

## **“Kindling the Light”**

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*First Parish in Wayland*

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*Intro: In this series of reflections, we explore the theme of light in the holidays of the season and in the new season of the congregation as we move to implement visioning plans. Prior to these three reflections, Kate Holland, Director of Lifespan Exploration and Engagement, shared a story about the Winter Solstice as well for which there is not a written text.*

### Christmas – Alyssa Lee, Ministerial Intern

When I was growing up, one of my favorite moments of the year was attending Midnight Mass. I loved the music, the poinsettias, the incense, and the twinkling lights in the cold, dark night. But most of all, I loved ending the service with “Joy to the World” with everyone singing in excitement about the return of God to earth in the form of this small, precious child.

In the Gospel of John 1:2-8, it is written,

“He was in the beginning with God...What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it...The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

As a young person, I was inspired by this notion of a light in the darkness who was our salvation wrapped up in the form of a helpless baby, whose parents had nothing and yet still he became a beacon of hope for generations of people.

While I don't ascribe to many of the same views as in my youth, I still find inspiration in the story of Jesus and recognize that for many people, he is a foundation upon which they rest their understanding of love, empathy, and justice. I am also inspired by those who look to Jesus' message of love and acceptance and find a deeper truth there. Who place him within the context of the marginalized community he was born into and who speak to his advocacy for, not only their salvation, but their survival.

In his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, the Rev. Howard Thurman wants us to note the significance of Jesus born as a poor Jew during Roman hegemony. He reminds us to keep in mind the economic and social predicament of Jesus' family and the cultural context of the age in which he lived. An understanding of who Jesus might have been talking to and the realities of the time in which he lived is key to understanding his message, but often gets lost when we pluck individual passages out of the Christian Bible or when we do not take a closer look into the historical context of his life.

Rev. Thurman writes that central to the religion of Jesus was an ethic of love, and I think that is what many of us have been taught, but the reality of Jesus' life and his message was a little more complicated than that. He had to apply this love-ethic to the oppressors of his community while also

balancing the reality that to love the Roman was also to be considered a traitor to your own people, to Israel, and to God. However, to stand up against the Roman or to hate him in a way that caused action was to invite the wrath of Rome.

An ethic of love was important for your survival and your ability to live and work in an oppressive society, but Jesus taught an ethic of love is also vital to ensure your own personal survival. To not let your heart be tainted by hate and anger. Thurman says, “[Jesus] recognized with authentic realism that anyone who permits another to determine the quality of his inner life gives into the other the keys to his destiny.”

Often when we live with anger or feel that life is unfair or unjust, it can be easy to lean into the darkness within us, to let it overtake us, to let other people’s actions define our lives. But, for many people, the story of Jesus is a reminder of the light of resilience that is found within us and within our communities. That perhaps this darkness is the beginning of the start of something resurgent in us? That perhaps it is like the baby in the womb whose life starts in darkness, but who has the capacity to bring light to the lives of all those who care for them or even into the wider world?

#### Hanukkah – Rev. Dr. Stephanie May, Minister

Already we have heard some about the Winter Solstice, the shortest day and the longest night on the solar calendar. And, we have heard some about Christmas, whose chosen date of December 25 coincided with the ancient sun festivals of the Solstice—even though Christians found a new sun (or light) in Jesus, as Alyssa described. When we turn to the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, we leave behind the sun and turn to the moon. Which is to say, unlike the ties of Winter Solstice and Christmas to the solar calendar, the dates of Hanukkah are determined by the Jewish lunar calendar. Specifically, Hanukkah begins on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the Jewish month of Kislev. Jewish Renewal Rabbi Arthur [Waskow explores](#) whether this date may be intentionally linked to the Greek sun festivals of the solar calendar. Reflecting on the war that preceded the peace which Hanukkah celebrates, Waskow notes that the Syrian Greeks who desecrated the Jewish temple to offer sacrifices to their gods did so on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev, perhaps to celebrate their winter solstice rituals. And when the Maccabean rebels won against the Syrians, they too chose the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev as the day to rededicate the Temple.

Much of today’s celebration of Hanukkah focuses on this rededication of the Temple and rekindling of the *ner tamid*, a sacred light over the ark, which burned constantly in the Temple as a symbol of G-d’s eternal presence. When the Maccabean priests were able to reenter the Temple after their military victory, they discovered only one day’s worth of oil, however this oil miraculously lasted a full eight days until additional sacred oil arrived.

As we heard in the choir anthem, “Bidi Bom,” Hanukkah is embraced as a joyful time, a “Festival of Lights.” On one level the celebration is simply about this miracle of the light remaining burning in the Temple. But, like many sacred stories, the meaning of the rekindled light has multiple levels.

The rekindled light is also about a military victory of the smaller army of the Maccabees over the Syrians. Considering this unequal dynamic reminds me of the Ukrainian army fighting for control of their country against the larger Russian nation—a nation that seems to be intentionally trying to turn off the lights in Ukraine. The ability to keep the light burning can be a sign of victory, of a hard-won peace.

And yet, scholars today have questioned the simple narrative of the underdog triumphing over the foreign oppressor. Others depict the Maccabean war as a [Jewish Civil War](#) between those who embraced the international, Hellenizing influence of the Greeks and those who sought to retain what they perceived to be an uncorrupted Judaism. For the latter, the Hanukkah light also shines for the triumph of Jewish identity that remains faithful to its traditions and cultures.

In a [2005 article](#) in *Slate* magazine, Rabbi James Ponet asks, “Was the bloody Maccabean civil war and revolt necessary to the survival of Jewish identity?” While some of his question has to do with the politics of the time, Ponet is also asking a question about Jewish identity. Ponet notes that the texts describing the events of Maccabean revolt come down to us in *Greek* texts. Additionally, he points to key words in Judaism with Greek roots: “*synagogue, diaspora, Sanhedrin* (the Rabbinic high court), and the very term *Judaism*.” Ponet comments, “the Jews somehow became Greek without ceasing to be Jews, even as light—the holiday’s metaphor—somehow becomes matter without ceasing to be energy.”

I find this metaphor compelling. In this telling, there are no firm edges between Jew and Greek, between matter and energy, between light and darkness. Rather there is a relationship. Ponet writes:

Here we find the historical miracle that Hanukkah implicitly celebrates: the capacity to sustain intimate relations with another without totally ceding your own sense of self, the ability to love without permanently merging, to be enchanted by the exquisite beauty of another without losing sight of your own charms. This relational art is ritualized on Hanukkah by the lighting of separate wicks or candles that build daily toward a unison of illumination.

In this telling, kindling the lights of Hanukkah calls us to keener awareness of our identity in relationships. The edges between self and others are not rigid, but like the flickering of a candle, exist in the ongoing dance between matter and energy, light and darkness.

Whether or not we celebrate Hanukkah or identify as Jewish, this story and the questions of identity can ask of us all how we understand who we are in relationship to groups—including groups like First Parish or to Unitarian Universalism more broadly. What is the light each of us seeks to individually bring to this community? How do we understand what it means to kindle the light of Unitarian Universalist identity and values within and beyond the walls of this community? Sometimes such questions can be matters of life and death as they were for the Maccabees. Sometimes we rekindle our sense of identity through family rituals, as so many Jewish families do

today by lighting the Menorah for eight nights of Hanukkah. Again and again, we are all called to these questions of identity, which the symbol of a shining light so often represents.

### First Parish – Lea Anderson, Chair, Parish Committee

Stephanie asks what is the light that each of us seeks to individually bring to this community? How do we understand what it means to kindle the light of UU identity and values within and beyond our walls?

Kindling the Light at First Parish is an apt metaphor for the visioning discussion that has been going on throughout the past three years..

In the Parish Committee Report published in The Unitarian in early 2020, the first glimmer was hinted at, as “we discussed our future vision of the church. We focused on a future ten years or tens of years out and discussed what we might want to think about now to help create our future. This was a wide-ranging discussion with no action items or specifics to coalesce around.” Despite the shadow that Covid cast not long after that report, we have come a long way. For those who have not been following the Visioning Team’s work closely, here is some history.

In the Fall of 2021 the Visioning Team (Ted Barnes, Jay Woodruff, Lynne Lipcon, and Annie Stubbs) was charged by the Parish Committee to seek out the vision for First Parish. A survey taking stock of the congregation’s well-being, our level of engagement, and our commitment to the future, went live a year ago this week. 114 of us responded.

Last February, sixty parishioners invested time in Focus Groups, which generated about eighty discrete ideas. Ideas fell into eight categories: Strengthening Our Sense of Community, Expanding the Ways in Which We Worship, Building Intergenerational Relationships, Augmenting Communications, Advancing Social Action, Planning Facilities to Meet Programmatic Needs, Reimagining Fund Raising, and Enhancing Our Presence in Wayland and Beyond.

This past summer, forty parishioners formed Exploration Groups and met to flesh out those ideas. At last month’s Parish Committee meeting, the Visioning Team recommended the first 18 projects for the congregation to undertake in the next year as we make our way past Covid and on to a brighter, more committed and more dynamic vision of ourselves as a liberal spiritual community.

These 18 projects include some programs that are already underway and others that are generating excitement before they have even started, such as Native Plantings for All Ages. Have you seen the interest expressed on UUSocial about plantings that attract hummingbirds?

Or connecting more with the UU Urban Ministry. First Parish is holding Watch Parties to tune into Community Conversations with Roxbury artists, educators, and businesspeople to learn ways to support minority businesses.

Or opening our facilities to community groups such as Arts Wayland who are presenting classical and jazz concerts, and piloting open mike nights at First Parish. Or increasing awareness of our educational programs in the wider community.

Today after the service you are invited to a Visioning Fair, which will be held downstairs in the Commons. You can ask questions, find a project that interests you, and if you like, sign up to be on an Implementation Team.

We are coming out of the darkness of the pandemic by shining a light on the ideas, values, hopes and dreams that will strengthen our community in the decades to come. We invite you to come along.

### Benediction

Having explored kindling the light in three religions and here at First Parish, we close now with this charge to bring light to the world:

Share Your Glorious Light With the World by James Morrison

Within each of our hearts there is a most glorious light.

Go forth, and let its spark help you understand what troubles both you and others;

Go forth, and let its light of reason be a guide in your decisions;

Go forth, and bring its ray of hope to those in need of help in both body and spirit, that they may find healing;

Go forth, and fan the flames of passion to help heal our world;

Go forth, and share your glorious light with the world.