

THE NAZI WITHIN
JOHN 21:9-17 ACTS 9:1-20

APRIL 13, 1986

When World War II ended, an eight-year-old French Catholic boy learned that he was French, but not Catholic. He was Jewish, and had been placed with a French Christian family to save his life-when his parents were deported to the death camps. He grew up confused about who he was and to whom he belonged. Some days he was angry at his original parents for giving him away; and some days he felt guilty for having survived while they had died.

As a teenager, he hated the Jewish part of himself, because Jews were victims. He felt that Jews were weak, Jews were unpopular. This hatred of himself manifested itself in his right hand which became painfully swollen. No doctor could treat it or even explain it. It was as if he had called down on himself the biblical curse: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning."

Like many a confused, split, self-hating person, he drove himself to become a success, in this case in banking and international finance. He made a fortune, but it was never enough. He needed one success after another to fill the emptiness inside him where his identity should have been.

Then one year, he found himself living in La Paz, Bolivia, managing the Bolivian branch of a French banking network, and there he heard about a notorious Nazi who had headed the Nazi operation in France, the man who had sent his parents to Auschwitz where they had died.

He decided to avenge his parents by killing the Nazi. He bought a gun, and despite the pain in his hand, taught himself to shoot. One day, while he was sitting in the park with the loaded gun in his pocket, he saw the Nazi sitting just a few yards away, with his back to him. His face flushed with excitement as he realized he now had the opportunity to achieve his vengeance. He reached into his pocket for the gun, held it in his hand; but could not bring himself to shoot. He could not shoot an unarmed, pathetic old man in the back, even if the man was a Nazi war criminal.

He went back to his room, expecting that he would feel ashamed of himself for his cowardice and lack of resolve. But, amazingly, he didn't feel ashamed. Instead, he felt strangely calm and serene. He had killed a Nazi that day, but not the one he had set out to kill. He had killed the Nazi in himself. He had killed that part of himself that hated Jews. He had killed that part of himself that was ashamed of his Jewish heritage. He had killed that part of himself that was so angry it wanted to shoot, kill and destroy.

Had he killed the Nazi war criminal, he would have been a murderer, an apostle of violence and revenge. By not killing the Nazi, he had destroyed the Nazi in himself; the Nazi within that had almost taken control of his life. And his right hand stopped hurting. It was healed. The Nazi within lost control.

I suspect we all have Nazis within us. We all have an evil side that

arises out of confusion as to who we are and our mission in life. Sometimes we feel justified in assuming the role of exterminator, out of some sense of misguided justice. Just as the Nazis sought to "improve" the human race by exterminating "inferiors," so even the best people can fall into the same trap--seeking to rid the world of Communists, criminals, terrorists, undesirables, gays and other so-called enemies of good, moral, God-fearing people. The Nazi within takes control.

A health officer was talking to a group of workers in a factory. One of his questions was, "Suppose you were bitten by a rabid dog and you were infected, what is the first thing you would do?" One worker promptly replied, "I'd bite my boss!" The Nazi within. Vengeance.

Sometimes the Nazi within is a death-wish, a preoccupation with death. Why do we prefer death to life, the negative to the positive, destruction to construction? Why do we delight in gossip, reveling in someone else's misfortune, almost as if we are glad that he or she, whom we may have considered superior, can slip? Why is it easier for us to complain than to give compliments? Some people have a difficult time giving compliments. They feel very uncomfortable, so they add a "but" on the end of a compliment. "That was a lovely service, but..." Why do we love to find fault? Is it the Nazi within--the desire to destroy, to kill? Small people revel in the power to pick apart, complain and tear down.

Sometimes the Nazi within is a death-wish rising out of a poor self-image. Things may be fine now, we say, but they won't last. It's sometimes difficult to enjoy success. A college official reported that a friend of mine on their staff was doing excellent work; so excellent that it was assumed my friend would soon be moving to a bigger, better job somewhere else. It never dawned on the official that the college might expand its thinking and entice my friend to stay there. The Nazi within--a poor self-image--takes control.

I see the same phenomenon in United Methodist churches. The itinerant system where ministers are moved periodically sometimes promotes the death-wish for churches. They develop poor self-images and excuse themselves for poor performance. If a particular congregation does not like its minister, the people say, "Let's not do anything of significance or consequence, so the minister will soon be appointed somewhere else." On the other hand, if a congregation likes the minister, then the people often say, "This minister is too good for us and as he/she will soon be moving to a larger church, let's not start anything new, significant or consequential." The Nazi within--a poor self-image, the death-wish--takes control.

The Nazi within is a powerful force not only within individual persons and churches, but within society as well. Look at the emphasis and energy our society puts into death, violence, force and confrontation. Congress has now weakened the already weak gun control law and the propensity of our leaders to get tough with Libya and Nicaragua is frightening. Whatever happened to the idea of winning friends by outdoing the Soviets with kindness, generosity and understanding; rather than forcing nations into the arms of the Soviets. What is happening to us? Is it a national death-wish--the Nazi within--taking control?

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This is the season of Easter. The church has a message. We have good news--the gospel. We have a solution to the madness---the resurrected Christ. The Nazi within can be defeated. The death-wish, poor self-image, and the preoccupation with the negative can be eradicated, surgically removed from our lives by the resurrected Christ.

The two Bible lessons read today tell how the risen Christ confronted the Nazi within Peter and Paul. Saul was filled with hatred and prejudice. He was so fearful of the new Christian movement, so antagonistic to change, so prejudiced against the followers of Jesus, that he became a fanatical leader of the anti-Christian movement.

But, the risen Christ confronted Saul. With a bright light, the risen Christ struck Saul blind and asked, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" When Saul regained his eyesight from Ananias, who also instructed him in the faith, Saul's name was changed to Paul, and he became a zealous missionary for Christ and author of much of the New Testament. The Nazi within lost control.

A mother of five children became desperate because of health and financial problems and decided that life was not worth the struggle. She took her youngest child, a pre-school girl, into the bedroom of their tiny house, turned on the gas heater without lighting it and lay down on the bed with her arm around her small daughter. She could hear the gas escaping and also became aware of another sound, the radio playing in the next room. For some reason, it seemed important to her to get up and turn it off. As she did, she heard someone on the radio singing, "O, what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer." In that moment she realized the mistake she was making. She rushed back into the bedroom, turned off the gas, opened the windows, picked up the little girl and held her tightly. She later said, "I began to pray. I did not pray for help. I prayed a prayer of gratitude to God for opening my eyes. I thanked God for life. I thanked God for five wonderful children. I promised God I would not forget my faith again." In her hour of need, the risen Christ conquered her death-wish. The Nazi within lost control.

The second account read today was of the risen Christ's visit to Peter. Jesus came to the disciples while they were fishing. He helped them catch fish, prepared breakfast, and in a very dramatic manner, confronted Peter. Peter sat at the fire, eating his breakfast. I imagine there was silence around the fire, for what could be said. No doubt Peter relived those horrible moments when the fear and cowardice--the Nazi within--took control. Three times Peter had denied he even knew Jesus and he left him to face his accusers, his long walk to Golgotha and his death by himself. Now at breakfast, the risen Christ looked at Peter and three times, once for every denial, like the pounding of nails, asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Note how Jesus reverted to Peter's former name, Simon. Was Jesus implying that Peter was no longer entitled to his name?

Three times Jesus asked him, "Do you love me?" and three times Peter answered. I wonder if he looked Jesus in the eye, or did he look at the fire, or the ground. Three times Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And three times--once for every denial--Jesus answered, "Feed my sheep. Peter, do something. Get on with the mission. Get on with the task. Feed my sheep. Take care of my people. Become a leader in my church. Go! Do! Be

my disciple. Follow me!" The risen Christ confronted the Nazi within Peter and Simon was again changed into Peter. Peter conquered his fear and cowardice and became a leader of the church. The Nazi within lost control.

What is the Nazi within you? A death-wish? Destroying yourself with a poor self-image, preferring the negative? Or, is the Nazi within you a death-wish directed to others--complaining, putting people down, spreading gossip, vengeance, getting even? Don't let the Nazi within you control you. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Let the risen Christ cleanse you, free you, and empower you. Get on with the mission. Get on with the tasks Christ calls you to do.

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

by Glenn S. Fuller

Dear Loving Parent,

Who, as Parent, are Creator, Nurturer, and Giver of Grace;
Who, as Son, are Companion, Physician, Redeemer;
Who, as Spirit, are Truth, Guide, and Life;
We thank You, we praise You, we love You.

Come into the brokenness, the anxiousness, and the uncertainty of each of our human lives with Your healing, loving, life.

Bring Your unique divine healing to Mary Rakitan and Allen Walker. Bring comfort to Richard and Claudia Weyhrich in the loss of Richard's mother, Mrs. Brembert. Bring Your comfort, blessing and life to our shut-ins and hospitalized.

Bless our nation in these days of decision over Libya and Nicaragua. Check our impulses with Your patience; discipline our responses with Your Word; teach us the wisdom of moderation and negotiation. Help all people to get at the source of terrorism and of violence that the Nazi within and the Nazi without may be cleansed.

Then, dear Lord, may Your Spirit fill our peoples and all peoples with new creative energies directed towards the future, new constructive energies directed towards building culture and civilization that we may pass on to our children and our children's children not only a vision, but some valid experience of Your Justice and Your Peace, through Jesus Christ.

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