

My wife and I have already been with you almost 3 years. And when I serve a church, there are certain things that I feel must be said at some point. Today is one of those days. You probably will not hear this again in a sermon from me. So I am glad that you are here on this beautiful Spring day.

Before I say anything else I need to ask two key questions: Here they are. 1) Do we want to be the “good guys?” Do we want to be known as Christians by our love? Are we in agreement that we want to be a force for good in the world? And 2) Does it matter what we believe? I will try to answer that for us. YES, it matters what we believe. Why? Because, almost everything that we do comes from our beliefs about life. Why do we do the things we do, and not do other things? Usually because we have certain beliefs about life, and these beliefs direct our behavior. So, one last thought, it matters what we believe, because those beliefs will have a bearing on how we behave, and whether we can then be the good guys or not.

Now, just a quick pause for something else: How many of you have a little pocket calendar in your purse? Does anyone have one of those little calendars to keep track of everything? If so, please check a date for me: April 11. Does it say anything, pre-printed in your little book? Check for a few seconds. Anyone? We will get back to that. But first, this...

Something happened to me 39 years ago this week. I was in Germany with a group from college, and we were in Bayern (Bavaria) near München and Augsburg. We would take these trips each day. We walk to the train station, and we go

somewhere. Well, one rare sunny day in Germany we took the train to a place called Dachau. I had no idea what was there. I had never heard of it. I had never really thought about it. Even though people were liberated from death camps in Poland only 14 years before my birth, I had never heard a word about the Holocaust, or the nazis and their acts of evil against Jewish people (and many other people as well). I was oblivious. No one ever told me I needed to know or care. So, as often happens, I didn't know anything about it. But that sunny day in April in 1979 changed my life forever.

We arrived at Dachau and we saw a big sign: "Konzentrationslager Dachau". Wow! What is that? Well, it was a concentration camp, as the nazis called them. This was actually the first one built by the nazis, and it opened in 1935. The nazis put different people there: college professors, Jehovahs Witnesses (they killed 20,000 of them in nazi Germany), political rivals, German communists, homosexuals, and Jews. I knew a German death-camp survivor named Emma Lang who was in a camp because she had a Ph.D. in Psychology. That was her crime.

I was in this camp which is now a museum in Germany. I was there for 4 hours. I cried at what I saw. I tell people that something in me died that day. Ever since that day I have been afraid of what we as human beings are capable of doing. And something happened to me as I walked back to the train station to go home that day. I looked up into the blue sky, and it was as if a voice inside me that was not my own was giving me words to

say. I looked up and said with the voice, “My God, what have we done?” That was all I said. But that was big. And I have not been the same since that day. All in all, it might have been the 2nd biggest day of my life, the first biggest being the day I felt God call me to be a Minister.

Not long ago I had planned to be in a synagogue in Cleveland on Wednesday April 11 for an evening service. I didn't go because our daughter had emergency surgery that day. But every year in April, for about 30 years, Jewish people have a sad day together. They call it Yom HaShoah. If you have a pocket calendar look that up for April 11-12. See if it says it. Yom HaShoah actually means “The Day of the Devastation.” I have grown to prefer the phrase Yom HaShoah instead of the word Holocaust. That word is just too painful. It actually comes from an ancient Greek Bible, and it is the word for a burnt offering made to God. The idea that 6 million people, 1.5 million of them being children, the idea that they were somehow a burnt offering to God is unspeakable. But here is the really hard part.

A little while ago I asked if we wanted to be the good guys. I also asked if it mattered what we believe in life. Those two things go together completely. If we believe bad things, sometimes we are lead to do bad things. Well, I am sad to report that since that day in Germany 39 years ago I have done some studying. And I have found that European Christians in fact came to believe a lot of bad things about that small group of people we call Jews. By the way, one reason they are such a

small group in the world today is because the Christian world was harsh against them, and actually believed things about them that led to violence and death for Jews.

A few minutes ago you heard me read some words from the odd Book of Esther in the Bible. It is a strange story. The book is odd because it is the only book in the Bible that does not contain the name of God! It is also a different book because it tells the story of a group of Jews who were in danger because they were different, and because they were hated by just one man. This man tried to kill them all in his area. This man, Haman, tells the king (Achashveyrosh) “...***There is a certain people scattered among the peoples of your kingdom; their laws are different...and they do not keep the kings laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them...let a decree be issued for their destruction...***”

In the story, a man named Mordecai and a woman named Esther work to protect their own Jewish people, and ultimately, they succeed. Just barely, the people escape destruction. Jewish people celebrate this in an odd holiday called Purim, where they read this story, they drink a lot, and every time they hear the name of the chief bad man Haman, they boo and bang their shoe on a table! For centuries Jewish people have celebrated this crazy holiday, where in the story they are not destroyed. Sadly in history, especially in the last 900 years, they are destroyed.

Let me share a quote that should shake us to our core: This is from the famous survivor from WW 2 named Elie Wiesel. He said these words often, and he said these in 1977 in a lecture at

Northwestern University in Chicago. At the end of a talk about the Shoah he said **“If I want to understand, and never will, why my people turned into victims, into perfect victims, somebody will have to understand or try to understand why all the killers were Christians, bad Christians surely, but Christians.”** I put this quote on Facebook and encouraged other pastors to respond so we could have a discussion. One wrote back with a lot of anger. Most other pastors took a pass and wouldn't touch it. I guess I don't blame them. Elie Wiesel was exactly correct. The killers were in fact people from Christian European countries. These were not Muslims or Atheist Soviets. These were people who had been baptized, and who had been taught to hate Jews. Why would they have this hatred? Well, there were those in the Church who taught it, going way back.

Here is the simple bottom line in all of this today: We can look back to 73 years ago, and what was discovered by our soldiers and the world about what the nazis had done, and be very sad. But if we do not look under a few rocks, and figure out where this hatred came from, then we don't get the picture, and it will be possible for us to still be operating on old and bad beliefs. I will share just a few of those in a moment, and then I will conclude this (like I said, this is something I only do once from the pulpit). What did Christians teach about Jews? Well, the crazy thing is that Jesus was a Jew, as were all of the first Christians. But as time went on, the Church became a Gentile outfit. There were fewer and fewer Jewish Christians. But then

the divorce began. Christian Jews and Jewish Jews began to fight and argue. They said mean things about each other. Christian Jews end up teaching a number of ideas about the other Jews. Even though Jesus is killed by the Roman Electric chair and by Pontius Pilate, the Church leaders switch this over so that the Romans did not do it, but somehow only Jews did it. Jews alone are guilty of killing Jesus. Most Jewish people back then had no idea who Jesus was, so they were not involved. Lots of Jewish people loved and supported him. But the teachings started. The Jews alone killed Jesus, and every single one of them is blamed forever. Christian teachings then said that it was all a part of God's plan that Jews would be rejected in order for the Gentile Church to be born. It was all a part of God's plan. It was taught that all Jewish people are actually children of the devil. Eventually it was taught that Jews would execute Christian children to use their blood to make Matzoth for Passover. It was taught that Jews would steal Communion wafers (the Host) and have satanic services in which they would punish Jesus even more. It was taught that Jews poisoned the wells in Europe causing the Bubonic Plague which killed 1/3 of the people. It was taught that Jews have tails and horns, and that they are not really humans at all. These teachings came from Church Leaders. Even after WW 2 in 1948, a World Conference of Christians was held in Amsterdam to talk about what happened in WW 2. They made a formal pronouncement that said they were sorry for what happened to Jewish people, but that ultimately it was their fault for killing Jesus and not converting to

Christianity. I can cite this source. I could go on with more, but that is surely enough.

As I have painfully been learning these things in the last 39 years, the voice I heard continues to haunt me. *My God, what have we done?* People were taught bad things that were lies and even worse. A Methodist Minister and scholar from Pennsylvania named Roy Eckardt made a terrible suggestion in a book about this from 1982. At the end of the book “Long Night’s Journey Into Day” he suggests that maybe the devil succeeded horribly in something from long ago: In order to make the Church weak, how about if you convince the Church to hate its own roots and its own heritage? Make the Church hate its own family, its own Jewish Brother, and surely the Church will be weaker because of it. Make Christians hate their ancestors from ancient Israel. And they will be weak, as they are hating their own selves.

I am gripped by that idea. If that was the evil plan, I fear that it has worked in many ways. After all, what kind of a religion develops that says “Well, we have this Bible, but we don’t really pay any attention to the first 80% of it, because that’s Jewish, and we don’t like it anyway! It has no value to us!” Isn’t that a little odd?

If we want to be the good guys, it matters what we believe. And how do we know what we believe? We get together, and we learn and we discuss and we grow. And we repeat this. Over and over. Or we can just watch Netflix and go about our business. But then we will not know what to believe, and we will

be at the mercy of possible bad teachings. Do we want to be the good guys? I want us desperately to be the good guys. But we have to be careful about what we believe and what has been taught, and what we teach in future days. And if we find we have some poison hiding deep in our past, we'd better find a way to clear that out. That is why I have said these things. May God guide us to be a force for good in His world, in Jesus's name. AMEN.