

Light and Dark

A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

Delivered at the UU Church of Columbia

December 9, 2012

“Night is the test,” writes Nancy Shaffer, “when grief lies uncovered, And longing shows clear; when nothing we do can hasten earth’s turning or delay it.”

I imagine I am not the only one for whom this stanza rings true... who has lain in bed with my covers up to my chin but my fears and worries laid bare.

There’s something about the dark - not evil or treachery but mystery and unknowing - which strips away all the defenses we create to protect our inner selves in the bright light of day. Something about night’s inevitable arrival that strips away our illusions that we are in charge.

Perhaps there is still some Adam/Eve brain in us that meets each night as though it were the end of the world, without the wisdom to trust that the sun will rise once more.

Perhaps sleep takes us closer than we would wish to what we imagine of death.

Perhaps it is simply our stillness that opens the door to all that swirls madly within.

For whatever reason, each night since that first mythical evening, we have been huddling together by fires and lighting candles and seeking out stars to drive away the dark, knowing that, while they cannot hasten the return of the sun, they can herald the return of courage and hope.

So it is especially during this season of deepening dark – we light advent candles and Christmas lights, the oil lamps of Diwali and the candlelit menorahs of Channukah, the yule log and the bonfire.

This is the time of year when we join together to overcome the dark. In this time of longest nights, for millennia human have declared instead a season of light and hope.

What else is the story of Hannukah but a testament of miraculous courage and hope shining longer and brighter than anyone could imagine?

What else is the story of Christmas but a statement that Love Eternal is born unto us in the dark and the cold; that Emmanuel – God-with-us, comes amid our long nights of worry and fear - bringing a bright morning star and life abundant once more?

In this season of parties and carols and expected good cheer, we need these messages – stories that take seriously the depth of the dark even as they promise

the return of the light.

For this is also the season when our losses are most poignant and our wounds most raw.

We grieve for loved ones gone from our hearth, for the empty chair at the family table.

We long for beloved traditions now changed or lost in the passage of time.

This is the season when loneliness is felt most acutely and anxiety rears its head.

The tidings we ache for in the candlelight are often of comfort, more than joy.

This season of the heart requires our attention to the darkness.

For the darkness is with us, whether we will it or not - darkness that contains stillness as well as turmoil, growth as well as struggle.

And it is only through our presence to the dark that we can ever arrive once more at the light.

In this time of sleigh bells ringing and joy to the world, we often forget that this season, and our faith within it - takes seriously the suffering within and around us - and in doing so, offers us serious moments for hope.

In the story of Hannukah, the eight days of light from one day of oil come to drive away the residual darkness of oppression and violence after the Maccabbees defeat the forces of religious and ethnic persecution under which they had been laboring. God, we learn, is on the side of the oppressed, and the light of Peace and Freedom will always return.

And this period of Advent in the Christian calendar carries the very intentional message that Jesus, the Light of the World is born on earth when we prepare the way, through acts of love - when we wait together in the dark like shepherds in the field on a cold, clear night.

It is the message that new love comes most readily and most powerfully to the poor and lowly places, which exist around us and within our own hearts.

This is not to say that we must suffer first so that we can be redeemed, but rather that loss is a fact of love and suffering simply is. None remain untouched.

It is simply the case that there will be darkness, and we cannot circumvent it, no matter how much we yell at the sun to return to us. In the face of that simple truth, the path to the light is straight through the dark.

Our faith does not attempt to explain away the suffering in the world, but calls us to be present to it, and offers us in return a promise.

The promise is that, as we wait together in the dark, we will find wellsprings of courage and hope beyond our reasoning.

Perhaps in the dark we will find stillness and peace. Almost certainly we will find growth, however hard won.

The promise is that, even within and through our suffering we will discover deeper connection than we could have imagined and a reality of Love beyond our belief.

In this beautiful bittersweet life of passion and loss intertwined, have you not found this to be true? Even in your darkest times, have you not been held, whether by human hands, or divine embrace, or simply by the good earth beneath you?

The promise is that, in the darkness of our unknowing – within our sorrow and worry and fear – we meet God as the flame warming the night, as the candlelight flickering and the stars above twinkling to guide the way. We meet God in the still and quiet, and in the friend or stranger who walks with us through the dark, unafraid of our sorrow.

In my chosen worldview of process theology, God is not seen as an All-Powerful Puppeteer, able to manipulate the earth at his whim why inexplicably ignoring its great suffering.

Rather, the divine is described as an ever-changing spirit of creativity and love that accompanies us – in the personal language of one theologian “a fellow-sufferer who understands.”

The message of Emmanuel, God-with-us, is that we never walk alone. Our cries are not sent out into the void, but are held in an ever-present spirit of tenderness. The process theology God is one who weeps when we weep and rejoices when we rejoice.

This message resonates with my Universalist belief that *all* beings are held in a Love that we did not make and cannot earn, but which moves in and through each and every one of us, without exception.

We could use other styles of language. In the words of this morning’s poet, we could describe the theology adequate to the night as: Something that is the beginning of love, And also each part of how love is completed. Something so large, wherever we are, We are not separate.” But connected and transformed even by the darkness itself.

Or simply this – that in every place where the hopes and fears of all the years meet, even there, will be rest, and sure stars shining, and hands to hold yours.

So in this season of light, let us remember the dark. Let us see hope as the miracle in the candle light, courage as the miracle in the flames, and holy, amazing peace twinkling overhead in the stars that guide us, together, through every cold, dark night.