

Winter Tales
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario
Sunday, December 20, 2015

SERMON: “Winter Tales: Reflections” by the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

I will light Candles this Christmas;
Candles of joy despite all sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,

Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all the year long. [Howard Thurman]

If you're a person who has been muttering “Bah! Humbug!” for the past 8 or 9 weeks, ever since Christmas displays went up right after Thanksgiving, here is the gist of my message:

Be grateful for what you can.
Laugh when you get a chance.
Cry when you need to. [Tears release oxytocin, a neurochemical that provides a calming effect.]

Connect with people you love. Don't expend much time with those who suck your energy.

That's the message of my opening words/story: joy, hope, thanks, love.

[Now you can let your mind wander, or say la, la, la, la, la...]

With the recent snowfall and the drop in temperature, winter is upon us.
The bleak midwinter days of November & early December transition into crisp, cuttingly cold, but often sunny winter days.

The nights are long.

Like Lucia, we seek illuminating light.
We face the trolls of darkness – of body and spirit.
We confront the trolls of grief – loved ones no longer with us, or far away.

Though we may yearn for the uncomplicated joys of Christmas, for some of us this time is not – or has never been – uncomplicated.

Complicated families. Complicated lives. A person with whom we wish we might have spent just one more holiday season. An addiction. A sobering diagnosis.

Poet, philosopher, Catholic priest John O'Donohue writes:

A Blessing for One Who Is Exhausted [excerpt]

--by [John O'Donohue](http://www.awakin.org), syndicated from [awakin.org](http://www.awakin.org), Jun 02, 2014

When the rhythm of the heart becomes hectic,
Time takes on the strain until it breaks;
Then all the unattended stress falls in
On the mind like an endless, increasing weight,

The light in the mind becomes dim.
Things you could take in your stride before
Now become laborsome events of will.

Weariness invades your spirit.
Gravity begins falling inside you,
Dragging down every bone...

The winter Solstice arrives. Tomorrow – at 11:49pm.
Only eight hours of daylight; and a long sixteen hours of darkness.

At night we watch the stars, the gibbous waxing moon is full on December 25th.

In our hours of darkness we practice welcoming the silent night. Open ourselves to the calm. Put a little light in the window of our home and our hearts.

We gather together at this time – before the menorah, the kinara, the bonfire, the hearth.

The gifts we bring: warm bread and stories and our very presence with one another.

O'Donohue ends his blessing:

Take refuge in your senses, open up
To all the small miracles you rushed through.

Become inclined to watch the way of ~~rain~~ [snow]
When it falls slow and free.

Imitate the habit of twilight,
Taking time to open the well of color
That fostered the brightness of day.

Draw alongside the silence of stone
Until its calmness can claim you.
Be excessively gentle with yourself.

Stay clear of those vexed in spirit.
Learn to linger around someone of ease
Who feels they have all the time in the world.

Gradually, you will return to yourself,
Having learned a new respect for your heart
And the joy that dwells far within slow time.

We gather together at this time of year– before the menorah, the kinara, the bonfire, the hearth, the candle’s glow.

The gifts we bring: warm bread and stories and our very presence with one another.

This time of year we remember what the Christian holiday story is about – we are reminded by a sign on St. Mark’s Anglican Church in St. John’s, Newfoundland – “What the Christmas story is about: A Middle East family seeking refuge.”

“Welcome home.”

“You are safe here.”

“As salaam aleikum.”

Bienvenue au Canada, mes amis.”

“Welcome to Canada.”

A darned good story about warmth and welcoming and hope.

Theologian Martin Luther wrote: “Everything that is done in this world is done by hope.

Another story:

Buddhist Jewish Christian Hindu Christmas Story [author unknown]

Under a cultural-exchange program, Solomon Abramsky and his family – his wife, the couple’s three children, and Abramsky’s father – living in Montreal were hosts to a rabbi from Russia at Christmas time.

They decided to introduce the rabbi to a culinary treat that was probably not available in his country: They took him to their favorite Chinese restaurant.

Throughout the meal, the rabbi spoke excitedly about the wonders of North America in comparison to the bleak conditions in his homeland.

When they had finished eating, the waiter brought the check and presented each of them with a small brass Christmas-tree ornament as a seasonal gift.

They all laughed when Abramsky's father pointed out that the Christmas ornaments were stamped "Made in India."

But the laughter subsided when they saw that the rabbi was quietly crying.

Concerned, Abramsky's father asked the rabbi if he was offended because he'd been given a gift for a Christian holiday.

The rabbi smiled, shook his head and said, "Nyet. No. I was shedding tears of joy to be in a wonderful country in which a Buddhist gives a Jew a Christmas gift made by a Hindu!"

Sing:

Om mani padme om.

[Buddhist: “The sound of silence. The jewel in the lotus.” Sanskrit]

La illaha, il Allah hu.

[Muslim, Sufi. “There is no God but God” or “There is no one but the One.” Arabic]

Shalom. Shanti.

[Jewish, Hindu. "Peace." Hebrew & Sanskrit]

Gloria in excelsis Deo.

[Christian. "Glory to God in the highest." Latin]

We remember the warmth of family, friends, companions.
We greet those who arrive at our doors.
We affirm our commitment to the unity of all being, and to the dream of a bountiful table
welcoming to all.

Whatever gifts are given us, our thanks will bless them all.
However dark the world, hope will bring the light.

A herald star shines out on high, and that star is joy.
A star to guide and gather us,
as once it did above a humble town,
rejoicing in the season's gift of love.

We hold up our hopes for peace, joy and love in a dark, wintery world.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.

The Stories:

"Follow the Star" by Andy Mansfield

"The Latke Who Couldn't Stop Screaming: A Christmas Story" by Lemony Snicket

"Lucia and the Light" by Phyllis Root

"Three Wise Women" by Mary Hoffman