Tonight's sermon begins with a story. It is not a pleasant story, it does not come from the vast collections of our tradition, and it does not contain a funny punch line or stimulating moral. It is not one of those types of stories, it is a story about a boy named Arnold and it is entirely true.

Arnold grew up in a home with a mom, a dad and a grandmother. When he was 5 his mom and his dad got a divorce. They had married very young, maybe even before they were ready, and as they grew their lives drew them apart instead of together. Arnold took this all instride, he was five and in his neighborhood many families were divorced. In fact most of his friends at school lived with only one parent. Arnold lived with his mom, and his grandmother, his father had moved away from home, he got letters every now and then but hasn't really seen his father since the divorce.

One day a few years ago Arnold's mom started seeing another man. This man wasn't very nice to Arnold, in fact he wasn't very nice to Arnold's mom either but for reasons not clear to Arnold she spent a lot of time with him. Arnold's grandmother called the man a Bad Man, She would say, "Oh that Man with your mother, he's a very bad man, Arnold never grow up to be like that bad man." Arnold would asked "what makes him bad?" but she never gave a clear answer. After a few weeks, Arnold's mom lost her job and started to spend more and more time with the Bad Man, she stopped making breakfast and packing a lunch for Arnold, and she didn't keep his things as neat and tidy as she used too. But Arnold's Grandmother took care of him and things were okay.

One day about three years ago, Arnold's mom didn't come home from her night out with the Bad Man. Arnold and his Grandmother waited up till very late at night but she never returned. The next morning, the police came to the house and took Arnold to the Police station. They told him that his mother and the Bad Man had been arrested for drugs, and that she was going to be away for a few months, while she was gone Arnold was going to have to stay with a foster family. Arnold asked, "Why can't I

stay with my grandmother?" The Police said that she was too old to take good care of him, and that he would be better off with another family.

Thus began a very difficult time in Arnold's life as he went from foster home to foster home with his mother away in jail. But Arnold missed his grandmother very much, and every time they put him in a new foster home he would run away and back to his grandmother's house. During this time, he didn't go to school very much, didn't make friends in his neighborhood, and never got a chance to experience the things other kids his age did every day, things like little league, school plays, and summer camp.

Finally Arnold's running away had become such a problem that the courts had to get involved and placed him in an institution with other kids of similar circumstances. Arnold liked the institution, his grandmother was allowed to visit and he got to go back to school and do the things that kids his age are supposed to do. Arnold did great in the institution and over the year that he was there his school work improved and he decided that he wanted to be a truck driver when he grew up. Things were going great for Arnold.

Then one day about three weeks ago, the court decided that the money had run out for Arnold to stay in the institution and it was time for him to return home to his mother, and the neighborhood he grew up in. Arnold asked if he could go to a school to learn to be a truck driver, but their was no place for him in those schools because he was so far behind in his studies. Then Arnold asked if he could continue to go to school at the institution, but the court said it was too far from his neighborhood, and their wasn't the money to bus him there. Finally they decided to put Arnold in the public middle school in his neighborhood. Last Monday, on his first day of school Arnold and one of his staff from the institution met with the principle of his new school. They sat across from the principles desk as she greeted them and got some basic information. Then she asked the most troubling of questions, she asked Arnold's staff, "What gang is Arnold in?" His staff replied, "he's not in any gang, the primary goal of the institution is to keep kids like Arnold out of gangs." She looked at Arnold, and with a very serious expression on her face she leaned forward and said to the staff person, "He better join a

gang, if he doesn't he'll have no protection and every gang in the school will come after him." She whispered so that Arnold couldn't hear, "Without a gang he'll be dead in two months."

That's the true story of Arnold, I am told that he now proudly wears the colors of a gang, he sells drugs to other mothers in the neighborhood and has given up on wanting to be a truck driver, Arnold thinks he can make more money doing what he is doing now. Next month, Arnold will turn 15, hopefully.

Judaism doesn't say much about gangs, their aren't too many examples of Arnold's life in the Torah, and it is probably very hard for many of us sitting here to imagine ourselves or our children standing on the street corner where Arnold stands doing what he is doing. But just because his life seems so hard to comprehend, so far from where we are in our own lives does not mean that it is not our problem, our burden to bear. Cain asks of God, "Am I my brother's keeper" And God replies to Cain, "Cain, what have you done? The blood of your brother calls out to me from the earth." Friends, can we not hear the call of Arnold's blood? It has not yet been spilled out on the earth, but we know it probably will. We read the papers, we watch the news, the life of a gang member in our city is short lived at best. This very moment, Arnold, that sweet young boy who wanted to be a truck driver stands on a corner with a gun in his belt selling drugs to mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. Do we have any doubt what his fate will be if he stays there much longer? He will die.

We have long held that our institutions funded by our generous donations and tax dollars would protect children like Arnold. Would take care of those kids in need, allowing them a safe place to grow up and a chance in the world. But it is those very institutions, powerless in the face of their overwhelming task that have put Arnold back on the streets, in the life that landed his mother in jail.

And so what is to be the final chapter of Arnold's story while he go to jail like his mother and so many other human beings, so many so that our jails and the system are overflowing. Or will he die on his street corner, in a blaze of bullets fired from other gang members just trying to survive? God asked Cain, "What did you do?" But Cain never answered, because his brother was already dead, what could he possibly have said. But Arnold is not dead, not yet, and God asks each of us, this time before his blood cries out from the earth. "What did you do?" And this time different from Cain

we must answer, we must respond and our answer must be, "We have done nothing yet, but as of today we are going to start doing." Why? Because the system that we created to be Arnold's keeper has failed, and we must restore it and make it work again.

In this room we posses men and women of great and varied abilities, we are teachers, doctors, lawyers, social workers, mechanics, shop owner, just to name a few. We have reaped the benefits of a good life, or at least a life better than what faces Arnold tonight on his corner. It is our duty, indeed it is our calling, for each one of us to use our abilities, our talents, our skills to rebuild the system. To make it work again, so that it will once again be the keeper of all the Arnold's in the world and little boys and girls will be able to grow up and be what they want to become.