

Light One Candle

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Story “Hanukkah”

Reading “Chanukkah” by Lynn Ungar (http://uuja.org/holidays/ess-ref/essay_ungar-chanukkah.html)

Sermon

The story Elizabeth shared earlier about Antiochus and the Maccabees, and the reclaiming of the Temple is found in 1st century Christian and Greek writings, including from the historian Josephus. It’s highly likely that – broadly speaking – these things happened.

The detail that’s missing from those early documents is the miracle of the oil. That first appears in the Jewish Talmud 600 years later, as part of making a case for the importance of celebrating Hanukkah.¹

And the events before the Maccabean revolt are almost certainly more complex than the story suggests – there seems to have been some internal conflict between more assimilated, Hellenized Jews in Jerusalem and the more traditional Jews in the country – some historians have even suggested that Antiochus was, at least initially, intervening in a civil war.²

As Unitarian Universalists, casting doubt on the literal factual truth of religious stories can be kind of a happy place for us – we’ve always questioned orthodoxy and rejected the pieces of any religion that we find wanting. Bringing reason into religion is one of our tradition’s great gifts. The trick for us is to hold facts in a way that leaves space for religious meaning.

For whether or not the whole story - as we told it - is literally “true,” it’s with us, more than 2000 years later, because it offered deeper truths about life to generation after generation. And, if we let the story be, it might offer something to us.

For the people who lived through these events, and their religious descendants, this story is about oppression and persecution, losing everything, and still insisting on freedom. It’s a story of a people saying to themselves and to those who would wipe them out, we’re still here, we will live on, and we will thrive.

Many generations of Jewish people have known all too well the struggle to survive and hold onto their cultural heritage as powerful forces strive to wipe them out. With antisemitism on the rise, we can all hear this reminder to resist antisemitism specifically, and threats to anyone’s freedom and wellbeing. This story could be a call to action in support of anyone facing powerful forces that deny their right to exist - so that they, too, might live on, and thrive.

It could also be a call to unlearn our own years of hiding, to declare our presence, our loyalties, our truths, whatever that might look like for each of us; and it might be a reminder that things do not always work out as predicted, sometimes the inexplicable favors the downtrodden, and maybe we don’t have to do it all ourselves, or even imagine it all ourselves.

¹ E.g., <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-maccabean-revolt>

² E.g., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antiochus_IV_Epiphanes

Any of that might speak to you, today. It is all part of this story. But what draws me to this story, as your transitional minister in an interesting time, is not so much the long-burning oil or the improbable military victory – I’m noticing the people who chose to light that candle.

In words from Rabbi Avi Weiss:

“The miracle of the first day is that the Maccabeans did not give up. They knew they needed oil for 8 days ... and they knew they couldn’t get it for 8 days. So one wonders, why light? ... The miracle ... is that they lit the candle.”³

Historians tell us that – at that time - part of the Menorah was to be kept lit at all times. So ... why did they kindle their sacred light knowing they couldn’t keep it lit?

Why would any of us choose to commit our resources to a project or cause or way of being where the outcome we need is so unlikely?

Actually, we do it all the time.

There are big problems in our world – environmental devastation, entrenched oppressions, hatred, greed, growing inequities, war, violence, poverty, threats to democracy – things that are so big that none of us has anywhere near the resources to overcome them. Often, we can’t even imagine how they might be overcome. But with every action, petition, donation, conversation ... we light a candle. Every time we carefully sort our recycling, even as we suspect it will end up in a landfill ... we light a candle; we emerge from hiding and declare our loyalties and our truths.

Or there’s parents. And teachers. Knowing that what they do is important, and that even if they do it incredibly well, they alone don’t have the resources to continue what they start. Day after day, they’re lighting candles without knowing where the rest of the fuel might come from.

And each of us does it, in our daily lives. Most of us – I dare say all of us - are struggling with something right now. It might be something manageable amid a larger sense of wellbeing; it might be something (or a collection of things) that is really just too much. It might be brand new, exacerbated by the season, or something that’s been with us for a very long time. Whatever it is, we may look at the resources we have available and know they’re not enough. We may have good reason to believe that there’s no point in lighting that candle because it’s just going to go out once again.

And yet – sometimes - we light it anyway. We try again, or we try something new. A first day of sobriety, a difficult conversation, a decision to leave, or to stay, a step into the unknown. Or just keeping going, though it gets harder and we don’t like the look of where we’re headed. Perhaps we find a way to trust (or to choose to act as though we trust) that there are resources beyond our awareness, and that it’s possible that what we do could unfold into something bigger than we can imagine.

It turns out that lighting that candle is very human. I think we light it because it brings us closer to being the people we truly are.

Egbert Ethelred Brown was born in Jamaica in 1875. He described himself as a child who was full of curiosity and a commitment to truth. One day he asked his Sunday school teacher a question about the walls of Jericho, which (in the famous bible story) God brought down after 7 days, so the Israelites could win the battle. His question was “Why did God waste so much time, when he could have brought down the walls on the first day?” “My teacher,” he writes, “was

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmxZ2CrflO>

horrified.”⁴ Brown went on to encounter what he described as “the strangeness of the Trinitarian arithmetic.”⁵ And shortly thereafter he discovered Unitarianism, and he was home.

He sure sounds like a Unitarian Universalist. And with his self-described lifelong tendency to make speeches and an affinity for religion, he came to aspire to be a Unitarian minister.

Meadville Theological School, the Unitarian seminary, accepted him. But they were very clear about his future, telling Brown “there is no Unitarian church in America for colored people, and white Unitarians require a white minister.”⁶ So he could take that step, but the next one seemed impossible.

He took it anyway. He graduated. He got ordained. And, things did not go smoothly. I shared some of what happened next in a previous sermon. He founded his own Unitarian church in Harlem. He suffered personal tragedy, blatant racism, lack of support from the denomination, and financial hardship – at one point working a second job as an elevator operator to make ends meet. The church he founded did not survive his death. But this faith was his faith, whatever anyone else said.

There are, for each of us, things that matter so much that our truest selves call us to give them what we have, whether or not it’s enough. And sometimes, as the poet says, we are

bold – [we] declare victory,
even when the temple is wrecked
and the tyrants have not retreated.

And when we make that choice, that’s miracle enough for me.

My inner oldest child insists that I mention here that there are plenty of real-life situations where taking action without a plan for subsequent steps is really not a good idea. Learning to anticipate and plan for the future, and to use our resources prudently, is part of learning to be a grown up, and most of the time, things work out better when we use those skills.

But there are times when something is so important, that we choose to light a candle even though we don’t know where the rest of the fuel is coming from.

What are those times for you? The things that are beyond the practicalities of this moment to which you dedicate yourself with that level of commitment? A relationship, a family, a vision, a planet, a cause, a job, a community, a person you aspire to be? The answer is different for each of us. And it can be revealing to notice places in our lives where we choose to take a step with no guarantees, where we light that candle even if we’re quite sure we can’t keep it lit. Those places can tell us something about what we’re truly dedicated to.

And what about in this congregation, here, now? Much of what congregations struggle with these days are challenges where careful planning and prudent use of resources are probably a good idea; but some get to the heart of who you are, your truest self ... your purpose. These are the values and ways of being to which this congregation might be so dedicated that you commit what you have even if you’re not sure it’s enough. We’re dealing with both kinds of concerns at the moment. Which ones are the candles we’re going to light no matter what?

⁴ Mark Morrison-Reed, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, 35.

⁵ *Ibid.* 36.

⁶ *Ibid.* 33.

This question has practical ramifications as we enter into the budget season, which we are. This is the time when your leadership works to create the best budget it can for next year. It is said that if you want to know what a congregation really cares about, don't listen to their words - look at their budget. Given that we're pretty sure there won't be enough money for everything everyone wants, worthy though it all is, which are the things that you're going to fund no matter what?

Our way forward is bound up with the answer to that question, and it's not determined by what we've done in the past, or what any person wants – it's about which candles we're going to light because that is who we are.

It's safe to assume we won't all be on the same page. And ... This is your faith. This is your congregation.

And it can be revealing to notice the candles being lit right now.

In an uncertain time, you choose to light candles every time you come here (in person or online). You light candles when you choose to take on a piece of making things happen around here – knowing your resources are not enough, and doing it anyway.

You light candles when you serve on the Board, a team or committee, when you care for the building or count the collection, when you hang banners that tell the world who you are ... when you write a policy, help lead worship, when you make music together, when you give financially and of yourself, when you join with others to make a difference in the world. The community breakfast is a candle. The facilities management folks replacing windows are lighting a candle.

You light candles when you bring your joys and sorrows into this space, trusting this community will help you hold what life dishes out.

Most of all, you light candles when you listen to each other, when you put aside your own fears and care for each other, even across differences of opinion or perspective.

We don't always do these things, but every time you do - with all the doubts and no guarantees - you are rededicating yourself to what matters most in this community. You are the stuff from which the miracle that is this church is made.

And as this church declares its presence, its loyalties, its truths ... our task is to rededicate it over and over by lighting those fires so they can be seen for miles.

In our lives and in this church, may we choose to dedicate ourselves boldly, where it really matters, remembering that we are also the stuff from which the next miracle is made.

Though the temple is wrecked and the tyrants have not retreated, let us light that candle anyway. For that returning light is miracle enough.

May it be so.

Amen