

## COULD IT HAPPEN AGAIN?

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
September 30, 1984 Philippians 2:1-13

How many of you have seen the Passion Play in Oberammergau? The six-hour Passion Play depicts the events in Jesus' last week on earth. People from all over the world make their way to Oberammergau to see the Play.

For some, the Play is a deep religious experience, as they identify with the passion and death of our Savior.

For some, the Play is a drama of impressive magnitude: 50-voice choir, 50-piece orchestra, over 1,000 participants in the Play, elaborate costumes, inspiring music, gigantic stage.

For some, the Play is a sociological marvel: that an entire village could unite in the production; musical compositions, orchestra, actors, all from the village; and that this village could sustain interest in the Passion Play for 350 years.

For some, the Play is slow-moving, laborious, hardly matching the pace of the rapid action and dialogue of TV. Sitting next to me, a teenage girl and her mother ate candy and whispered. During much of the play, the teenager wrote letters!

For me, the Play was a moving, spiritual experience. The play was a masterpiece, increasing in momentum during the trials and execution. It captured the jealousies, fears, greed, frustrations, the human feelings that resulted in the death--the unjust death, the painful, torturous death--of a good, righteous man. The passion and death of Jesus reveals humanity at its worst.

I asked myself the question, COULD IT HAPPEN AGAIN?

On our trip, we saw remnants of Nazism. We visited the razed, demolished summer home of Hitler near Berchtesgaden, with the Eagle's Nest towering far above in the distance. To this summer home, Hitler summoned the leaders of Europe, including Prime Minister Chamberlain of Great Britain.

We visited the parade ground in Nuremberg where thousands of soldiers strutted in front of Hitler's reviewing stand, where thousands of spectators gathered in the stands. In my mind's eye, I could hear the haunting echo of multitudes shouting, "Heil Hitler!" Now the weeds are overrunning the stands. The cement is cracking under the pressure of time. The Nazi monster was an ugly blemish on the 20th century. Good people, wise people, kind people were caught up in the evil force that swept through Germany and Europe, hating, dividing, conquering, killing.

Then, the judgment came. Now, there are weeds, deathly silence and memories; but the haunting whisper is there, COULD IT HAPPEN AGAIN?

Six million Jews were slaughtered by Hitler on behalf of the "superior race." One Jew was crucified, hung on a cross, dramatized in Oberammergau for the world to see. COULD IT HAPPEN AGAIN?

What happened in Germany? How did a nation of geniuses--known for its scientists, its musicians, philosophers, theologians--become hypnotized by a Hitler? I realize I am oversimplifying, but after World War I, Germany was devastated and humiliated. They suffered economic depression. Morale was low. Self-esteem was crippled. Then came a man with fire in his eyes, a promise on his lips, and an enthusiastic confidence in his spirit. He had charisma and magnetism. Hitler was an eloquent, inspiring orator. He spoke, he shouted, he dreamed, and the nation saw hope. They saw a new beginning. They believed again. They laughed again.

They were so enthralled that they overlooked the means, and were glad to believe that the end justifies the means. They were so relieved to raise their heads again, they overlooked whom they were stepping on in order to raise their heads. They were

so happy to be climbing upwards again, they overlooked on what they were climbing. They wanted someone to blame for their troubles, anyone but themselves, so Hitler gave them the Jews. They believed the nonsense that they were destined to be a "pure race," a "superior, super" race. They wanted to believe.

The Germans believed by the millions. Huge crowds greeted Hitler. They were united. They were caught up in a movement with music, rituals, liturgies, a new religion; but it was evil. Majorities are not always right. Charismatic preachers who attract multitudes are not necessarily right. The majority answered Pilate's question with "Crucify him!" The majority raised their arms and saluted, "Heil Hitler."

We are talking about bigotry, intolerance, selfishness and greed. They thought too highly of themselves. That attitude killed Jesus. It was bigotry, intolerance, and unrestrained patriotism that gave Hitler his ammunition. And the people blindly, glibly followed. AND IT COULD HAPPEN AGAIN.

Our Scripture lesson this morning from Philippians 2:1-13 contains a hymn about Jesus, celebrating his humility and humanity. Paul uses this hymn, which might have been popular in the churches at that time, as an example for all of us to follow. "Have this mind among you which you have in Christ Jesus," Paul encouraged. Because Jesus was humble, because humility is the way Christians should live, because humility is a basis for all human relationships so we can live together on this planet, Paul writes in verses 3 and 4, "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

"Count others better...look to the interests of others." This attitude and action saves us from bigotry, superiority complexes; saves us from thinking that we are better; that our ways are better; saves us from intolerance and selfishness. Look to the interests of others.

Look to the interests of the poor. I'm concerned and nervous about how our nation is becoming increasingly embarrassed by the poor. There are more Americans in poverty today than ever before. The large numbers of poor disturb our fantasy that we have a country where everyone is so well off. So, because we are disturbed by the contradiction, we would rather not see the poor. As a nation, we would prefer to ignore the poor and hope they will go away. In Washington, D.C., derelicts were sleeping on sidewalk heating grates near the State Department. Because passers-by and merchants complained that the homeless people were an eyesore, federal officials built steel sheds over the grates to keep the poor away. There has been an outcry, however, and the officials are "re-evaluating." Look to the interests of the poor, or IT COULD HAPPEN AGAIN.

Look to the interests of the minorities, of the people who are "different." Why do we feel we have to step on a people in order for the "pure" to be higher? Why do we feel we need a people to blame in order to make the "pure" look good? Hitler had the Jews. White America has had the blacks and the Hispanics. Today we have the gays, the homosexuals, to step on and discriminate against. Even so-called leaders of the Christian Church degrade people who are different because their life-style upsets our little morality schemes of what is right. Look to the interests of those who are different, or IT COULD HAPPEN AGAIN.

Look to the interests of those who practice religions which differ from ours. Look to the interests of those who profess no religion. As a nation, we are treading on thin ice today with the blurring of the distinction between church and state, between religious fervor and government neutrality, between super patriotic fanaticism and tolerance. When a government forces prayer--a religious exercise--on all school children, we are in dangerous water. When a government seeks to support parochial schools, we are in dangerous water.

Some of the ugliest atrocities in history have been committed in the name of Jesus Christ--inquisitions, holy wars, witch hunts, pogroms against Jews, Ku Klux Klan. When religious, fanatical intolerance has political power, IT COULD HAPPEN AGAIN. Likewise, when fanatical patriotism acts as if it has God and the church in its pocket, IT COULD HAPPEN AGAIN.

Patriotism is healthy. It is good for a people to be proud of their country. But, if patriotism is the ultimate goal, then you have a nation of blind sheep, vulnerable to Nazis, bigots, nationalists. Patriotism needs to be tempered by a higher loyalty to Christ, his teachings, his values. God is deserving of our ultimate loyalty, not nation or patriotism.

Likewise, a zealous, intolerant religion, that sees itself as the only way, needs to be held in balance, in check, by a government that is separate. When the government begins professing a particular faith, or supporting a particular religion, IT COULD HAPPEN AGAIN.

Religious people need to be involved deeply in politics. Our religious beliefs must shape our political beliefs and the direction we want the country to take. It is proper for Christians to influence the government and its policies. But, church and state must be kept separate. James M. Dunn, Executive Director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, states:

"The American tradition of religious liberty has always recognized that it wasn't simply an opposition to a state church, but it was an opposition to state support of religion."

William C. Martin, Sociologist of Religion of Rice University, states:

"One of the cornerstones of our society is the idea that no religion has the right to impinge on the right of other people to believe and practice as they choose, and that the state will not back any religion."

There is a distinction between applying religious beliefs to public policy and the state support of religion. Look to the interests of those who practice religions which differ from ours; look to the interests of those who profess no religion, or IT COULD HAPPEN AGAIN.

COULD IT HAPPEN AGAIN? Let us be zealous and industrious in obeying our text today, "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

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DOUGLAS NORRIS

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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