

SLD06.22.08 12th Ordinary Anne Frank
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 10:26-31
Jill Oglesby Evans

“A Separate Peace – the Story of Anne Frank”

Flames. An enormous iron oven. A railroad car. More flames. Train wheels. A full screen photo of a lovely, dark-eyed young girl, smiling.

So opens the movie “Anne Frank Remembered,” directed by Jon Blair.

A deep voice begins: “She is perhaps Hitler’s best known victim. Her book has sold 25 million copies. It has been translated into at least 55 languages. She has become a symbol of 19 million souls murdered by the Nazis, Jews and non-Jews, in particular the 1 ½ million innocent children. She was just 15 when she died of typhus, a miserable and lonely death in a concentration camp in Germany, yet she is remembered for her faith in humanity. This is the story of the life and legacy of Anne Frank.”

We all know who Anne Frank is, don’t we? The adolescent German Jewish girl who, in 1942, hid for two years with her family in an attic in Amsterdam in an effort to elude the Nazis? Most of us know her through her book, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, quietly and privately written by Anne during those years, collected after the family had been discovered and shipped to concentration camps, significantly edited by her father and others after Anne’s death, until it was finally published in its present form.

Most of us read, or at least were introduced to, Anne Frank during our own adolescence, somewhere between fifth and ninth grade, and grew up regarding her as a candid, courageous and optimistic young voice remarkable for its strength despite the death-dealing, moral degradation of the Third Reich. To this day, Anne’s testimony

continues to introduce young people both to the horrors of the holocaust and to her experiences and hopes in its midst. An online exhibition sponsored by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation invites visitors to submit memories of the first time they read Anne's diary.¹ I have asked some of our own people to share a few of these remarks.

Olivia

From Sarah of Sydney, New South Wales:

I watched the movie of Anne Frank and i was like oh my god I can't believe that a young girl can go through this much hell. i felt sooo sorry for her and then I went to the jewish museum and learned more and i was almost in tears. She was such a brave and strong girl. She was also innocent. I just can't get over that.

Morgan

From Jessica of Pennsylvania:

I read the Diary of Anne Frank when I was in the sixth grade. It gave me a whole new perspective of the Holocaust and life. I felt like following my dreams more and taking action against racism so that nothing like the Holocaust ever happens again. I'm almost in the eighth grade now and I still remember what I felt reading the diary. I even felt like I had a strange connection with Anne.

Tiffany

From Jasmin of New York

I first read Anne's diary when I was 13. At first, I was like "Can young people write like this? Was this really Anne?" And then it dawned on me that it was Anne. That she was just a regular girl, like me, being persecuted only because she was Jewish. It's because of Anne that I started to write my own stories, and my own poems, and my own songs. It's because of her that I know we young people have a voice. And that people are "really kind at heart."

Reid

From Joshua of Canada:

I just finished reading the "Diary of Anne Frank." It was very heart breaking that she was so full of heart and she still thought that there was good in every one. No matter what they did many years after her death, she impacted many lives for the better. She has taught me to be thankful for what I have, and that hate made a terrible tragedy in history.

Tina

From Nafeesa of Trinidad and Tbago:

¹ <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/af/htmlsite/>

I first read Anne's diary when I was about thirteen. It opened up a whole new world to me as I began to read other books to learn more about the Holocaust. One thing that struck me about the diary was how ordinary Anne's life seemed before she went into hiding. She went to school, had crushes on boys, argued with her sister and mother, spent time with her best friends. All those things that are universal in their timelessness, so typical for a young girl in any era. But Anne's parents went to great lengths to protect her and Margot for as long as possible. Over the years I have collected several books about Anne and her family. My daughter first read the diary when she was twelve, and had many of the same questions I had at her age. It was an opportunity for us to discuss prejudice and persecution, still so prevalent in our contemporary society.

Annelies Marie Frank was born to a secular Jewish family in Frankfurt, Germany on June 12, 1929. Her father, Otto, was an entrepreneur and a scholar, her mother, a homemaker, and her older sister, Margot, a placid and well-behaved girl whose personality contrasted dramatically with Anne's own lively, witty, and often impertinent manner.

Anne and her family moved to Amsterdam in 1933 after the Nazis gained power in Germany, and were trapped by the occupation of the Netherlands, which began in 1940. As persecutions against the Jewish population increased, the family went into hiding in July, 1942, in hidden rooms in her father's office building. After two years, the group was betrayed and transported, first to Westerbork, then to Auschwitz, and finally to Bergen-Belsen. Seven months after her arrest, Anne Frank died of typhus in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.²

To understand the conditions under which Anne lived and wrote, and ultimately died, it is necessary to review what happened in Germany in the 30's and 40's.³ In January 1933, after a democratic election, Hitler and his Nazis took power over the

² En.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Frank

³ From a lecture presented by Dr. Anthony Anderson at the University of Southern California on October 24, 1995. See <http://www-lib.usc.edu/~anthonya/holo.htm>.

national government of Germany. The core tenet of Nazi ideology was its belief that the Germanic people, the Aryans, were the "superior race" of people. "Inferior peoples" included Slavs, Gypsies, and above all, Jews. In Hitler's twisted thinking, the Jews were "parasites", "bloodsuckers" who more than anything else had led to Germany's defeat in World War I. In the new Germany that Hitler hoped to build, the country would achieve its greatness only when all Jews in Germany were eliminated. Beginning in 1933 Hitler began taking away the rights of German Jews until finally, in 1942, they would not even possess the right to live.

Now, in 1933 there lived in Germany approximately 450,000 Jews. Following the period in which Hitler first took power, some 50,000 Jews left. Among those who fled that first year was Anne's father, Otto Frank, who moved from Frankfurt to Amsterdam. Many people within the German Jewish community felt that Frank and other such people were over-reacting, that the Nazis' anti-Semitic bark was far worse than its bite. It might be a bit unpleasant for awhile, but eventually cool heads would prevail and things would work out okay. Sure, they might go to a synagogue to pray to God, but as far as being German, they were just as German as anyone else.

...But what German Jews thought and what the Nazis thought was something totally different. Some years would pass, and many decrees be enacted, but certainly by the time of *Kristallnacht* (in 1938) the vast majority of German Jews now knew there was no place for them in the Third Reich.

Kristallnacht (literally "Crystal night," its name alluding to the smashing of plate-glass shop windows) was a pogrom in Nazi Germany on November 9, 1938. In a single night, *Kristallnacht* saw the destruction of more than 1,000 synagogues,

the ransacking of tens of thousands of Jewish businesses and homes, 91 Jews murdered, and upwards of 28,000 arrested and deported to concentration camps. *Kristallnacht* marked the beginning of the systematic eradication of the Jews, serving as a prelude to the Holocaust that was to follow.⁴ Suddenly escape from Germany became the uppermost desire of most German Jews.

The Franks in Amsterdam were luckier than most. Not only had they already left German and settled in Holland, but even after Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and World War II began, most Dutch people were convinced that Holland would remain neutral, as it had in WW I. What's more, Hitler had repeatedly given assurances that he would absolutely honor Dutch neutrality. What a shock it was for the Dutch people when, on May 10, 1940, Germany suddenly invaded the country. For five days the Dutch fought hard and bravely, but it was no contest between them and the superior might of the German war machine. When the city of Rotterdam was bombed, the Dutch surrendered to German occupation of the Netherlands.

By July of 1942, persecutions against the Jewish population in Holland had so increased that the Frank family went into hiding. Anne had just been given a diary for her 13th birthday and it was in this journal that she wrote as to a special friend her confidences and observations for the two years she and her family were confined to the hidden rooms. These published writings are what have made Anne one of the most renowned and discussed of Holocaust victims.

Many of Anne's early entries relate to the mundane aspects of her life as a developing adolescent - body changing, falling in and out of love, dealing with the

⁴ wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristallnacht

frustrations of familial relations and general confinement. . But in addition to providing a narrative of events as they occurred, including the changes in the Netherlands since the German occupation, Anne also wrote about more abstract subjects such as her belief in God, and how she defined human nature.

Indeed, perhaps the best-known line (and admired attitude) from The Diary of Ann Frank is this: (quote) “I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.” This is Anne’s admired attitude, courage and optimism in the face of one of the worst atrocities in modern human history, that so captures the imagination of the Western world. But while appreciating Anne’s positive qualities, it is important also to recall that her diary ends with the Frank family still safe in hiding. That Anne’s optimistic conclusions about the nature of humanity were asserted before she and her family were discovered in their secret attic following a tip-off from an informer, arrested, transported by the Gestapo first to the “transitional camp” at Westerbork, and then to Auschwitz, where they were forcibly separated. In Auschwitz, Anne was forced to strip naked to be disinfected, had her head shaved, and was tattooed with an identifying number on her arm. By day she hauled rock and dug sod; by night she was crammed into overcrowded barracks. Daily she witnessed children less than 15 years of age being led to the gas chambers. When Anne’s skin became badly infected with scabies, she was transferred to an infirmary, which was in a state of constant darkness and infested with rats and mice. Anne’s scabies also prevented her from being eligible to be transferred to another work camp in which many Dutch prisoners lived. Her sister and mother chose to stay with her.

Anne's mother died of starvation. On October 8th, Anne and her sister were transferred to the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen, where disease was rampant and Anne was described as "bald, emaciated, and shivering." Believing both her parents to be dead, she told two friends she no longer wished to live herself.

In March of 1945, a typhus epidemic spread through the camp, killing about 17,000 prisoners, including Anne and her sister, Margot. Both were buried in a mass grave, the exact whereabouts of which is unknown.⁵

It seems important to hear together the harsh ending to Anne's story, to give witness to the unimaginable conditions she endured subsequent to her diary, and to the tragic end of her innocent life, lest all we take away from her story is the romantic image of a girl who, despite the horror with which she was surrounded, saw the best in everybody. Or the optimistic view that "the devastation wreaked by the Nazis was but a momentary lapse in the ultimate civilizing trajectory of Western culture."⁶ Rather, eminent Dutch historian Jan Romein remarks, Anne's journal, "stammered out in a child's voice, embodies all the hideousness of fascism, more so than all the evidence of Neuremberg put together."⁷

Had she continued to write, or her writings survived her days at Westerbork, Aushwitz and Bergen-Belsen, it is highly unlikely that Anne would have drawn the same conclusion about the nature of humanity, never mind allowed her diary or the subsequent movies and plays based on it to focus in such a climactic manner on her earlier triumphal proclamation. In other words, a more realistic way to receive Anne's

⁵ wikipedia, p. 4.

⁶ Anderson, www-lib.usc.edu/~anthonya/holo.htm.

⁷ Ibid.

Diary is less as the testimony of one who heroically transcended misery, as the prologue, the introduction, to one who was about to be destroyed by it. Herein, in my view, lies Anne's greatest gift to her readers.

Jerusalem's Holocaust museum, Yad VaShem, has inscribed on its entrance this quote of 18th century Jewish mystic, Baal Shem Tov: "In remembrance lies the secret of redemption." If this is so, if remembrance holds the secret of redemption, then Anne Frank's greatest gift to the post-holocaust world is that she helps us to remember. More than an archtypal figure who exhorted the ideals of a moral life, or some universal symbol of human perfection and purity, Hitler's best known victim was a bright, peppery, fifteen year old Jewish girl whose life was senselessly ended by a human system of barbarity. And because of her diary, when Anne dies her tragic, premature death at Bergen Belsen, someone we know dies. Not six million Jews or 10 million targeted humans, numbers too vast for us even to imagine, but a precious teenager with a sense of humor like Olivia's, a thoughtful mind like Morgan's, a gift for writing like Anne's, mature for her age, like Camelia, ...an adolescent with a lively mind and a precocious spirit, who continues to put a face on a specter entirely too tragic and horrific for most of us to grasp.

Really I'm not sure you and I can ever really grasp the breadth of the horror of the Holocaust. Not everybody knows a Holocaust survivor. Not everyone gets to go to Germany or Jerusalem, or even to our own Holocaust museum down on Spring and 18th. But thanks to Anne Frank, the breadth of the horror of the Holocaust does not loosen its grasp on us.

And this is a gift. Unpleasant as it may be, it is important for you and I ever to remember, perennially to be grasped by, the unremitting horror of the holocaust, if for no other reason than that the impulses of evil made manifest in 20th century Europe are every bit as seeded in humanity today – in you and me and everybody else – and always will be. As a people of the Christian reformed tradition, we do not believe in the fundamental goodness of humanity, as Anne did in her pre-tortured state, nor in the fundamental goodness of a particular slice of humanity, as Hitler did at the height of his power, but in the fundamental goodness of a God who has chosen to save us finally from ourselves.

Nothing covered up will be left uncovered; nothing secret will be left unknown. God counts the hairs on our head. God counted the hair on Anne's head. God will count the hair on the heads of our children's children. The body can be killed but not the soul. And the soul of Anne Frank invites us to remember.

From Anna of Massachusetts:

The Diary of Anne Frank has touched so many people's hearts, including mine. She was so young and hopeful. I only wish she could have had the chance to make all of her dreams come true. Anne Frank did make one of her dreams come true, though. She said, "I want to go on living even after my death." She's been living in our hearts ever since.

May God transform our remembrance to redemption.

To the glory of God. Amen.