

“A Year Like No Other”

Confirmation Consecration Sermon 5766

May 26, 2006

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New Orleans, Louisiana

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Do you know that every Jewish festival has its own book of the Bible, which is always read when that festival occurs each and every year? For instance, Ecclesiastes is read at Succot; The Song of Songs accompanies Passover; Esther, of course, is read at Purim; and Lamentations at Tishe B'av. But on Shavuot, your Confirmation holiday, in synagogues all over the world, we Jews will read the Book of Ruth. Why? Well, the story of Ruth teaches us that there is no Judaism without interpersonal commitment and an awareness of our shared fate as a human family.

In brief, here's how the story goes: after her husband's untimely death, Ruth is encouraged – ordered, really – to go back to the land of Moab and to her father's house. For you see, Ruth was not an Israelite. She was married to an Israelite, but Ruth was from Moab – a Moabite.

And, in the ancient world, your best chance for safety was to be found only among your own people, especially so for a woman who was widowed. But, listen to this: against all logic, Ruth chose to stick with her beloved mother-in-law, Naomi, the mother of her deceased husband. And, together, they journeyed back to the land of Israel. I think that Ruth's stubborn clinging to Naomi represents a foundational moment in our Judaism's development, because we learn how people of different nations, cultures, faiths, and fates can, nevertheless, commit themselves to one another's protection and loving care.

When Ruth insisted to Naomi that she would never leave her; that “your people shall be my people, and your God, my God,” Ruth performed a sacred act of selflessness and loving kindness toward Naomi.

P.S. – Ruth goes on to meet a rich hunk named Boaz through J-Date! They get together and they have a son named Oved, who, in turn, has a son named Jesse – the father of King David who, according to Jewish tradition, is the forerunner of the very Messiah.

So, what's the lesson? Redemption as people, and as a people, derives from interpersonal commitment to the other person's well being.

This year has been a year like no other. And you, my dear Confirmands, have been, like all of us, swept into the chaos, the tragedy, and the trauma of Katrina. Though your lives have been irreparably changed, the full assessment of that transformation is nowhere near fully told. In many ways, we have come to acknowledge that the storm still rages and we each seek shelter and protection as best we can.

This much I know. Your flexibility, your understanding, your patience under trial, and your incredible growth and maturity have enabled you to see this world through new eyes. Yes, you have seen your parents struggle this year with unfair realities, and you have done your part to help to find a solution to each and every challenge that Katrina has presented.

You, yourselves, will share just a little bit of your hearts with us this coming Thursday evening, when you take a personal look at how your life has changed since the hurricane. This year, truly a year like no other, has surely complicated our task of gaining a view of the world and our place in it that makes sense to us. Katrina has been, and remains for most thinking people, at least some stumbling block to faith in life's trustworthiness and in the possibility for safety and happiness. We cannot help but feel more vulnerable after than we did before. These days are tough times for many. We so dearly want to believe in God and God's goodness.

I saw a terrific cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine some years back. Let me describe it to you. It pictured several people on a New York street corner and some seated inside a coffee shop just like the one in the Wellington Hotel. The overall title of this full-page cartoon was "Persons of Faith." And, here's what these individuals were thinking, which characterized them as such – persons of faith.

One woman with her hand up, looking down the street, was thinking, "I won't be late, because a taxi is going to pull up any second."

A glassy-eyed fellow near her was thinking, "My novel will be a bestseller, and then my parents will respect me."

Another lady was figuring, "Pilates will change my life."

One guy – a street vendor selling hotdogs – was a million miles away, faithfully thinking, "Auntie Macassar to win in the seventh."

His latest customer, still chomping on his hotdog, and now walking on his way down the street was thinking, "People eat hotdogs from street vendors all the time and don't get sick."

The fellow in the coffee shop was reassuring himself, "It's not too late to invest in Google."

All the while, a lovesick young fellow on his cell phone hopefully concluded, "Perhaps her answering machine is broken."

Now, what's so funny about all of these folks, of course, is that none of them really fill the bill as persons of faith – optimists, perhaps; in denial, most certainly. But, none of them are tackling life's deepest faith issues, are they? Not a one of them is wrestling with why Sara's wonderful daddy, Marc Shachat, got cancer and died this year. They aren't pondering the cruelty of FEMA, or the outrageous treatment by insurance adjustors, or widespread homelessness, or disgraceful governmental incompetence, or the ill-considered War in Iraq, or human hatred and intolerance. And, do you know what else? There isn't a one of them who is acting accountable for their own or anyone else's destiny.

I wonder, do you remember that scene we read together in Arthur Miller's play, *Incident at Vichy*? In 1939, individuals are rounded up by the French collaborators and taken to a Paris railway station to be interrogated by the Gestapo. The Jews, the homosexuals, and the gypsies will be sent on to Auschwitz, but Christians with proper papers will be released.

Here is the scene I remember: the German aristocrat, Von Berg, enters into an uneasy conversation with Lebeau, a Jewish actor. Von Berg, criticizing the vulgarity of the Nazi relays to the Jewish actor of a young Jewish oboist – a member of Von Berg's cherished private orchestra.

Von Berg tells Lebeau how, after a rehearsal, the Gestapo came to arrest the brilliant musician. Only, they waited until the oboist had flawlessly performed his solo, sitting appreciatively to enjoy his gifted performance, and then arrested him and sent him off to be gassed.

Von Berg tearfully recounts this incident, confessing his sorrow and feelings of guilt over the matter, to which the Jewish actor knowingly replied, "We don't want your guilt. We want your responsibility." Struck by this ethical lapse, the prince later sacrifices his freedom by giving up his precious past to this young Jewish actor, allowing him a chance to escape.

My dear young friends, as you approach your Confirmation this coming Thursday evening and your private moment with me before the open Ark, won't you remember this? Tumors, hurricanes – they have no conscience. Floods will come and blizzards will rage, tornadoes break out, and tsunamis rip all life from its mooring. But, like Ruth, who stood steadfastly beside Naomi, it is our degree of interpersonal commitment and our desire to accept responsibility for how we react to such horrors that will ultimately define us each, and tell the tale of our humanity.

This world of ours needs repair. And I believe with all my heart that God anxiously invites us to share in the work of its healing. No one has the power to do the whole job alone. But, listen – as Rabbi Hillel taught us, we are still not free to turn away from doing what we can.

There is a corner of this world that is waiting for your touch. Did you know that? You will find it and you will see clearly that it is broken and that only you can fix it. You were created with the most wonderful abilities to do the job, and to make this little corner of the world whole and safe and beautiful.

No, I can't tell you exactly when you're going to find it or where this corner of the world will be. But, this much I know. You will come to that moment and to that place. Life will bring you there. Be ready! Open your eyes, open your heart, and apply all that you have of your energy, your talent, your imagination, your intelligence, and your faith. That will be your sacred calling as a Jew, and as a worthy human being. Such

is the challenge of Confirmation. You find your mission, and you will find your life's meaning!

God bless you, dear ones, in your search and in your ever finding.

Amen