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I have been to Auschwitz.

I have been to Dachau.

I have been to Buchenwald.

These were all concentration camps used by the Nazis during WWII.

By the end of the war, over 6 million Jews were executed in these and other camps, not including about three million gypsies, homosexuals, the handicapped, and any free-thinking intellectuals who posed a potential threat to the Nazi Reich.

When I was a teacher in southern Hungary, I remember showing my high school students the movie “Schindler’s List.” We had a very emotional discussion after the movie, during which time I learned that before WWII, the very town we were in was over 80% Jewish. After the war, the village was Jew-free. *Cleansed*, they called it. It turns out, most of the Jews from

our village died in the basement of the very dormitory where we watched that movie...right there, in the showering rooms, they were lined up against the walls and shot. You can still go downstairs into the shower rooms today and put your fingers in the bullet holes in the walls.

Most Jews, however, died by being gassed, and later their bodies were cremated in ovens that worked around the clock, seven days a week, just to keep up with the piles of corpses.

There are too many examples of genocide in human history, of thousands and millions of voices crying out to God for deliverance in their final moments before death...It has been said and written that as the Jewish people lined up to go into the gas chambers, most prayed and recited scripture. Today's reading from Malachi was one such passage called upon by many Jews as the doors to the shower rooms were locked down and the gas was turned on.

“See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.”

But wait. Isn't there an irony here? Isn't there an elephant in the room that simply must be named? Let's name it.

The Jews weren't saved.

The arrogant and evildoers were not the ones burning up like stubble; no, it was the mothers and children and old men and old women...it was the teacher and the tailor and the banker and the rabbi and the farmer and the baker and the butcher and the shoemaker and the toddler and baby and the blind and the elderly who were burning up like stubble in the ovens...what

happened there? Did God get it backwards and let the wrong people die?

Were the wrong ones sent to hell? Do the wrong ones go to heaven?

It is said during that time that no one trusted anyone. Father turned son in for treasonous remarks about Hitler. Student turned professor in for teaching revolutionary ideas in the classroom. Neighbors stopped trusting each other. Families members spied on each other. Everyone was a potential threat, a potential rat. Anyone could turn anyone in, anytime, for saying just about anything, and then a knock on the door would come and the Gestapo would take you away, never to be heard from again.

So today we have hell finally defined. Today, we put a face to that ambiguous, vague thing we call hell.

Hell is not what happens after the crematorium. Hell is not what happens after the bullet has been fired. Hell is not what happens when the gas chambers are emptied. No, *salvation* is what comes after all these

things...God answers all of our attempts at playing God with forgiveness and redemption and eternal healing in a kingdom free from genocide and rape and abuse. Hell doesn't come after death.

No, hell is what happens *while you're still alive*.

Hell is what happens when son betrays father, when daughter betrays mother...hell is what happens when trust is lost, when neighbors and families and friends start looking at each other with suspicion instead of love. Simply put, hell is what happens when it's every man for himself...every woman for herself...every child for himself...hell is what happens when you are running for your life, alone, through the woods in the middle of the night and you hear the dogs barking and the guns firing as some of the Jews experienced when they escaped their prison camps...*simply put, hell is not for the dead. It is for the living.*

And who in this room can honestly say they have not been there?

Every last one of us at some point has felt utterly and completely alone, abandoned, with no one to trust or turn to, and that, my friends is hell...and we've all been there.

It might not seem like the most positive sermon...but it is, because if hell exists on earth, if it is something we walk in and through in our daily lives, then that means it is part of this temporary world...it means, then, that if we confront hell in this temporary life, it cannot be what exists on the other side of the grave...because we do not believe in or confess eternal hell, and so we should stop thinking we do...Jesus is not Santa Claus, making a list, checking it twice, casting the naughty into the eternal fiery pits of hell. If that were the case, none of us would stand a chance.

So, while we do not believe in or confess eternal hell, we do believe in and confess *eternal life*...because we believe that our crucified king descended into hell and brought his eternal light and life into those places of

existence that only knew death and darkness and evil...and so Jesus crushed eternal life and replaced it with eternal life. Jesus has answered humanity's temporary injustice with final, eternal justice. God does hear our cries as we fall into our graves, and he answers with resurrection, with life, with his reign of mercy and compassion for all people.

When you cry out to God in your final hour and pray that he might save you from hell, be assured that God has already saved you—and this entire world—from hell, that work has already been done by Jesus and his death on the cross.

In the meantime, however, as we all journey through our own individual hells in the brokenness of our lives, we can give each other strength, through prayer, through words of love and comfort, by assuring one other that you can trust me, that I can trust you, that you are not in this alone, that I am right there beside you, cheering you on, loving you always,

reminding you that Jesus loves you so much that he died for you so that you will face eternity in hell, but rather in heaven...

You are bound together by a baptism that joins you to Jesus, who walks with you in the hellish days of your lives, and who lovingly ushers you through this life into the next, where weeping will be no more, where pain and suffering and sorrow will be no more, for those first things will have passed away, those temporary, hellish things that belong to this world but not to heaven, and we will not miss them.