

Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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Rosh Hashanah, 1978.

Rosh Hashanah Sermon Daniel Jeremy Silver October 1-2, 1978

After the conclusion of the Camp David Conference a number of my ministerial friends telephoned me to express their feelings. They were excited and pleasured. One of them said to me: "Don't you have the feeling that the Middle East has turned the corner?: I suspect that they had called largely to receive my confirmation before they bubbled over to their own congregations the next Sunday.

Like most Americans these were not the kinds of people who stayed abreast of the intricacies of Middle Eastern developments. They had not read, by and large, the two framework documents which were signed in the White House by Egypt, Israel and the United States; nor had they read the various supporting letters concerning such issues as the West Bank and the air bases which will be built in the Negev, which were exchanged between the respective governments. What they knew was what they had seen. What they had seen or thought they had seen was what their television screens had shown from the White House that night when the Conference concluded: Manachem Begin and Anwar Sadat hugging each other, and the President of the United States smiling benignly as if he were presiding at a family reconciliation. What they had seen, or what they thought they had seen, was a triumph of what church folk would call a ministry of reconciliation. As one said to me: "The President witnessed to our faith." They felt that through courage, wisdom, perseverance and tact Jimmy Carter had brought together two men who had been kept apart by politics and divergent national interests and had won them over from their separate mistrusts to realize in how many areas they shared common concerns.

What they saw, or what they thought they had seen, was a new American posture. The war mongers were no longer in the White House. The peacemakers were there.

When, the next day, Mr. Carter quoted to the Congress from the Gospel according to

Matthew they were excited and thrilled. Truly, "Blessed are the peacemakers for these are the children of God." America had somehow found again her right place in the council of nations. Vietnam was behind us, a new and better role lay ahead of us.

I confess that I did not have the heart to remind these enthusiasts that it was the Administration of Mr. Carter which had tried last November to prevent bilateral meetings between Egypt and Israel. The United States, and we who are its citizens, have had too few opportunities these last years to be innocently happy with the policies and the achievements of government; and I did not think that it would be appropriate or kind to deny others this opportunity simply to rejoice in what America can and should stand for. Perhaps I should have spoken up, because I also sensed in their conversation a feeling of which they may not have been consciously aware: that it was somehow inevitable that it would be a Christian who would bring a ministry of reconciliation to the Muslim and " to the Jew. I did suggest to some of them that each of their faiths, and all these leaders were men of faith, valued peace and were dedicated to peace; that at a meeting such as this no one puts into the heart of another what is not already there; that each of the men who had come as heads of state to Camp David had witnessed to his faith and to the political and national interests of his country. I reminded them, or tried to, that despite the wooded surroundings, the rustic lodges, the sport shirts, Camp David was not a denominational retreat, but a closely guarded military conclave and that it was not important to the success of these meetings whether or not the men occasionally played chess with each other or liked each other. What was important was whether or not these men could find ways of adjusting their special needs and interests in such a way that they could produce a document, a policy, which would further the interests of all parties to the conference. I would suggest that what happened at Camp David was not a ministry of reconciliation, however significant and critical the role of the President of the United

States may have been. The model which is the counseling model which lies behind the concept of a ministry of reconciliation is simply not appropriate.

Camp David represented a meeting of hard-headed men of policy coming together to find if there were some common denominators which would allow them to adjust policies in their part of the world to their mutual advantage. Frankly, I find little wrong with that. Indeed, I am encouraged by this fact. I know that one can take a group of people to an institute or Sabbath retreat and discuss religious themes and find the congregation a very pious one that Sabbath, but when they come back to town to their natural surroundings the one-time Hasidim will revert to their usual religious temperature.

Moods are transient. We can be picked up for the moment, but, generally, we revert to our typical attitudes and our habitual patterns. But when a nation or an individual acts out of what is perceived as being in their interests, then decisions tend to have some lasting effect.

Simply put, each of the men, and each of the countries that was represented at Camp David, was there because it was to his interest to be there. There is a direct relationship between the bread riots which occurred in Cairo and Alexandria about a year ago and Mr. Sadat's attendance at Camp David. There is a direct relationship between the tank battle between Egyptian and Libyan tanks which occurred about a year ago and Mr. Sadat's attendance at Camp David. There is a direct relationship between the Soviet-Cuban intervention in sub-Sahara Africa and Mr. Sadat's attendance at Camp David. Simply put, peace has become necessary to him in order to protect his administration and country from enemies without and in order that he may begin to grapple with serious domestic economic problems within. Apparently, Sadat came to the conclusion about a year or so ago that Egypt could no longer afford to pay the major price for the Arab's thirty-year ideological dogma that Israel must be eliminated from the Middle East.

War, even preparations for war, have become too costly.

War and the preparations for war always have been too costly for Israel. Peace has always been in Israel's national interests. Peace would mean stability and security. Israel would finally be established on her land. Peace, the necessity, the logic of peace, brought Sadat to Camp David. The logic of peace, the necessity of peace, brought Menachem Begin to Camp David. The logic and necessity of peace in the Middle East brought the President of the United States to Camp David. It is the United States' interest to obviate the oil weapon as a threat in international affairs. It is in the interest of the United States to find arrangements that will bridge the conflict so that she can have the secure military presence which Israel represents and the commercial opportunity, the oil, the banking, the building which Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States represent.

The nations who had come to Camp David and who worked there to produce a framework for a peace treaty were there because, in a cold-eyed way, they had determined that peace was in their national self-interest. And what is true of the motives of those nations would, I submit to you, be equally true if one were able to make a realistic evaluation of the needs of most of the nations of the world. I am comforted by the fact that war is simply too expensive today for any nation. I am comforted by the fact that the preparations for war are simply too expensive for any nation. Here we are, citizens of the richest nation on the face of the earth, and not only does the defense budget distort the economy, contribute to inflation, but it diminishes our ability to provide monies for public welfare, medical research, education and our inner cities and any number of policies which we know we must undertake but do not undertake, not for lack of money, but because the funds are being diverted to less productive undertakings.

It used to be that when a nation made war the generals rounded up and sent out the scum of the cities to fight; as you fought on somebody else's territory and if you won you brought back gold and bullion and booty. War was profitable, understandable and seemingly practical business. Today the bombs drop everywhere. There are no civilians. The best and the brightest are drafted and after you win a war you must rebuild your enemy's economy. Today, just to prepare for war, a nation must strip its economy of monies necessary for basic economic and human enterprises. The nations of the world are slowly, but surely, coming to understand that "love peace and pursue war" is not simply a pious slogan of wooly-eyed religionists who actually believe in the commands of God; but in a cold-eyed and realistic way policy, necessary element of public policy. If the accords arrived at during the Camp David meeting have any chance of success that chance grows out of the practical and cold-eyed rationality which they express.

War is simply too expensive an undertaking for Israel and for Egypt; and yes, for Jordan and Syria and, certainly, for Lebanon.

Coming as close as it did to Rosh Hashanah, I found, as perhaps you found, that the mood of Camp David and my thoughts about what happened there shaped much that I felt about the new year. When the President spoke to the Congress the day after the conclusion of Camp David, he described the events of the last thirty years in the Middle East as "a text book in pessimism." The image is an apt one. It describes what we have all seen: four wars and endless acts of violence; the refugee camps, the terrorist attack and the human suffering. Actually, the Middle East is not the only text book in pessimism from which we have had to read these past years. Indeed, one could amass quite a library of text books in pessimism. Certainly, a whole shelf would include works on race and the relations between the races. There would be a shelf devoted to the arms race, describing the needless sums plunged into weaponry and missiles of destruction. Many a volume would detail the greed or megalomania or ideo-

logical fanaticism of individuals. There would be thick national volumes on Ireland and Cambodia, Vietnam, Korea, Bangladesh, Uganda, Rhodesia, Nicaraugua, Chile. I suspect there would even be a volume labeled Cleveland.

We wake to black headlines. Those of us who work in the city drive to work through a dismal landscape. Though few of us are confirmed pessimists, I think that most of us do not quite recognize how much this feeling that nothing quite works out, that our world is not what it used to be and probably will never be again, this pessimistic mood, has affected all that we think and do. In the weeks before Camp David I heard no one, literally no one, suggest that Camp David would be a success. No one said that Camp David really would produce a framework for an Israeli-Egyptian peace. The psycho-historians said: here is the President of the United States again acting on impulse. The political pundits opened: the best that President Carter can hope for is an agreement that Begin and Sadat will meet again. Literally, no one suggested that what eventuated could, in fact, come about.

I suggest that most of us have become folk who look bleakly on our world and no longer date to think in grand and bold terms. Where are all these grand visions today? The great causes? Obviously, the needs are there, but where are the causes and where are the visions?

I found the fact of Camp David's success, or seeming success, the fact that these agreements have, as the President said, increased the chance of peace, a welcome reminder at the beginning of a new year that life is not hapless. Life is difficult. Life is often bruising. Often, events do not work out as we would like them to; but it is not fated that there be a fifth mid-Eastern war. There are things that can be done-Camp David type arrangements which can be made. There are plans that we can undertake. We can move our world a little bit forward if we have the wisdom and if we have the

courage and if we have the will. I found Camp David an immediate example, a case history if you will, of some of the most fundamental teachings of our faith. When the Bible describes creation, the editor does not praise God simply for the immensity, the cosmos. God is praised because what He created is good, because it is filled with promise. Man, too, is part of a wise creation and together with God, can't we if we have the courage and the wisdom and the will expose that promise and bring it into flower.

Life is potentially good. There is promise out there. We are born human beasts. By training we can turn ourselves and be turned by those who love us into human beings.

"See, I have set before you this day the blessing and the curse, life and death, choose life." For some life is a weary dragging along between the cradle and the grave; for others there is vigor, purpose, commitment to causes beyond ourselves, the willingness to give of ourselves, to share life, to feel and to share feeling. There is the dreary and the dismal; there is the vigorous and the purposeful. Choose life.

Three nations at Camp David chose life and the choosing was not easy. Every choice involves risk. Most of us never choose life because we are too timid or fearful. It's easier to hold on to what we have than to walk out unto the unknown. Camp David need not have taken place. President Carter need not have encouraged Sadat and Begin to come to the United States. He had a lot to lose. His stock was low. A failure would have pushed his popularity lower and, yet, not only have put in doubt his reelection, but made his remaining years in office more difficult. President Carter risked a great deal. President Sadat risked a great deal by coming to Camp David. He risked the renewed anger of his Arab brothers. He risked assassination. He lives in a violent world. Prime Minister Begin risked his prestige and Israel risked its survival by coming to Camp David. For Israel a consequence of Camp David will be the withdrawal of soldiers and planes from the Sinai and the Straits of Tiran and the removal of its derricks from the oil fields of Sinai. Israel will withdraw into its 1967 borders and once this withdrawal

is complete there can be no returning the soldiers and cannon, the opening of the oil tap short of war. No treaty is ironclad. There are no guarantees that Egypt will not find a reason to renounce the peace agreement and simply take what has been given to her without completing the peace-making which is contemplated.

Those who came to Camp David risked a great deal and we must be glad that they had the courage to do so. In doing so they set an example for us for most of us are, in one way or another, involved in a Near Eastern type confrontation in our private lives. Our children will not listen or our parents talk too much. Our wives are determined to lead only their own lives or our husbands are determined that their wives must lead the lives that they insist on. Our parents demand too much of our time and we have no time left for ourselves. Most of us go on day after day caught in some unsatisfying relationship with someone close to us, angry, bitter, tending to make snide remarks to others or cutting remarks to the other.

There are two ways to approach such problems. We can continue as we are, facing each renewed contact bitterly, full of complaint, full of self-pity, and each day becomes more shadowed and increasingly burdened. Or we can do something about it, We cannot change the other, but we can change ourselves. There is help. There are supportive institutions. There is psychic restraint. We can teach ourselves not to care that much. There are things that can be done if we are willing to risk the doing. Life requires risks. Every relationship which we undertake is a risk. No relationship is totally idealic. It is a risk to give ourself to those we love. Every profession we undertake is a risk. The professions are demanding of time, energy and capacity. We risk our energies. We risk our self-respect. All that is worth doing requires risk. Are we willing in the new year to take risks so that we can enjoy a fuller life during the year?

Paradoxically, even as Camp David suggests that we must choose life whatever the risk, it suggests that we must not act impulsively. There are necessary risks
and there is daredevilty. Those who came to Camp David came prepared, laden with
position papers which provided deep background on any point that might be raised. Nobody spoke impulsively. When they sat down to write out the framework every paragraph,
every phrase was read and reread and compared to the notes that had been brought. There
were positions and fall-back positions, suggestions of all kinds which had been developed
by the ministries which support the chiefs of state. When we take risks we must be prepared - emotionally, intellectually, spiritually - for what we plan to do. That's not the
usual way. Many of us approach the new year impulsively. We will make the resolutions
without really thinking how to carry them out; of finding ourselves unhappy in a particular
relationship or job. We impulsively throw it over, believing that the impulsive act is
itself a guarantee of happiness. It is not.

The adult way is to act out of concern and after having thought through our actions. Children act impulsively. Time and again we act childish. We react to the moment or we fail to make the plans that need to be made. How many people work up to the last day before retirement without thinking of the day after they receive the watch and the accolades? How many people break up a marriage without asking what it is that they will bring to a second marriage which would allow them to hope for its success?

Camp David teaches many truths, and perhaps its last lesson is the truth which goes to the nature of the new year. It may be a good year; it may not. There will be moments of fulfillment and moments of frustration. There will be the sunshine and the shadow. Camp David cries out that there are no guarantees about the future. There are no guarantees that a peace treaty will ever be signed between Egypt and Israel.

There are no guarantees that if a peace treaty is signed it will not be broken.

There are no guarantees in life for any of us. To live is to walk an uncertain way, but to walk a certain way with courage, wisely, seeking to devote ourselves to others and to causes beyond ourselves is to know that whatever happens to us along the way, each day that we have lived has been a fulfilling one. There are empty days and there are days of achievements. What makes the difference? Our activities, what we bring to the day, the work that we do, the energies we expose, the reactions we have and the feelings that we share.

There is powerful vision to the book of Isaiah. It's late at night in a small Judean town. There are no lights, of course, in such places. One of the citizens is abroad. Since he cannot see over the wall to the countryside he calls up to the grand sentinel on the wall. "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?" The sentinel looks out towards the Judean hills and notices the first rays of the morning sun appearing over the mountain tops. He calls down to the citizen: "The morning comes, but also the night," There is no day without its night, there is no night without its day. There is no year without its sorrow, there is no year without its joy. There are no guarantees except this: that you have the courage, the will, the wit and the wisdom to do more with your life than simply to drag along through the day. You can commit yourself to people worth the loving and to causes worth the sacrifice. You can commit yourself to your talents and develop them to the full. You can commit yourself in love to those who need your love. If you are willing to commit yourself in that way to each day of the new year, whatever happens, it will be a good year.

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