

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Mystery”
Sunday, December 2, 2018 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: What if life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived? - Professor Emil Homerin

Sermon “Faith Survives, Hope Remains”, Rev. Paul Sprecher

Isaac Bashevis Singer, the great Yiddish story teller, offers stories for Hanukkah in his book *The Power of Light*. Some of the tales involve magic. For example, in a story set in the dark days of persecution in Russia, a mysterious stranger arrives in a grand coach at the home of a penniless family and brings real gold to enable them to feast for Hanukkah – and then disappears without leaving any tracks in the snow. One of my favorites is the story of how two young people, David and Rebecca, manage to escape from the Warsaw ghetto through the sewer tunnels of the city during the darkest days of Nazi oppression. In addition to a little bread to sustain them, David manages to smuggle out a single candle. It happens that the night they escape to a forest nearby where they can find safety for a little while is first evening of Hanukkah. As they light the candle and say the prayers, they remember all of the times in Jewish history when their ancestors had suffered great persecution, and these stories of survival against all the odds gave them courage to continue their journey and eventually to reach Israel, their Promised Land.

The Jewish people have suffered persecution for centuries, sometimes prevailing, sometimes just persevering whatever the adversity. In this time of rising anti-Semitism, of attacks and desecration by haters – most tragically with

the murder of eleven souls at the Tree of Life Synagogue – it is imperative that all of us stand in solidarity against the forces of evil and “Light one candle for those who are suffering the pain we learned so long ago” in the words of our opening hymn by Peter Yarrow. There might come a time even in this country when all people of goodwill need to display a menorah to assert solidarity with the Jews just as all of the people of goodwill in Denmark during the Second World War chose to wear the yellow star mandated by the Nazis in order to thwart the attempt to persecute the Jews of their land. Those of you in the TU’Urning Leaves book group who just finished reading Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* were reminded of how easy it can be to stir up populist resentments by declaring that some people are the Other who don’t belong in this land of welcome for all. Hopefully such a future will never come, but in the meantime we light one candle to remind ourselves to remain vigilant and to declare our readiness to stand in solidarity with all those who are singled out for attack and persecution.

The origins of Hanukkah are familiar to most of us. The successors of Alexander the Great conquered and subdued most of the ancient Near East and brought with them their Hellenic culture. About 170 years before the Common Era and the birth of Jesus, a new and especially arrogant ruler named Antiochus IV had the arrogance to add to his name “Epiphanes” meaning “manifest god.” In the course of bringing his subjects to heel, he forbade the reading of the Torah

and the observance of the Sabbath and forced observant Jews to eat pork. Many of the Jews including some of their leaders adopted the ways of their Greek rulers and abandoned the practice of Judaism, but others led by Judas Maccabee resisted and ultimately prevailed. They cleansed the temple of the idols who had been placed there by their enemies and proceeded to restore traditional worship. As the story goes, only one day's oil remained to kindle the eternal flame, but eight days would be required to sanctify a new supply of oil. Miraculously, the little remaining oil in fact enabled the flame to burn for eight days and to be replenished at that point – hence the eight days of Hanukkah and the eight candles each representing one day of that miracle.

Remarkable and inspiring as the resistance and overthrow the tyrant Antiochus may have been, it didn't prove to be a lasting victory. The successors of the Maccabees fell to fighting among themselves and Israel fell under even more brutal rule by the Romans who at least allowed the Jews to continue the practice of their religion. Then, in 66 CE, radicals in Israel once again rose in revolt against their rulers and started a guerilla war that was brutally put down by the Romans, who in their triumph destroyed the temple in Jerusalem for the last time. They crucified as many as two thousand rebels a day, so many that it was said that the hills around Jerusalem were denuded of trees during that time.

Nor was this the last of the revolts. In 132 CE Bar Kochba led one more revolt. He was acclaimed as a new Messiah by some of the Jewish leaders, but

again the revolt was brutally suppressed and this time most Jews were expelled from Israel and sent into the diaspora.

Despite these successive failed uprisings, the common people kept the memory of the Maccabees alive and continued to celebrate Hanukkah and its celebration of those first rebels from three hundred years before. As the early rabbis attempted to form a new understanding of Judaism without the traditional practices of temple sacrifice, it was clear to them that celebrating revolts against oppressors was no longer a wise policy. Since the people wouldn't give up the celebration of the holiday, the rabbis changed the emphasis of the holiday from a celebration of revolt and resistance to a celebration of the miracle of the oil for one day that lasted eight instead. The mysterious intervention of the divine now became a source of strength and hope rather than an impetus to rebellion. A new telling of an old story can have the power to change hearts and minds and to give new purpose and resolution to a people.

The birth of Jesus fell just about in the middle of this series of revolts, and his followers faced the same issues about how to practice their religion in the face of the brutal oppression of the Romans. Jesus was himself a rabbi, a teacher among many others at the time. He did not encourage revolt but instead a Way that amounted to a form of non-violent resistance that acknowledged the rule of those in authority – “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's” – but also asserted the dignity and worth of every person by teaching that even in the midst

of the greatest oppression it was possible to treat others in such a way as to bring into being what he referred to as the Kingdom of Heaven.

This was a very different message that led his followers to refer to him as a prince of Peace rather than of War, as a teacher who showed the way to retain personal dignity whatever the oppression. In this way he offered a different story about how we might organize each of our lives in such a way as to overcome enemies with love rather with hatred. It was this way of non-violent resistance that became the method of Gandhi and then of Martin Luther King, Jr.

And so we also light an Advent candle to bring to mind the birth and the teachings of Jesus that formed the foundation of the religion of our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors.

At the same time, it's important to remember that these stories of ancient times contain a shadow side as well. Modern scholarship suggests that the revolt of the Maccabees – while ultimately directed against a foreign ruler – was actually more of a struggle between modernizing Jews and their fundamentalist opponents. An op-ed in the *New York Times* this weekend suggests that it's hypocritical for liberal Jews to celebrate Hanukkah because they would more likely have been on the side of the modernizers than the fundamentalists, those Jews whom we might refer to today as ultra-Orthodox. As Unitarian Universalists we are not fundamentalists in the practice of our religion – far from it – and we are on the whole comfortable with our own contemporary culture.

We, too, would hardly have been likely to take the side of the Maccabees in such a struggle.

The Christmas story has a dark side as well. The writers of the Gospels in the New Testament took pains to obscure the Jewish origins of the teachings of Jesus and in so doing also initiated a deep rift between Judaism and Christianity, especially in passages that explicitly blame *all* Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus. The teachings of the Christian church based on readings of the gospels have been among most important sources of the anti-Semitism that has resulted in untold destruction of Jewish lives and communities and synagogues over the centuries and down to our own day.

As Unitarian Universalists we honor the Jewish and Christian heritage and teachings that led to the founding our own twin traditions, but we have also chosen to incorporate a much broader range of religious resources for our own living tradition. You will find in the front of the grey hymnal a listing of these sources, including:

- Our own direct experience
- Words and deeds of prophetic people
- Wisdom from the world's religions
- Jewish and Christian teachings
- Humanist teachings; and
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered religions

In recognition of this diversity in our pluralistic faith, some Unitarian Universalists recently created Chalica, a week-long celebration of our seven principles that begins tomorrow, the first Monday of December. Our own candles are based on our chalice, the symbol of our faith that comes to us in part from the work of brave Unitarian Universalists in our Service Committee who fought Nazism by rescuing Jewish children from the Holocaust. Each day a new chalice is lit to celebrate one of our principles – to bring it to mind and to determine how to practice that principle in our daily living. Each day this practice asks us to find a way to enact that day’s principle in the course of the day. Let’s try that out a little. Turn to #594 in your grey hymnals. We’ll use the words in italics to think about this a little.

594, Principles and Purposes for All of Us.

- 1. We believe that each and every person is important.*
- 2. We believe that all people should be treated fairly.*
- 3. We believe that our churches are places where all people are accepted, and where we keep on learning together.*
- 4. We believe that each person must be free to search for what is true and right in life.*
- 5. We believe that all people should have a voice and a vote about the things which concern them.*
- 6. We believe that we should work for a peaceful, fair and free world.*
- 7. We believe that we should care for our planet earth.*

So this is one way that we as Unitarian Universalists can ensure that our own faith survives, that our own stories are told, that our own commitments are strengthened. Hope remains because we can tell stories that shed some light on the choices that we need to make day by day. Our faith, embodied in our seven principles, inspires us to side with love each day, especially in tough times when every voice matters.

Stories aren't rational or logical. They inspire us to action as we live out our faith, and they give us hope that love is stronger than hate even in the worst of times. They help to make sense of the mystery of our lives, where we come from, what we are, where we are going.

We have a song about that:

Where do we come from, what are we, where are we going? (2x)

Mystery, mystery, life is a riddle and a mystery. (2x)

May the stories we tell and the lives we lead cast light in the darkness, give shape to the mystery, strengthen the faith that survives and further the hope that remains.

Amen