

Through grief, we can touch the hand of God

FOCUS ON THEOLOGY



REV. RONALD P. BYARS

Why do people have to die? A young woman brought this question to me after her mother-in-law's funeral. There are answers to such a question, but they are not very satisfying. Is it conceivable that the natural order could have been constructed in another way? Would it have been possible to create a world in which no one aged? Where traumatic injuries didn't threaten life? A world in which life simply went on and on, with no possibility of death?

There is no way to answer such speculative questions. It would seem certain, however, that such a world would require a very different human psychology than the standard model with which you and I come equipped. If there were no death, would there continue to be reproduction? If so, what would be the living conditions of all those people? Would there be room for new generations to find a role in society? Would the older share power and resources with the younger? And if such a world did not include reproduction, would there be room for love and romance? Families? What would family life be like when no one aged or died? How would roles of parent and child be defined in such a situation?

It would seem that there is no way simply to put a freeze on aging and mortality without creating a world so radically different that we might not really enjoy it. Could it be that the deep ties among human beings and the richest emotions are related to the fact that we do not live forever? Is it possible that what makes us human is that our lives progress from infancy to maturity to old age, each stage in turn bringing with it gifts unique to that part of our journey? Would we really choose to exchange that richness for sameness, a flatness that would accompany the permanent extension of our biological life?

Many Christians begin their preparation for Easter with a 40-day season of penitence called Lent. On Ash Wednesday, they

are summoned to recall the words from the book of Genesis: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." Perhaps the creation might have unfolded another way, but it has in fact unfolded in this way. As biological creatures, deeply rooted in the natural world, we shall reach our limit of years: "The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong..." (Psalm 90:10, NRSV).

There's no question that human mortality introduces us to the experience of grief. If we live long enough, we shall be tragic, as in the death of a child, or violent deaths. There is no loss which is not painful, even when the person being mourned has lived well into a ripe old age. Even in the midst of mourning, though, there is a mysterious emotional chemistry that can lead to peace. Johannes Brahms, in his German Requiem, quoted Psalm 128: "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves." Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." The word for "comfort" is the Greek word "parakaleo," which means "to console, but to strengthen."

It is the testimony of many who have suffered grievous loss that there is comfort even in grief. Grief cannot be denied, bypassed, ignored, minimized, or short-circuited. One must embrace it and move through it, because there is no way around. In grieving, a person may experience solidarity with all others who have experienced deep sorrow. They may also discover, at the bottom of their grief, the God who weeps with them. But there are no short-cuts. Well-meaning assurances may do more harm than good. The discovery of peace in the journey of grief can be made only by those who make the journey themselves.

Ronald P. Byars, Ph.D., is pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham. To leave a voicemail message, dial (313) 953-2047, ext. 1851, from a Touch-Tone phone.

BELIEFS Values

BY REZA FULKA
Special Writer

Jews living in Germany in the 1930s were rustled from their homes as they worried about where they were being led, what they should take and what would happen when they reached their destination.

Neighboring Christians watched their friends disappear, not knowing where they were going, what could be done to help them, or even if they'd ever be seen again.

These are the scenarios that will be explored in "Life Unworthy of Life," a three-part

series delving into the impact of the Holocaust on the Jewish and Christian families of World War II Germany.

The program is being hosted by the Pilgrim Youth Fellowship of North Congregational Church, 36520 W. 12 Mile, between Drake and Halsted in Farmington Hills. The public is invited to share in the experience, which was designed especially for youth and their parents.

"With the prayer, 'never again,' we study the Holocaust, but in that study our young people learn how to live with

all their neighbors," said the Rev. Dr. Mark Jensen, senior pastor of North Congregational Church.

The Rev. Dr. James Lyons, executive director of the Southfield-based Ecumenical Institute for Jewish-Christian Studies, will lead the 6 p.m. sessions on Sunday, Feb. 23, and March 9. The program will end with a tour of the Holocaust Memorial Center in West Bloomfield at 2 p.m. on Sunday, April 13, where participants will meet with a Holocaust survivor.

A Detroit native, Lyons has

struggled with the issues of the Holocaust since he first learned of the horrendous activities at a college student at Wayne State University. After a 12-year pastorate, he founded the Institute in 1982, intent on building solid relationships between Christians and Jews. It is with a special sensitivity that Lyons shares his years of research on the subject through lectures, programs and other Institute-sponsored events.

There is no charge for the Holocaust program, but reservations are required. Call Barbara Yuhus at (810) 353-2434.

COMMUNITY MESSENGER

Community Messenger features spiritual announcements from Oakland County religious institutions. Write: Community Messenger, c/o Beliefs & Values Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009. Our fax number is (810) 644-1314.

FAMILY FOCUS
At 10:30 a.m. Saturday, Feb. 22, Cong. B'nai Moshe in West Bloomfield will host an informal, participatory Shabbat service for kindergarten and first-grade students and their families, most of the synagogue's "Tefillot Together" series. The service runs for about 35 minutes and takes place in the west foyer of the synagogue building while the main service goes on in the sanctuary.

"Tefillot Together" features story-telling, songs and other age-appropriate activities to enhance the family Shabbat experience. Throughout the school year when LIFE (Learning is a Family Experience) classes are in session on Shabbat mornings, B'nai Moshe offers "Tefillot Together" for a different grade level from K to 6. The next "Tefillot Together" program will be for second grade families and will take place on March 8. All interested families are invited regardless of affiliation. B'nai Moshe is located at 6800 Drake Road. For more information call Education Director Rita Abramson at (810) 788-0600.

KOL AMI COURES
Temple Kol Ami, 5085 Walnut Lake Road, West Bloomfield,

will offer three new adult education courses. The True Story of Esther will prepare students for Purim. The class runs 8:30 to 9:30 p.m. Mondays, Feb. 24 to March 17. Comparative American-Jewish Law will explore the similarities and differences between the American legal system and halakha, traditional Jewish law, 7:30 to 8:30 p.m. Mondays during March. Reform Judaism and the End of Days will explore traditional and liberal interpretations regarding the Messiah, 8:30 p.m. Mondays, March 24 and March 31. For information, call Temple Kol Ami, (810) 661-0040.

SHIR SHALOM
Temple Shir Shalom 3999 Walnut Lake Road, West Bloomfield, will hold a special Shabbat service for children ages 2-7 on Saturday, Feb. 22. Ma'at Shabbat services will feature Helyne Shaw entertaining children with songs, puppets, stories and creative projects from 9:30 to 11 a.m. At 6:30 p.m. Friday, Feb. 21, an adult dinner preceding Shabbat services will feature guest speaker Donald Cohen, executive director of the Southfield-based Anti-Defamation League. Call (810) 737-8700.

LENTEN SERIES
A partnership is being formed between Northminster Presbyterian Church, 3633 West Big Beaver Road, Troy, and Trinity Community Presbyterian Church of Detroit. The churches' present venture is a Lenten series around the theme, "Jour-

ney." Members will be eating and studying together beginning at 6 p.m. on Sundays, Feb. 23, March 2, 9, and 16. The first session will be held at Northminster. The public is invited to join in the journey. For information and supper reservations, call (313) 342-2288 or (810) 644-5920.

GENDER ROLES
The monthly, home-based "Contemporary Jewish Issues" group sponsored by Cong. B'nai Moshe of West Bloomfield, will discuss gender roles in Judaism at 8 p.m. on Sunday, Feb. 23, in a private home in Farmington Hills. Advance reading for the session consists of several articles from "Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility," a bi-weekly newsletter published by CLAL-The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. Copies of the reading material are available at the synagogue office at 6800 Drake Road, which is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Mondays through Thursdays, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Fridays and from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Sundays. Prospective new members may attend one session at no charge. The cost to join the group is \$15 per household per year. For information, including directions to the Feb. 23 session, call the synagogue during office hours at (810) 788-0600.

ISRAEL FAIR
The families of Cong. Shir Tikvah in Troy and Cong. B'nai Moshe in West Bloomfield will celebrate the completion of

a major study unit on the Land of Israel with a gala Israel Fair from 9:30 a.m. to noon on Sunday, March 2, at Cong. B'nai Moshe, 6800 Drake Road. The event is free and open to all interested families in the community.

Families will attend the fair in costume and play the roles of various population groups within Israeli society, including tour guides, kibbutzniks, members of the Israeli defense forces, Arab Citizens of Israel, members of the Hasidic community and tourists, who constantly visit Israel from all over the world. Also featured will be a presentation about "Project Israel" sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women. "Sh'ma" at the fair will include an Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem, a shuk (market) in Tel Aviv, and an artists' colony in Safed where families will learn how to make their own HaMishpacha plaques. Activities will include music, dance, art and food. For information, call Rita Abramson at Cong. B'nai Moshe at (810) 788-0600.

STORY TIME
Temple Shir Shalom, 3999 Walnut Lake Road, West Bloomfield, offers story time for children ages 2 to 5. Join Debbie Landau of West Bloomfield for books, music and projects from 10 to 11 a.m. on Tuesdays, March 4 and 18, and April 8 and 29. Each week will focus on a different Jewish theme or holiday. A fee of \$5 per child will be charged per class. To register, call Temple Shir Shalom at (810) 737-8700.

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