

Reading # 634

In my opening words, I noted that today marks the first day of both Hanukkah in the Jewish calendar, and of Advent in the Christian calendar. It's a lovely alignment, one that happens every now and then, and it serves to remind us of our deep connections as UU's to one of our six sources – Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

For those who may not know... and I must confess that I counted myself among them until just a few short years ago, Advent is the beginning of the Western liturgical year and commences on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. It's a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas as well as the second coming of Christ.

Each of the candles lit on the four Sundays leading up to Christmas has a theme that varies depending on your particular denomination, for instance: The Prophets' Candle, symbolizing hope; the Bethlehem Candle, symbolizing faith; the Shepherds' Candle, symbolizing joy; the Angel's Candle, symbolizing peace. Another variation is Hope–Peace–Joy–Love.

Whether or not we agree with the beliefs, or the symbolism, or any Christian creed, there is little doubt that our faith grew out of the Christian tradition, and that these words carry great meaning for us, for Jesus's teachings inform our covenants and our work for social justice.

Until Jesus, God didn't used to be about Love. Jesus said wait a minute, not only does God love you, and not only should you love God back, but you should love your neighbor too.

That was pretty radical. He also said that the Kingdom of God – Heaven – was right here on Earth, in the way we treated each other.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

And that's our connection.

As a faith, we decided we didn't need a belief in God to feed the hungry, or clothe the needy, or treat each other well.

In 1828, the great Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing, asked this question: *Whence do we derive our knowledge of the attributes and perfections which constitute the Supreme Being?*

He answered: *We derive them from our own souls. The divine attributes are first developed in ourselves, and thence transferred to our Creator. The idea of God, sublime and awful as it is, is the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged to infinity. In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity.*

Which does not make us divine, I might add. Rather, it reminds to be humble - aware of our humanity, our flaws, our failings, our constant struggle to live our ideals.

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The Direction of Light by Linda Hogan

New stones have risen up earths labor
toward air. Everything rises,
the ocean in a cloud,
the rain forest passing
above our heads.

Children grow inch by inch
like trees in a graveyard,
victors over the same gravity
that pulls us down.

Even our light continues
on through the universe, and do we stop to
wonder who will see it and where,
when the light of this earth is gone?
May there long be our light.

And then it falls. Shades are pulled down
between two worlds, clouds fall
as rain, light returns
the way rain from Brazil falls
in New York and the green parrots
in their cages feel it, shake their
feathers, and remember home
and are alive
and should they be thankful
for that gift
or should they curse like sailors and grieve?

I tell the parrots,
I too have wanted to give up
on everything
when what was right turned wrong
and the revolutionaries
who rose up
like yeast in life's bread, turned
against those who now rise up.

That's why I take the side of light—
don't you?—with the weight of living
tugging us down and earth wanting us back
despite great thoughts and smiling faces
that are prisons in between
the worlds of buying
and selling even the parrots
we teach to say "Hello."

Hello. Did I call this poem
the direction of light?
I meant life
so let this word
overthrow the first
and rise up to the start.

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The eight days of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem after the success of the Maccabean revolt.

Around 200 B.C., Judea— the Land of Israel—came under the control of Antiochus III, the Seleucid king of Syria, who allowed the Jews who lived there to continue practicing their religion. His son, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, wasn't so generous. History tells us that he outlawed the Jewish religion and ordered the Jews to worship Greek gods. In 168 B.C., his soldiers descended upon Jerusalem, massacring thousands of people and desecrating the city's holy Second Temple by erecting an altar to Zeus and sacrificing pigs within its sacred walls.

Led by the Jewish priest Mattathias and his five sons, a large-scale rebellion broke out against Antiochus. When Mattathias died in 166 B.C., his son Judah, known as Judah Maccabee ("the Hammer"), took command and within two years the Jews had successfully driven the Syrians out of Jerusalem. Judah called on his followers to cleanse the Second Temple, rebuild its altar and light its menorah—the gold candelabrum whose seven branches represented knowledge and creation and were meant to be kept burning every night.

According to the Talmud, one of Judaism's most central texts, Judah Maccabee and the other Jews who took part in the rededication of the Second Temple witnessed what they believed to be a miracle. Even though there was only enough kosher olive oil to keep the menorah's lamps burning for a single day, the flames continued flickering for eight nights, leaving them time to prepare a fresh supply. This wondrous event inspired the Jewish sages to proclaim a yearly eight-day festival.

Whether the story of the olive oil is factually true is beside the point. The point is that there are things we can't explain, and some of those qualify as miracles... like the simple fact of our existence, that any of this here at all, and that we are witness to it.

The Hasmonean dynasty—led by Judah Maccabee’s brother and his descendants— freed the Land of Israel from the Seleucids and maintained an independent Jewish kingdom for more than a century.

Like all kingdoms, it too fell. Rome entered the picture, and Jewish-Roman wars raged for another hundred and fifty years or so, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in the year 70. The Jewish people scattered, or were sold into slavery, and it would be almost 2000 years before they regained their homeland and established the modern state of Israel in 1948.

And during all those centuries, during all that adversity and struggle, and to this day, the Hanukkah lights are lit every year. Wow.

The lights represent renewal and rededication and joy. Peace after a long struggle. In Jewish tradition, the candle's flame is also represents the human soul and serves to remind us of the frailty and beauty of life.

Like a human soul, flames must breathe, change, grow, strive against the darkness, and, ultimately, fade away. Thus, the flickering of candlelight helps to remind us of the precious fragility of our life and the lives of our loved ones, life that must be embraced and cherished at all times.

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Again and again, across cultures, these things appear as we near the depths of winter: Fire. Hope. Joy. Love. Light. Anticipation.

They will carry us into Spring, when the Earth renews itself as it has for millions of years.

And yet.. and yet... we cannot hurry Spring. It will come when it is ripe and ready, not before. Now, on Winter’s threshold, we pledge ourselves again to Spring, and fill our lamps with precious oil, to keep the human spark alive in the face of adversity and oppression.

This is the human way, and we've been doing it for a long, long time.

In the words of Wendell Berry:

Again we come,
to the resurrection
of bloodroot from the dark,
a hand that reaches up
out of the ground,
holding a lamp.

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Like those who came before us, we renew and rededicate ourselves once again to living better lives and making the world a better place.

But we know from bitter experience that renewal is not possible without the opportunity to begin again like the Earth and Sun, without the cleansing dark, without atonement and forgiveness.

Please join me in reading:

Reading # 637 – Begin again in love

May it be so. May peace and joy be with you in this season. May light and laughter fill your homes and hearts, and love guide you always.