**Message: Light One Candle**

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**First Parish in Malden**

**December 6, 2015**

Hanukkah will begin tonight at sundown. As most Jewish people will tell you, it is really a very minor holiday. And yet it is a very visible one – arguably the most visible one – largely because of its proximity to Christmas*.*

The story of Hanukkah, in brief, is this:

Over 2000 years ago, Antiochus IV was ruler of all the land that included ancient Palestine, and he was no friend to the Jewish people. In fact, he had outlawed the foundational practices of Judaism. Jews were no longer allowed to perform circumcision or celebrate the Sabbath or do anything that would set them apart as Jews in the Greco-Syrian culture in which they lived. Furthermore, Antiochus had taken over the Temple in Jerusalem, put up an altar to the Greek god Zeus, and begun to allow the sacrifice of pigs – a non-kosher animal, and one therefore particularly offensive to the Jews.

The Jewish people found it difficult to live under these circumstances and especially to maintain their distinct Jewish identity, but for the most part, they had managed to carry on and live their lives, some of them practicing their religion in secret and others giving up their traditions and assimilating into the larger culture.

But according to the story, one man finally had enough. His name was Mattathias and he was a priest. And when a government official ordered him to sacrifice a pig on the altar of Zeus, he refused, and killed the man instead. Then he and his five sons fled the city, ran to the hills, and from there, along with other supporters we presume, carried out a 3-year guerrilla-style war against the Greco-Syrian army of Antiochus.

Eventually, in the year 164 BCE, the resistance movement prevailed. They reentered the city, triumphant. And they reclaimed and sought to rededicate the Temple, which had been defiled. In order to do that, they needed to light the sacred flame and keep it lit.

But all they could find was one single small container of purified oil, only enough to keep the flame lit for one day. It would take eight days at least to purify and consecrate new oil. And yet against all reason, against all common sense, they went ahead and lit that flame. And, miraculously, it burned for 8 days, long enough to keep the flame lit until the new oil was prepared.

There are many ways of looking at the story of Hanukkah. It can be understood as a story about resisting political imperialism or tyranny, a sort of David and Goliath story that gives hope to those who resist oppression in any form. Or it can be understood as a story about resisting cultural assimilation, the struggle to keep one’s values alive and to practice one’s religion freely within a larger culture that doesn’t honor it. Either would be timely.

But this month our theme is waiting. And I find myself thinking about the part of the story after the battle has been won, after the temple has been reclaimed, and the oil lamp lit. I find myself wondering about the people...

What did they do for those 8 days?

Of course, there were olives to be gathered and pressed and turned into oil, but I imagine the priests had much of that task. What did the rest …of the people do…other than wait…trust…hope against hope for whatever would come? Remember, this was an eternal flame they were lighting. It would have been a big deal to allow it to go out once lit.

What was it like for them to light that flame and then let go of the illusion that they were in control? Because, you know, as soon as they lit that flame, they were no longer in control of their own story. They put themselves, in a real way, at the mercy of something that made no sense.

Why had they done it? Can you imagine the discussion, the arguing, should we light it? No, that makes no sense! We should wait! But then perhaps someone else – someone of great faith – spoke up… “It is our duty to do what we can with what we have…and then it is our duty to trust…some things are in our control, but not everything. Sometimes we just have to do what we can and then wait for what comes. We can till the land and plant the seed, but we cannot make it grow.”

And so, there they were, a people waiting, fully expecting - some of them, no doubt – that the light would go out at any moment, and that they’d be left there, waiting in the dark…and yet, still waiting, in faith…

So, this year, as I reflect on the Hanukkah story, I find myself thinking of those who had faith to light that one lamp to be witness to whatever might unfold, knowing they were not in control, but remaining hopeful nonetheless, for what else could they do?

And isn’t that very much what the poem, our reading from earlier, is about?

From our perspective, thousands of years after the events reported in the story took place, it looks like a cohesive narrative. There is some fact, there is some finessing, and very likely there is some fiction. It’s a story. But we already know what will happen at the end. We’ve heard it before.

But imagine for another moment what it was like for the Maccabees and those who were likely with them.

Here’s my question [says the poet]. What if there was a poem

That didn’t know what it was about until it got

To the end of itself? So that the poet’s job isn’t

To play with imagery and cadence and metrical

Toys in order to make a point, but rather to just

Keep going in order to find out… […what the poem is about…]

Which is really about not being the boss, not being in control, having to simply be witness, to shine a light on the story as it unfolds…

No one knows what’s going to happen…

You are not allowed to edit. You’re not in charge

At all – a major bummer…

Brian Doyle, the poet, writes about his children, about how if he “had been the boss of this poem [he] would have made it so they can manage things, or [he] could be the quiet fixer [he] always wanted to be as a father. But that’s not what the poem wanted to be about, it turns out.”

I imagine many of those of us who are parents may be able to relate to that. But I think it’s the kind of poem that we can relate to whether we have children or not, because in truth, there is very little that is really in our control. Mostly life is about doing what we can do and then waiting, being witness to whatever is going to unfold.

The climate conference in Paris is a poem unfolding. We are waiting to see what that poem will be about, and how it will end. The presidential election is a poem unfolding. The national conversation about guns and gun control is a poem unfolding. The conversations about Muslims in America and about refugees and about religious extremism…those are poems unfolding, too.

No one knows what’s going to happen, and there

Will be pain, and you can’t fix everything, and it

Hurts to watch, and you are terrified even as you

Try to stay calm and cool and pretend to manage.

[Pause]

Some poems you can leave when they thrash too much but kids are not those sorts of poems…

And for people of faith, I would argue, neither are the others. For we are called, I think, each of us, to throw whatever small light we can on them and to witness their unfolding…to bear with the pain and the grief, but to do it with hope…

[Pause]

This church, too, is like a poem. You can only do what you can do, but in the end, no one of you is boss. No one of you is in charge – a major bummer, you might be thinking.

Over the course of the next year, I imagine, we will have conversations about Mission and Vision. We will have conversations about finances and budget, endowment and investments. We will have conversations about banners and crèches…about who you are together and who you want to be in the world…about what you believe and what you long to be and to do.

Sometimes it might hurt to watch, since you can’t fix everything the way you might wish you could. But your job is to stay with it, to keep going in order to find out what the poem is about. To take a deep breath and patiently follow the line as it writes itself. To be both participant in and witness to its unfolding. To “sing wildly and hope it’ll finish so joyous and refreshing that you gape with awe.”

May it be so.