

“Sacred Light”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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“Yes, maybe.” This descriptor of Robert Frost is like a subliminal mantra for any who have known an inkling of light, who have ignited a lamp, who have lit the candles of a menorah, who have kindled a chalice, who have borne hope against hope in the darkest of nights, literal and metaphorical. How many shades of darkness there are: the darkness that beckons us into the “woods...lovely, dark and deep;” the darkness that comforts us with the knowledge that dawn will come earlier tomorrow and the next day and the next; the darkness that hovers ominously; the darkness that envelops like a shroud; and the darkness that calls for hope with all evidence against it.

What would it have been like to kindle that ancient lamp in the Temple, such a milestone in the life of our Jewish ancestors? A few drops of oil suggested barely enough for a day. Yet legend tells us that the lamp burned for eight days—a miracle of light. When pain and oppression have withered our imagination, is it such a stretch to claim that when the unthinkable happens, it’s a miracle? Miracles aren’t everyday occurrences, unless one thinks twice about the sun rising and setting day after day, millennium after millennium. Miracles, as we dare to call such phenomena, leap from time and space and humble us with a reminder of the constraints we impose on the possible. What may be improbable is not impossible. As Kentucky poet Wendell Berry proclaims: “Life is a miracle!”

Light is what we experience upon birth—almost blinding light, so that we blink; we cry out in bewilderment and wonder. As we arrive into life as we know it, we’re bathed in light.

We can abide only so long in a darkness that threatens to envelop or extinguish us. We must go on, never mind a biting chill and the temptation to succumb, for there are “promises to keep” and it’s not yet time to sleep, not yet time to enter the great mystery that we glibly call darkness. How readily Frost’s tale lends itself to the stuff of dreams.

My favorite image of the Old Testament is that of Jacob struggling with a mysterious force described variably as an angel, a man, or some form of the divine. It was night. Was Jacob wrapped in a dream? He was on his way back to Canaan, when he encountered a being with whom he wrestled fiercely. All night long he struggled, and he prevailed. Toward morning he demanded a blessing and was told that from then on his name would no longer be Jacob, but Israel, meaning “one who struggles with God.” What a dramatic image for any of us who wrestle with the forces of soul and psyche. How commonly we speak of struggling with our inner demons; how rarely, of struggling with our inner angels.

“His life was a struggle,” related Frost’s daughter after hearing her father’s poetry spoken by Unitarian Universalist minister David Rankin in the context of worship. “Hope was hard won,” she added, noting that “if he affirmed anything at all, it was a yes, maybe.”

“Yes, maybe” is neither optimistic nor nihilistic, but a hope-infused resilience that easily masks a deep reverence for life.

Our Jewish sisters and brothers crossing the perilous Pyrenees escaping the scourge of Nazism, held such hope. It was affirmed with a flaming chalice—not like the chalice we lit this morning, probably not even three-dimensional, but most likely engraved on a flimsy piece of paper or cloth. Yet that paper or cloth bore the image of light rising from that ancient symbol of faith, a chalice. Such light pierced the darkness with the promise of sanctuary and longed for liberation.

Recall what our youngsters were invited into earlier this morning—the story of a huddle of Jewish people gathered in a space unfit for any life form, concentrated there by the brutal forces of Hitler and those who obeyed him. Yet there was a rabbi whose mission it was to hold hope for all who could not hold it for themselves. Hanukkah arrived, and he had planned for days and days by collecting drop after drop of oil from his meager food portions. It was barely enough. Like that first kindling of the lamp in the Temple, this rabbi took a dram of oil and poured it into the tiny recession he had carved in a rock.

“Tonight is not a time for despair,” he proclaimed. “Look at this little flame and try to understand what it means.” He recalled the promise that he believed with his whole heart, the promise that God had made to his people that the Temple Menorah may be snuffed out for a time, but there would always be the promise of light until that promise was honored, even as it was on that night in the concentration camp. There was light, and with it, hope.

Turn those worn pages of history back to the days of Judah and his fellow Maccabees overpowering the armies of Antiochus in the second century B.C.E. It was time to rededicate the temple, to kindle the lamp once more. Yet the portion of oil rescued from the original temple was miniscule, only enough for a single day. “Light it anyway,” was the choice they made. Astonishing! The flame rose and shed light for eight long days, inspiring Judah to proclaim a holiday to be celebrated “with mirth and gladness for all time to come.” Hanukkah means dedication, and dedication is realized whenever the menorah is kindled.

Whenever a lamp, a candle, or a chalice is lit amid the darkness, however deep the darkness, hope comes alive. On December 7, 1942 in a cramped garret in Holland, a young girl wrote in her diary:

“We just gave each other a few little presents and then we lit the candles. Because of the shortage of candles, we only had them alight for ten minutes.”

Just a few pages away, Anne Frank penned her credo:

“Despite everything, I believe that people are really good at heart.”

Sacred light, sacred hope, sacred trust.

I invite you to close your eyes, settle into your seats, and ask yourself:

Whatever you are struggling with this morning—family conflicts, job anxiety, illness, loss, dissolution of a relationship, oppression that invades personally, violence visited upon neighbors near and far and perhaps on some of us gathered here—what calls you to light a candle? What calls you to illumine the darkness that you know? What is your hope beyond hope? Go ahead, light it. Watch its flame rise. Light is bursting inside you. Light is embracing you.

Even this late it happens: [echo the words of Mark Strand]
 the coming of love, the coming of light.
 You wake and the candles are lit as if by themselves,
 stars gather, dreams pour into your pillows,
 sending up warm bouquets of air.
 Even this late the bones of the body shine
 and tomorrow's dust flares into breath.

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

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“The light flickered...The Story of the Sixth Hanukkah Light,” in http://www.chabad.org/kids/article_cdo/aid/103026/jewish/b6b-The-light-flickered.htm

David O. Rankin, “Yes, Maybe,” in *Singing in the Night: Collected Meditations, Volume Five*, Mary Benard, Editor, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2004, 101-102.

Mark Strand, “The Coming of Light,” from *New Selected Poems*. © Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.