

*A Meal in Three Courses* (Deut. 26.1-11)  
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People were dressed to the nines as they entered the ballroom. I watched them as I stood in a short line of guests inquiring about table assignments and realized that I hadn't quite known what I was getting into when I accepted my friend's invitation. Soon enough, however, we reached the front of the line where our names were checked from a list, a table number was given, and we were directed with the motion of an arm toward one of the large sets of open doors through which a number of guests were streaming. The doors opened onto a very posh scene indeed. Spread as far as we could see were round tables, beautifully set with bright floral centerpieces, shining silverware, crystal pitchers of icewater, baskets of bread, and an artfully arranged starter salad at every place. The people floating around the room, shaking hands and kissing cheeks, wore silken ties, crisp suit jackets, and elegant, understated dresses. At the front of the ballroom stood a lectern, and, behind it, projected onto the wall, was the logo of the Holocaust Museum Houston.

After a moment of greeting people at our table, my friend and I took our seats and waited for the program to begin. A few minutes later, someone appeared at the microphone to welcome everyone to the luncheon commemorating the Holocaust Museum Houston after ten years of work in the community. Then a traditional opening prayer was said and we began to eat. The food was extraordinary, but I couldn't help but feel slightly strange as I poked through the perfectly arranged greens and then the delicate entrée. I was remembering stories that I had read about the Holocaust itself and the kinds of sacrifices people were forced to make. I was replaying the cast of characters that I

knew about – everyone from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Anne Frank – and wondering what they might have eaten when they were in hiding. It brought to mind the worst that humanity is capable of, and these were admittedly difficult thoughts to entertain while eating. But there was more that would contribute to my sense of awkwardness, and before the luncheon was over my thoughts would have drifted from a few initial qualms to a rather complete kind of discomfort.

My discomfort was brought on by two words that were repeated throughout the meal. They were powerful words, beautiful words, words that I desperately wanted to believe were true but couldn't. They were the words "Never again." As I sat at the table, taking my food in small bites while looking toward the lectern, a series of passionate speakers addressed the ballroom. A few of them were actually Holocaust survivors, and when they spoke I simply put my fork down and used my napkin for a handkerchief. Rarely in my life have I ever heard people speak with stronger senses of morality and courage. Their stories were heartbreaking, their memories were sharp, and their call was clear. Over and over again, speakers leaned into the microphone at the lectern and said to the crowd that we should never let such a thing as the Holocaust happen again. "Never again," they said. With tears in their eyes. With voices cracking. With their suffering still palpable. "Never again." And the whisper that followed in my own mind, the whisper that was there every time someone said, "Never again," said "But it is...it is happening again."

For several years now I have been reading the column published by Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times*. Kristof has made something on the order of eight trips to the Darfur region of western Sudan to chronicle what he has called the first genocide of the

21<sup>st</sup> Century. I think many in our congregation are already aware of what is happening in Darfur, but for anyone who may not be aware we would do well to take just a moment and offer a brief sketch of the violence in that region and why that violence can be considered genocide by any reasonable standard.

What is happening in Darfur is a sustained pattern of military attacks on civilian populations with the aim of wiping out entire ethnic groups. The ethnic groups under attack are non-Arab African tribes indigenous to western Sudan, particularly the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa people. Most of these people are subsistence farmers living in small villages scattered throughout the countryside near the border with Chad. Those carrying out raids against them are groups of Arab African militiamen known as *janjaweed*. The *janjaweed* are descended from nomadic herders who have a history of occasional conflict with the more sedentary farmers through whose land they migrate. But the *janjaweed* are also now supported by the Sudanese government. They are very well-armed and paid under the pretext of rooting out anti-government rebel groups. And while such rebel groups do exist, the *janjaweed* have put into place a scorched earth policy of ethnic cleansing wherein all non-Arab African tribes are to be eradicated. Over the past several years the world has watched as *janjaweed* militias have systematically burned down villages, killing men, women, and children indiscriminately, employing rape as a weapon of war on an undocumented scale, and dumping the bodies of their victims into wells in order to poison the water supply and render the settlements uninhabitable. To date it is believed that on the order of 400,000 people have been killed with upwards of 2 million more permanently displaced and living in refuge camps without ample food, water, or medicine. Nicholas Kristof wrote of the unfolding

situation in the region, “In [all] my years as a journalist, I thought I had seen a full kaleidoscope of horrors...but nothing prepared me for Darfur.”

Perhaps what is most striking about the genocide in Darfur is that in our internet era, the world has unprecedented access to information about what is happening there. In fact, in no more than a few clicks of the mouse, almost anyone can read Kristof’s column or watch streaming video of him meeting with refugees in the camps and listening to their bitter stories. On one such posting, I saw an African woman named Miriam caring for her sick children under the extremely harsh conditions of refugee life. Miriam appeared to be in her early to mid-twenties. She was a slender woman, dressed in the colorful wraps of her tribe. As she spoke, however, there was great pain etched onto her face. She described running from the only village she had ever lived in. She spelled out details that have now become a common narrative for millions of displaced Africans. *Janjaweed* milita came to the village on horseback, setting fire to all of the huts, and shooting many of the people who tried to run. Miriam said the old and the sick were burned alive in their homes while the *janjaweed* shouted that the tribes would be exterminated, that Africa would be rid of them forever. Other refugees tell very similar stories, adding even more horrific details – children killed in front of their parents, women brutally beaten and raped, animals slaughtered and crops destroyed – all of it with *janjaweed* taunting that the aim is to wipe the non-Arab African tribes from the map.

The 1948 Genocide Convention, developed just after the Holocaust, defined genocide as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such.” With this definition in mind, it seems clear that genocide is happening in western Sudan as the events Miriam and others have described recur on a

daily basis. So far we have seen the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the forced expulsion of millions more, many of them children representing the very future of their tribes. In fact, according to UNICEF, it is now estimated that “the conflict-affected population in Darfur stands at a staggering 3.2 million, about 1.4 million of them children under [the age of] 18, and 500,000 children under [the age of] 5.” Most of the displaced people now live in large refugee camps, but that does not mean they are safe. As the camps continue to swell, their inhabitants have used up the scarce firewood that is immediately available. Part of the pattern of camp life, then, has become the daily forage for firewood, a search that requires women to travel farther each day in search of limited resources. *Janjaweed* now patrol outside the camps and routinely attack the women, shouting racial epithets, sexually assaulting them, and ritually scarring them to show that they have been raped. It is difficult in the camps to find any women who have not been the victims of such violence. Indeed, most women have suffered the trauma repeatedly. When interviewing some of the refugee families, Nicholas Kristof asked them why they continued to send their women out to face such a threat. The answer he received was stark and simple. He was told “[It is because] when the men go out they’re killed. [But] the women are only raped.”

Life inside the refugee camps is barely easier, and most days are spent trying to find limited shelter from the elements by squatting under trees or sitting beneath leaky plastic roofs. Meals often consist of a small portion of grain, millet, rice, or a powdered food mixture provided by relief organizations. Sometimes there is oil or salt that can be added to the meal, but not always. It’s a stark contrast to a posh ballroom filled with crystal

pitchers and baskets of bread, but in my mind the two meals are bound together by the two words that are so haunting. “Never again.”

It is extraordinarily difficult to conjure images of suffering and questions of genocide within the context of a Sunday morning worship service. But our religious tradition and our common humanity both compel us to remember our sisters and brothers and to find new ways to work for justice. To be honest, the lectionary reading is a good example of such remembrance and resolve. In Deuteronomy Chapter 26, we are given a text that describes a ritual offering of first fruits. According to the prescription, when the first fruits of the land were ready they were to be brought as an offering of thanksgiving, bearing in mind the long and difficult history of the Hebrew people. The people were to remember that they had been oppressed. They were to remember that they had suffered great violence. They were to remember that they had been strangers once in a strange land. The ritual offering was designed, then, to help them remember in order to be more deeply human and more authentically religious. Having remembered, the ritual was designed to inculcate in the people a certain ethic. Following the text, once the offering was brought, then the people, “along with the Levites and the [other strangers]” who had come to reside among them would all celebrate together. It is an interesting liturgical move, a ritual of remembrance meant to broaden who is remembered, beginning with the Hebrews, but then moving outward to include the Levites, the other strangers who had come to reside among them, and perhaps even more disparate groups if you follow the logic. It wasn’t a ritual that said, “Never again,” so much as it seemed to say, “Remember when?” and “Look around.”

This is actually one of the reasons that we gather in religious community. We gather to remember by reminding ourselves of the worst humanity is capable of because we need to be reminded of our worst and to guard against it. But we also gather to remember by reminding ourselves that we are similarly capable of making great good and effecting real change. We gather in religious community to call out the best that is possible in us because we need to be called out. We need to be empowered to struggle. We need to be mindful of the voices that whisper back and forth within us, tearing at the fabric of our humanity, one whispering, “Never again,” the other, “But it is happening again.” For it is only through the creative tension brought about by the two voices that we can ever learn to hear the third voice. The third voice may actually come to us as a kind of question. Perhaps it is simply the middle way, phrased as an interrogative. “What can we do?” it asks. If we listen deeply to this third voice, we might hear that it is inviting a third course, another sort of meal altogether that takes the first two meals from the ballroom and the refugee camp most seriously while incorporating the ritual wisdom of the Hebrews. “What can we do?” this voice whispers. At least it has whispered to me. And though there are actually many things we can do, I’ll pass along a first possible answer, which constitutes a third kind of meal.

On a Sunday afternoon, two weeks from today, following our second worship service, we are invited to share a ritual meal. It is a kind of meal that many churches and grassroots groups are now beginning to organize. We might call it something of a Darfur dinner. The object of the meal will be to gather to remember our sisters and brothers who are suffering unspeakable hardships in western Sudan. There will be a few prayers and readings, there will be information so that people can learn more about Darfur, and there

will be a quiet area where those who wish can write their elected representatives and implore them to act. It will be an intentional ritual meal, and already various representatives of Covenant's committees, including our worship and missions committees have agreed to help us make it happen. But the true focus of the meal will be sharing the simple elements of rice or millet and water as an act of solidarity with our sisters and brothers. We can gather in the narthex to sit on blankets or group together outside on the lawn. And as we eat a relatively meager portion, it will be possible to put our normal Sunday brunch money into a basket to be sent directly to the humanitarian relief efforts in Darfur. Of course, we'll make arrangements for those who cannot sit on the ground or may have dietary concerns related to their health, but everyone will be invited to participate in whatever ways they are able. And everyone will be invited to move beyond the statement "Never again" to begin answering the question "What can we do?" For the truth is that we are a community with incredible creativity, strong voices, many resources, and much more power than we realize. *There is so much that we can do.* With this in mind, then, let us say...

May it be so.

(I am indebted to Nicholas Kristof and his reporting in the *New York Times*. His quotes in this sermon, including the reference to the 1948 Genocide Convention, are drawn from the article "Genocide in Slow Motion" that appeared in the February 9, 2006 issue of the *New York Review of Books*. Many of the human stories from Darfur, including Miriam's can be heard in documentaries like the NBC News special "Crisis in Darfur," available at no charge on iTunes. The statistics I quoted were found at the Save Darfur and UNICEF websites – [www.savedarfur.org](http://www.savedarfur.org) & [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org).)