

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 9 December 2018

Be the Light

The darkness is fruitful. The Jewish scriptures tell us Jacob wrestled with an angel through the night, and won a blessing. The Israelites made their exodus from Egypt at night. At night, the Red Sea parted; at night, manna fell from heaven. At night, in the darkness, we rest and dream and, like seeds, we come to life.

Rev. Robert T. Weston writes, “This day of cold and gloom, chill wind and wet, holds in its grayness the restless urge of upward-straining life. Stoop down and listen; [push] aside dead leaves and see; under the ice crystals, ... there is movement, as, undismayed, life steadily thrusts upward, nourished by the dark.”

“In 1939, with fascism on the rise worldwide, and the Third Reich firmly planted among people — good, intelligent people, who claimed they never saw it coming, they must have been asleep, they’d just had no idea — in that darkening time, W.H. Auden, a young [English] poet, captured the despondency of the moment, and also, urgently, a flicker of hope.”¹

All I have is a voice
 To undo the folded lie,...
 And no one exists alone;...
 We must love one another or die.

He continues,

Defenseless under the night
 Our world in stupor lies;
 Yet, dotted everywhere,
 Ironic points of light
 Flash out where the Just

¹ Rev. Victoria Safford, *Light Within Light*, preached on 11/11/16 at White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church in Minnesota

Exchange their messages:
 May I, composed like them
 Of Eros and of dust,
 Beleaguered by the same
 Negation and despair,
 Show an affirming flame.²

“It is an ancient discipline,” writes my good colleague Victoria Safford, “an old, December discipline in the northern world, to watch for light [to appear], and nurture it, ... fan the little flame, draw other people toward it to warm their frozen hands and feet; to flare it up, and pass it on. This old religion, on the darkened side of winter solstice, mid-December, [is to sing] the sun back into the sky when the long nights threaten to swallow the world.”³

Some of you will remember the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes — Calvin, a boy; and Hobbes, a stuffed animal, a tiger. In one strip, Calvin is worried. Kicking the ground, he says, “Since September, it’s just gotten colder and colder. There’s less daylight now, ... too. O, no! This can only mean one thing. The sun is going out! In a few more months, the earth will be a dark and lifeless ball of ice.”

Calvin consults with his father, and comes back to report to Hobbes. “Dad says the sun isn’t going out. He says it’s getting colder because our hemisphere is tilted away from the sun now.” Picture this boy with a look of pure disbelief and vague disgust. He continues, “Isn’t it sad how some people’s grip on their lives is so precarious that they’ll embrace any preposterous delusion rather than face an occasional bleak truth?”

Victoria Safford continues, “We think [we’ve] outgrown [or] outwitted the pagan urgency, but our hearts have not. This is old religion at Chanukah, at Advent, building the light, candle by candle, night after night, with nothing to go on but legends and trust.... This is ... an ancient discipline, to watch for the light, not to let it go out, [to show an] affirming flame.”⁴

² W.H. Auden, excerpted from “September 1, 1939,” from *Another Time*

³ Rev. Victoria Safford, *op cit*

⁴ *ibid*

Sometimes I think — and I assume a lot of us think, if we let ourselves indulge in this kind of thinking — Who are we to be bearers of the light? Especially in these times, who are we to do it? The task is so daunting!

Here's one answer.

My Episcopal colleague Gail Goodwin serves a small-town church in the Smokey Mountains. On a Sunday morning just like this — in the midst of Chanukah and Advent — she did something I would never risk doing. But it was brilliant.

For the opening of the service, Gail chose a teenager to read the genealogy of Jesus. She writes, “Jennifer mounted to the pulpit. I had instructed her to count to twenty silently before she began to read, and I could feel her honoring every digit, despite her eagerness to start.

“The Genealogy of Jesus Christ, from the first chapter of Matthew. The story of the origin of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham:

“Abraham was the father of Isaac;

“Isaac was the father of Jacob;

“Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers;

“Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar;

“Perez was the father of Hezron;

“Hezron was the father of Aram;

“Aram was the father of Amminadab;

“Amminadab was the father of Nahshon....”

And on and on and on. “The recitation of the genealogy took three minutes and ten seconds. Jennifer had clocked it beforehand with her stopwatch....

“[Gail says,] The baffled looks could be seen kicking in before [she] got to Amminadab and had spread over most faces by the time she reached Rehoboam. If I had dared to do this [as] part of the sermon, there would have been raised eyebrows before Perez and silent mutiny before Boaz....

“By the time she had launched, with Jeconiah, into the final fourteen-generation home stretch to Jesus, most faces were alternating between polite resignation and piqued interest.... The exceptions were Chase Zorn, whose eyes were riveted on Jennifer, and his pew neighbor Grace Munger, whose haughty countenance maintained an emphatic attention throughout; periodically, she gave

small nods, as though she wanted it clear that all of these names were perfectly familiar to her.

“Thus the total generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the Babylonian Exile fourteen more generations, and finally from the Babylonian Exile to Christ fourteen more generations.”

So what’s the point?

“The story of the origin of Jesus ... begins with Abraham begetting Isaac; no mention of that deserving elder son, poor unfairly banished Ishmael. Then Isaac begets Jacob; not a word about his elder brother Esau whose birthright Jacob stole. Jacob begets Judah and his brothers; why is Judah chosen, and not the good and extraordinary Joseph?” The point, says Rev. Gail Goodwin, is that G*d does not necessarily select the noblest or most deserving person to carry out divine purpose. “Matthew’s genealogy [shows] us how the story of Jesus ... contained — and would continue to contain — the flawed and inflicted and insulted, the cunning and the weak-willed and the misunderstood. His is an equal opportunity ministry for crooks and saints.

“And what about that final fourteen generations of unknown, or unremarkable, names...? Who was Azor, or Achim?... Or even this Matthan, who was, according to Matthew, Jesus’ great grandfather? What did they do?....

Rev. Gail Goodwin continues, This is “where the message settles [squarely on] us. If so much powerful stuff [was] accomplished down through the millennia by wastrels, betrayers, and outcasts ... — through people who were such complex mixtures of sinner and saint — and through so many obscure and undistinguished others, isn’t that a pretty hopeful testament to the likelihood that [we might be of use], with our individual flaws and gifts, in all manner of peculiar and unexpected ways?”⁵

American author Annie Dillard writes, “There were no formerly heroic times, and there was no formerly pure generation. There is no one here but us chickens, and so it has always been: A people busy and powerful, knowledgeable, ambivalent, important, fearful, and self-aware; a people who scheme, promote, deceive, and conquer; who cry for their loved ones, and long to flee misery and skip death. It is a weakening and discoloring idea, that rustic people knew G*d

⁵ Rev. Gail Goodwin, “Genealogy and Grace,” in *Watch for the Light*, “December 16”

personally once upon a time ...but that it is too late for us. In fact, the [holy] is available to everyone in every age. There never was a more holy age than ours, and never a less.”⁶

Rev. Gail Goodwin concludes, “Who of us can say we’re not in the process of being used right now, this [Chanukah, this] Advent, to fulfill some purpose whose grace and goodness would boggle our imagination if we could even begin to get our minds around it.”⁷

Who are we to be bearers of the light? Who are we not to be?

I’ll close with a story from my famed colleague Robert Fulghum, from a time he was attending a seminar with Athenian philosopher, politician, and teacher Alexander Papaderos. On the final day, Dr. Papaderos “stood in the bright Greek sunlight of an open window [and asked,] ‘Are there any questions?’” The seminar “had generated enough questions for a lifetime; Fulghum, always good for a laugh, raised his hand and asked, “What is the meaning of life?” Everyone laughed and began to stir and prepare to leave. But Dr. “Papaderos held up his hand and said, “I will answer your question.”

He took his wallet out of his pocket and slid out a “very small, round mirror about the size of a quarter.... ‘When I was a small child during [World War II],’ he began, we lived in a remote village. We were very poor. One day, along the road, I found the pieces of a broken motorcycle mirror. “I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it [just wasn’t] possible. So I kept only the largest piece — this one.

“And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it, ... and became fascinated ... that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun could never shine.... It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places ... I could find.”

For years, I would take out this mirror in idle moments and play this game. But over time, “I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game, but a metaphor for what I might do with my life.”

⁶ Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*

⁷ Rev. Gail Goodwin, *op cit*

Alexander Papaderos continued, “I came to understand that I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light [or truth or understanding or knowledge] into the dark places of this world, [the dark places of human hearts] ... and change [things for the better].

“Perhaps others, [seeing it happen, will] do likewise. This is what I am about; this is the meaning of my life.”

“And then, [with] his small mirror ... [he caught] the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them” on Bob Fulghum’s face.

Fulghum concludes this story, “Any questions?”⁸

Beloved spiritual companions,

The darkness is fruitful.

As we watch for light,
let us build the light, candle by candle —
kindle it, nurture it, fan the little flame,
flare it up, pass it on,
and not let it go out.

Who are we to be bearers of the light?
Who are we not to be?

May we reflect light into the darkness.
May we be the light.

Amen.

⁸ Robert Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*, pp. 174-177