The Festival of Lights©
preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver (WA)
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
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I like Thich Nhat Hanh’s conclusion that hope is the nourishing of all that is good in the present, and Barbara Kingsolver’s determination to look hard at a single glorious thing, and then another, until she learns to be in love with her life again. Hope is an elusive concept and difficult to pin down, so these concrete practices of looking at what is and focusing on them and nourishing them and a great way to find one’s way to hope.

Another way to find hope is through stories. True stories or not, doesn’t matter, because in those stories we find those concrete things to focus on and nourish. Stories we tell at this time of year are stories of hope – stories of triumph and success, of the less powerful over oppression. Chanukah is not a high holy day in the Jewish calendar, but a more obscure holiday emphasized particularly in America because of its proximity to Christmas.

Some call it ironic that this holiday which celebrates the freedom to be Jewish has become popular in reaction to the celebration of Christmas by the majority. But isn’t that the point? Christianity asserts itself all over this place this time of year. The public schools, for example, which in our system are supposed to be free from religious teachings, welcome at this time of year trees and carols. One can easily understand that if you come from another tradition, Judaism, or Hinduism, Islam, etc. that these religious symbols, though intended to be fun and celebratory, function also to exclude. They favor the majority – the Christian population, and exclude those who don’t celebrate Christmas.

So, it makes perfect sense to me, that the rise of Hannukah in America is reflective of the story of the triumph of the Macabees over the Syrians who were forcing the Jewish people to change and disavow their practices. The Macabees won their freedom to worship their faith. Circle round for freedom, circle round for peace, for all of us imprisoned, circle for release.

Most interpreters emphasize that Chanukah, which means dedication as Amy explained, or re-dedication, is about the miracle of the oil and not a celebration of the bloody battle. But it is about the triumph of a small group of people practicing their own religion and not bowing to pressures of the ruling king. The miracle of the oil is an affirmation of their victory.

I’ve been thinking, as I often do, about the meanings of all these legends and stories told at this time of year, and what they might tell us about hope. Because the proliferation of advertising between Thanksgiving and the New Year, would lead anyone to believe that acquiring more things is the point and yet we know better. In fact, most of us recognize the connection between the perpetual acquisition of new things and the destruction of the planet. We simply can’t sustain the level of consumption Americans do forever. And so we have to work extra hard at this time of year, I think, to find deeper meanings and hope, and to practice it amidst the outside pressures of the marketplace. Like the rise of Hanukkah in a predominantly Christian country, or the victory of the Maccabees against the Syrians, I want to suggest that we prevail against the rise of consumerism.

What is the point, then?
My answer lies, in part, in the reading developed by the Congregation Beth El, in Sudbury, MA. I couldn’t come up with any better meaning than. “we gather in the chill of winter solstice, finding warmth from each other, nourishing hope where reason fails, grateful for small miracles, we rejoice in the wonder of light and darkness and the daring of hope.”

Finding warmth from each other. First and foremost, this season is about warm and nurturing community. It is about friends or family - supportive people in our lives. Some of us can survive with a precious few, and others of us need many, many friends, but we all need others. And the warmer and kinder and gentler the others are in our lives, the richer our lives become.

Even in the absence of close friendship or intimacy, we humans can provide warmth for one another. When I lived in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, it was a rather long bus ride up the hill to get to my apartment. The city of Teguc. like many cities all over the world, is not very safe. Especially for women walking alone at night. So the first time I rode the bus home, I was a little anxious about the walk I faced from the bus stop to my apartment. But when I got off the bus, this amazing thing happened. The men got off, immediately separated and headed in their different directions. The women, however, stayed together. We walked together and peeled off individually to our safe entries – we talked, even though we didn’t know each other, and didn’t say, ‘I am walking you home for your safety’, or anything like that, but it was understood, that to stick together made sense and we found hope in finding warmth from each other from the chill of the world.

Hope and the nourishing of all that is good in the present expands, then, to gratitude – gratitude for the small miracles. When we are thankful for what we have, our need for more diminishes. The oil lasting for eight days, or the birth of baby Jesus, these miracle stories remind us that miracles abound everywhere. The transformation of a little girl for a school picture. The survival of a rose over winter, or rain turning to snow. These are miracles, too, and our appreciation increases with our gratitude. We notice more miracles as soon as we acknowledge one. The miracle of breathing is always appreciated best after a good, hearty cold.

You know the kind, when your nose is stuffed up and your chest hurts with congestion, and even when you know it’s not a sign of more serious disease – that it’s your average, run of the mill winter cold, after a few days of rest and when recovery is near, your breathing becomes easier – and wow, is there ever a moment of purer appreciation for life itself in those first days after the cold. Before the cold, breathing was just as easy, but after the cold, we are grateful for the small miracle of breath.

Those of you who have survived a more serious health scare, many of you have told me, how this phenomenon is increased exponentially – such that the miracle of life itself makes you grateful in a way you never imagined before.

Hope and nourishing the good in our lives includes rejoicing in the wonder of light and darkness – that humanity can be so cruel and so kind; that we are capable of both. Isn’t it a wonder? Isn’t it a wonder that we have such capacities for pain and joy, heartache and compassion.

The story Karl shared of his wife’s childhood in a dysfunctional family where she rarely got her hair washed or dress mended –the pain of her mother’s illness impacting her upbringing. And the compassion of her teacher and school nurse who wouldn’t let Picture Day pass without offering a little care and grooming. The wonder of light and darkness. That we are capable of causing such pain and offering such kindness.
It’s why we look for the yule log in wintertime and burn it bright. Why we clammer pots and pans and whistles and noisemakers to call back the sun, and light the menorah for eight days, the festival of lights. or put lights on trees all these are symbols of our wonder of the light and darkness.

Or, as David Wilcox puts it in a song:

“If it wasn’t for the night,
so cold this time of year,
the stars would never shine so bright
so beautiful and clear.”

We rejoice in the wonder of it.

Finally, to hope is to risk. Daring. Courage. Dare to hope.

Have you ever noticed that young people often display more courage than their elders? Sometimes, I think it is because they are not yet despairing. I remember with a kind of awe my own 7th grade speech in favor of gay rights at Agassiz Middle School in Fargo, North Dakota, and wonder how I gathered all that courage to speak out so boldly. And then I remember, that it wasn’t until after giving that speech, that I learned the cruel nature of discrimination in a very personal way. And to this day, it gives me pause. I still speak out, but, as an adult, I have to actively nourish that hope now that, as an adolescent, had come so naturally.

Or daring to risk one’s comfort by choosing to shake things up. I had a perfectly good teaching career, in a nice community east of the mountains, with a baby and a supportive husband pursuing his own career. But I dared hope for more. I sat in board meetings at church and imagined being the minister rather than board president, and spent my leisure time creating lay led services for our small fellowship. It was a quite a risk we took as a family, quitting our jobs, packing up our goods, moving to the southside of Chicago, with simply a promise of an education, but no job for Stuart, my husband. Or the risk we took again, nearly 20 years later, to return to the Pacific Northwest and join this community. Plenty of you, I imagine, have made such life changes and bigger ones even – risked much as you hoped for more.

Daring to love again when our heart has been broken, daring to walk when you have fallen, or to join a religious community again, after you have been exiled, alienated or hurt by another religious community. When we have been attending this church for a long time, many of us forget the risk involved for many by just walking through these doors. They are daring to hope that this place might welcome them. Daring to love.
My examples of risk sound tame when compared to those refugees who risk everything to seek freedom and safety. The American Jewish World Service is inviting all who celebrate Chanukah to dedicate one night to the millions of people across the world struggling to live with freedom, dignity and justice. Tonight is the last night of Chanukah, so I wish to share with you the reading they recommend. They say: “Our tradition recounts that when the ancient Greek army invaded Judea, the Jews ran for their lives, retreating into caves to practice their religion in peace. Tragically, this pattern has repeated itself throughout the ages—both for Jews and for so many other persecuted minorities around the world. Tonight, as we light our candles in the relative safety and warmth of our homes, we bear witness to all those who yearn for safety and comfort. We know that all should have the right to live free from persecution and fear. No one should be forced to flee because of who they are or what they believe. We dedicate these candles to all people around the world who seek shelter from persecution today. And we kindle our flame to signify the courage of all who, like the Maccabees, rise up to defend human dignity, justice and freedom. To the refugees who bravely journey in search of food, water, shelter and survival. To the women and girls forging a world where all have equal choice and equal opportunity. To the LGBTI people defending their right to live and love with pride. To the local communities protecting themselves from droughts, famines, floods and other effects of climate change. To the children hoping for a future without fear. To the courageous activists who are fighting for equality, dignity, expression and peace. May the light that we kindle tonight shine bright, illuminating our pursuit of justice. May it be a reminder that each of us has the capacity to dispel darkness and bring light and hope.” -American Jewish World Service.

I commend HOPE to all of you, all of us, in this season of distractions and busyness and hype.

Hope is the nourishing of all that is good in the present. Find the determination to look hard a single glorious thing, and then another, until you learn to answer the call of love, to fall in love with your life again.

“We gather in the chill of winter solstice, finding warmth from each other, nourishing hope where reason fails, grateful for small miracles, we rejoice in the wonder of light and darkness and the daring of hope.”

Benediction

It is our light we will not let go out as it shines through our love and our tears. Find that single glorious thing this week, and then another, so that we might answer the call of love and nourish all that is good in the present, bringing more hope into this season and our lives.

*Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.