the rock so they can flourish for centuries to come.

Many of us here today, I'm sure, have been to holocaust memorials. The New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston was the first I ever visited. That memorial stands adjacent to Quincy Market in downtown Boston. It has six glass towers anchored in black granite. Six, for the six million Jews killed; six, for the six main death camps; and six, for the six years between 1939 and 1945 when most of the victims perished. Each tower has 22 glass panels; and inscribed on each are 17,280 seven-digit numbers - the very numbers tattooed onto the arms of concentration camp prisoners. There are millions of numbers on those glass towers. At night they are illuminated by lights. The New England memorial includes the well-known quote by Rev. Martin Niemoller: “They came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cornellbotanicgardens.org/our-gardens/arboretum/goldsworthy/creation>

wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up."

When author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel saw the New England memorial he said this: "Look at these towers, passerby, and try to imagine what they really mean - what they symbolize - what they evoke. They evoke an era of incommensurate darkness, an era in history when civilization lost its humanity and humanity its soul . . . . We must look at these towers of memory and say to ourselves, No one should ever deprive a human being of [their] right to dignity. No one should ever deprive anyone of [their] right to be a sovereign human being. No one should ever speak again about racial superiority . . . ." "We cannot give evil another chance."

On Tuesday, CNN interviewed 80-year-old Judah Samet, a holocaust survivor.<sup>2</sup> Samet was 6 years old "when he watched as a Nazi soldier put a gun to his mother's head, simply because she spoke without being spoken to while on a train headed to Auschwitz." Last Saturday, Samet was "was running four minutes" late when he arrived at his synagogue - the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. When he arrived, he heard the gunshots inside, and saw the face of the shooter. "It just never ends," said a dejected Samet in the CNN interview. "I[t] never [feels] completely safe for Jews. It's in the DNA. Not just America's DNA but the world's." Moshe Taube, a 91-year-old Holocaust survivor said of last Saturday's shooting:<sup>3</sup> "This kind of evil makes me think of the Holocaust and how people can be so cruel, that there is so much evil in the world, still."

Inscribed into the pathway of the granite and glass memorial in Boston is the word "Remember." It's the same word that ran through my mind looking at the boulders and trees in The Garden of Stones: *remember*. The shooting last week caused many of our Jewish siblings to *remember* the darkest days of the twentieth century. This week on Ho Plaza, 150 Cornellians - some of them from the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh - gathered to *remember* the victims. One graduate student, Chad Rosenbloom, lit eleven remembrance candles, two of them for his cousins, Cecil and David Rosenthal. This is a week to *remember*. Yesterday, several of us from this church joined dozens of others from communities of faith in Ithaca in a solidarity march to *remember* the plight of the world's migrants and refugees, and to *remember* that Jesus was a migrant.

The word "remember" is our theme on All Saints Sunday - the first Sunday after Reformation Sunday on the church calendar. During the Lord's Supper, we will speak the words: *Do this in remembrance of me*. On this day, we *remember* the host of that first communion meal; and we *remember* those who've passed on. We light candles to *remember* them. We say their names, and ring a bell in their honor. This year we've added the eleven names from the Tree of Life Congregation. Each name on the list is organized alphabetically; but this year, they're organized alphabetically by the *first* name. There's beautiful theology behind this decision - theology that comes from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah in today's Old Testament reading. To a people fearful that their time in exile meant that God had forgotten them, the prophet offers

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[https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/30/us/holocaust-survivor-pittsburgh/index.html?utm\\_term=link&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_content=2018-11-03T10%3A01%3A05&utm\\_source=twCNN](https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/30/us/holocaust-survivor-pittsburgh/index.html?utm_term=link&utm_medium=social&utm_content=2018-11-03T10%3A01%3A05&utm_source=twCNN)

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/29/us/anti-semitism-attacks.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer>

reassuring words. Isaiah likens God to a mother, nursing her beloved child, and says - speaking for God - I will never forget you. The Hebrew grammar is the strongest negative construction in the language: I will never, ever, under any circumstances, forget you. I have inscribed you, says God, onto the palms of my hands. This is tattoo language. The language of permanence - like a name etched into stone, like tree roots fused to granite, like Holocaust memorials. The names - the *first* names (and, I think, the serial numbers of every Holocaust victim) - the names, the numbers of every person are inked, like tattoos, onto God's hands. The God, who elsewhere in the prophets, opens wide her tattooed hands, and says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I will always be faithful to you." I will never forget you. Reading names on All Saints Sunday is a way we live into this beautiful theology - a way we *remember* those in our midst who've passed into the loving, tattooed hands of God - a God, who always *remembers* us.

But today is also a day to *remember*, and to draw out from scripture, some of its most hopeful promises - promises not just for those who've passed into God's hands, nor just for us sitting here; but promises for the whole of humanity, and especially for our grieving siblings in the Jewish faith. It's a week to *remember* yet again that Christianity's roots are anchored - like dwarf chestnut oak tree roots - to the granite stone of Judaism. We heard three epistle readings today - three readings from the New Testament letters. The first from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. There Paul the Rabbi - Paul, who elsewhere in his letters says he's a Pharisee, a Hebrew of Hebrew, a strictly observant Jew - *remembers* for his readers the eternal promises God has made to the ancient people of Israel. "All Israel" will be saved, writes Paul. It's an inclusive "all." *All* are held dear in the memory of God. In the reading from First Corinthians, Rabbi Paul reaches back to the first human being in the Bible - the first human in Jewish tradition - Adam, and his eating of forbidden fruit, which, as the story goes, brought death into the world. "As all die in Adam," writes Paul, so "all will be made alive in Christ." Paul uses Greek parallelism to make this point: ten words in Greek; five in each parallel phrase. Translated literally it reads: "In Adam all die. In Christ all will live." Paul the Rabbi becomes Paul the pastor in passages such as these, offering hope and consolation to those who pass into the tattooed hands of God. And today's final reading from Revelation - with its picturesque and artistic language - offers a vision of the future, anchored in Jewish roots. Those who've passed away stand beside a sea of glass - a symbol of peace - and sing the song of Moses: a song of salvation sung when the Israelites were freed from bondage.

We *remember* these promises today - that "all Israel" will be saved, that all who die will be raised, that all will be at peace singing a song of salvation - as we *remember* names, and as we *remember* victims from a week ago, and as we *remember* past atrocities - we *remember*, because in remembering we learn compassion; in remembering we learn the heart of God with her outstretched arms and tattooed hands. To *remember* is to offer a counter narrative to hate speech; a counter narrative to the gaslighting and the fear-mongering, the manipulation, the lying, the *othering* of human beings that have become part of our daily political discourse. To *remember* is to cull out those glimmers of compassion in one of our darkest weeks; it's to look for those tattooed hands of God at work in our world. I think we saw them at work in the actions of the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh. We *remember* today that Muslim community, which raised over \$70,000 for the families of victims at the Tree of Life synagogue. In the words of the Imam: "Money should not be an issue [for you right now] to pay for funerals. This is a time to mourn. So, the Muslim community has come together to support you. We

just want to know what you need,” he said. “If it’s people outside your next service protecting you, let us know. We’ll be there. If you want someone to go with you to the grocery store so you feel safe, we’ll be there. These were the same offers made to the Muslim community after the election,” he said, “and the same offers made after 9-11. So, we’re just repaying the favor.”

And we *remember* this week the doctors at Allegheny General Hospital, who were the tattooed hands of God that saved the life of Robert Bowers, the Pittsburgh shooter.<sup>4</sup> Several of the doctors are Jewish, including Dr. Jeff Cohen, a member of the Tree of Life Congregation, and two of the lead people who treated Bowers as he raged aloud against Jews. Dr. Cohen remembered thinking that Bowers is “just a guy. People say, he’s evil,” said Cohen. “But he’s some mother’s son. And how did he get from that to where he is today? ... [Many on the surgical team that saved Bowers’ life] are Jewish,” said Cohen. “And they’re heroes. [We all looked into Bowers’ eyes, he said. He was] like a lot of other people that come [to the hospital]. They’re scared. They’re confused. They don’t quite understand it. ... [M]y job,” said Cohen, “[wasn’t] to judge him. ... My job [was] to take care of him.”

And we *remember* this week the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, which on Friday printed words in Hebrew from the Mourners’ Kaddish Prayer on its front page to honor the victims. David Shribman, the Executive Editor, wrote that the decision to print in Hebrew was to give words to those who reacted to the shooting with the phrase “there are no words.”<sup>5</sup>

And we *remember* today those tattooed hands of God extended in blessing over a marriage that occurred at the same time as the shooting. It was a traditional Jewish wedding that took place not far from the Tree of Life Congregation.<sup>6</sup> It was our act of “defiance,” said the groom. “[O]ur wedding,” he wrote on Friday, “was held under the explicit threat of anti-Semitic violence. About two months prior, a group of online anti-Semites ... had published [the] date and location [of the wedding,] and threatened to crash the celebration. ... This is the duality of modern Jewish life: We are tasked with maintaining a beautiful and ancient tradition in the face of the knowledge that some people want to kill us for doing so. Every joyful Jewish event operates with this understanding humming in the background. ... [Our] wedding went ahead as planned. We stood under the chuppah and exchanged rings; we broke the glass and were hoisted up on chairs and danced the hora. This was, to my mind, the best way we could honor the 11 victims in Pittsburgh: to show that Jewish life goes on in the face of those who want it to cease ... .”

... We *remember* today the victims. We *remember* today the saints in our midst who’ve passed on. We *remember* those compassionate words from scripture about all Israel being saved, about all dying and rising, about all standing beside a sea of glass. And we *remember* those tattooed hands of God - tattooed with the names of every person - hands that reach out to embrace and bless both the living and the dead. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://triblive.com/local/allegheny/14226879-74/pittsburgh-doctor-comes-face-to-face-with-suspect-hes-a-very-lost-man>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.post-gazette.com/local/city/2018/11/02/pittsburgh-post-gazette-front-page-newspaper-kaddish-mourners-prayer/stories/201811020126>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/11/2/18051900/pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting-anti-semitism-wedding>