

A Light in the Dark

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Imagine yourself, if you would, in a large room, in a vast hall, as though it were the main room of a cathedral or an ancient place of worship. And it is dark in the room. Not so dark as to be frightening or to make you feel disoriented and cut off but dark as the darkness of a womb, the darkness of quiet, the darkness of the winter.

You have entered this room and left the tumult of the world behind you for a little bit. Outside the world is raging in chaotic and turbulent ways. In this room, there is some quiet and some peace.

And at the far end, or in the middle of the room - you cannot exactly tell which - there is a small lamp burning, giving off the soft, yellowish light of a candle. It speaks of peacefulness and faithfulness, as though this candle has been burning there for a very long time.

As you approach the lamp and as your eyes become more accustomed to the low level of light, you see that there are objects scattered on the table around the lamp. Some pieces of metal - perhaps they are forks or spoons, some pearls and pieces of jewelry, and a pen or two, a variety of things. There are some pieces of paper, and some cloth. A piece of bread, broken to reveal the earthiness inside, a pear. There is a knife as well, its sharp edge catching some of the light. Off to the edge is an old balance, its small pans empty, the brass of the stand and chains worn, sitting poised, waiting for something to consider and weigh. These objects take on life as you approach, the light from the lamp throwing shadows, revealing shape and color. It might be a scene as painted by Johannes Vermeer.

You could imagine that simple and human activities take place here. People have eaten bread and fruit, drunk wine or water. They have put precious objects on the scale to measure the worth, perhaps traded those objects for other things. No doubt people have talked here, of things profound and mundane. The presence of community is all around you, and the light brings great comfort and peace. It brings your eye and mind into focus; your breathing deepens and lengthens; the light draws you into its world; it bathes you in the warm glow of its light.

It may have been such a scene some two thousand plus years ago as the Maccabees entered the inner parts of the temple to check the lamp of the Sabbath. Outside, their world was in turmoil; they had barricaded themselves in the temple after battle - they were a people at war - and they wondered when an assault would come. Their temple had been desecrated by Antiochos and his Greek idols. But in the middle of the desecration, there were still all these human objects.

The story is well known to us all: how the Maccabees, a family a tribe, a group of Jews defended themselves against the Syrians in order to reclaim their temple, and how, after the Maccabees had miraculously won the battle, they set about to re-consecrate the temple, and how, in order for the temple flame to be kept lit, new oil had to be consecrated, a process which took eight days, and how, though there was but one day's supply of oil left, the lamp kept burning the whole eight days.

We know the story and we certainly have our interpretation of it - not surprisingly one about freedom of belief, about religious freedom. It is a story which might even ring with a bit more resonance these days what with our worries about religion in public life and the growing influence of a more exclusive view of religion and faith. Here we are, Unitarian Universalists, religious liberals, defending ourselves against the armies of the fundamentalists.

Now we know that Hanukkah is not a major religious holiday in Judaism, and its importance has every bit as much to do with the commercial ubiquity of Christmas as anything, but these days it might stand as an apt metaphor for our inner sanctuaries - at least our civic one.

After all, our public temple has been desecrated by idols – the idols of fundamental Christianity, of anti-science, of intolerance, of prejudice, of the assault on civil rights, the imperial presidency, the use of torture – and our faith, our faith, centered on freedom and reason and tolerance is threatened.

So I light this first candle for liberal religion and for tolerance.

There is an irony here. The Macabbees were warriors and zealots. The kingdom they established was reactionary; the idols of Antiochos stood closer to the ideals of reason and tolerance. The Macabbees were not a peaceful group; they took the temple by storm. Violence was the means by which the Syrians were defeated. How are we to understand this? Is it possible that the conclusion of war is peace? Is peace possible only through violence?

How is it possible that out of the maelstrom of the world peace might be found; where does serenity lie in our lives? Where, I ask, in the midst of all of the violence in the world, are there points of serenity where peace might be experienced? Isn't it true that peace can only come from peace, that peace without starts with peace within?

I imagine that, for the Macabbees, it was in the temple where peace was found, in the innermost rooms of the temple where that lamp stayed lit for eight days.

And so this second candle I light for those recesses of serenity and peace in our lives, wherever they may be.

I know this was my sermon for last week, the search for quiet,, but hold on for a bit; I won't be staying there. It was this image of the inner sanctuary – the candle and the objects that brought Vermeer to mind. I had been going through my books this last week for some direction for the sermon and came upon my book on Vermeer, and it led me here.

In a New Yorker article some years ago, there was an extraordinary article about the Bosnia war-crimes trial that occurred in the Hague. The author wrote about listening to the beginnings of the trial, and speaking with one of the judges, about the atrocities alleged to have been committed by a young Serb, Dusko Tadic. The crimes with which he was charged were awful. Of course this brings to mind our current situation and the use of torture by our own country and what an absolute betrayal of our own ideals it is. There are many things I disagree with in our leadership, but for this I am ashamed.

The author asked the Dutch judge how he could not go mad, listening to the testimony, and the judge responded by saying that as often as possible he would go over to the Maruitshuis Museum and spend some time with the Vermeers.

Vermeer is my favorite painter. Ever since I walked into a room in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, just after a roomful of Rembrandts with their power and depth and craft, and saw Vermeer's painting of a woman in blue reading a letter, I have been captured by Vermeer.

I know of no other artist who has so expressed grace and peace more than Vermeer. There is an inner light; there is serenity both captured and transmitted. In the aftermath of the shooting in Omaha, the continued travesty of Guantanamo; the horrors in Iraq, the brutality of fundamentalism, taking some refuge in Vermeer helps me. It is a light in the dark.

As the author of the New Yorker article wrote:

I was reminded of a cautionary comment made to a group of us well over twenty five years ago - in the midst of some frenzied political crisis or another - by a medieval historian visiting from England. Observing our hyper-ventilating excitement, this fellow calmly cited the story of Jesus on the waters in Matthew 8: 23-27, going on to note sardonically how it had always seemed to him that the point of the story was that in moments of crisis one mustn't allow the storm to enter oneself, but should, instead, find peace inside oneself and then breathe it out.

And it now seemed to me, sitting among the Vermeers that afternoon in the Maruitshuis, that that was exactly what the master of Delft had been about in his life's work: at a tremendously turbulent juncture in the history of his continent, he had been finding - and, yes, inventing - a zone filled with peace, a small room, an intimate vision ... and then breathing it out.'

This third candle I light for Johannes Vermeer and the art of breathing out zones filled with peace.

It seems to me that we forget this all too often, this importance of Vermeer's vision. There is no doubt that this world is a hubbub; the examples of violence and injustice are all about us. There is peace promised, now, in so many places, but the hatred between people is enormous. This is central to what we promise here – a zone filled with peace, a vision of a more abundant life.

And so it must have been for the Macabbees. They lived in violent times; their world was hounded by war and hatred. And so I imagine that in some way they had their own Vermeer as well, they had that zone of quiet, that calm in the midst of the storm so that they were not engulfed. How else could the lamp stay lit?

We need this vision; we need not to be engulfed by the storm.

I wish I could capture what Vermeer does, but, well, you'll have to settle for me. He is one of those artists who captured the transcendent; he included the light of God in his paintings. His articulation of light and dark and perspective, the intimacy in his paintings, the fact that I feel like I am catching a real moment in life, that something human is going on is nothing less than an act of transcendence. His paintings are not grand, not vast, not deep, but they are deeply and profoundly human and that, in the most deeply human is how he depicts the holy.

The reading about falling out of bed, remember? Vermeer takes us right into the center of life.

For the human things of life, the light and the dark, the pitcher of milk, the red hat, the compass, the balance, the letter, the music instrument, I light this fourth candle.

Perhaps you know his painting of a young woman, glancing over her shoulder at the viewer, wearing a blue turban, a large pearl earring, lips parted, skin pure. Is her glance just turning to Vermeer or just beginning to turn away? Where does that inner light which radiates from her come? How is such peace and repose possible?

This fifth candle is for us as we gather in search of the holy and as we honor what is sacred.

There is something else, though, about Vermeer that matters - his paintings always point outward or forward. To me they are about hope – the girl with pearl earring looking at us with longing, the girl reading a letter or the maid pouring milk, the astronomer or geographer or painter, the view of Delft – all of these point past themselves to something beyond. They are not paintings of sorrow or despair but filled with hope. Not dramatic hope, but a hope dependent on the human and humane activities of everyday life, those available to us all.

This is what we promise each other here -to help each other find hope. We offer this to and ask it from our new members. Seekers of the light in the dark together. This is the point of faith, after all, to find the light when times are dark, to offer hope. We have welcomed new members today in this journey of hope, of the promise that when the world is dark, we will find light.

There are still three candles left, and again, this year, I will leave them unlit and trust that someone will come up after the service and that they will be lit before I blow them out.

We often force ourselves too much, trying to get everything in, trying to make sure that everything has been done just right. So I am going to leave something undone and trust that the light will shine anyway that all of these eight candles, whatever they may stand for, will be lit at some point and will

shine brightly. No one of us here needs to feel responsible for lighting everything because here we can trust that we share enough light in community.

Yet all of these candles are lit with this one, with this ninth candle and it has meaning too. The ninth day of Hanukkah is the day after, the day when the celebration has ended and we return to the ordinariness of our lives; it is the day which stretches into eternity, the day on which it is seen whether the inspiration of lighting our candles has truly lifted our spirits and strengthened our hearts, the day on which we live out and make durable those values and hopes burning so brightly here, the day on which we will see if the darkness has returned or whether our faith will endure. The days in which our hopes turn into reality.

The ninth candle is the candle of our lives, of our daily lives. It is the candle of loyalty and vision; it is the candle of steadfastness; it is the candle of love; it is the candle which tells whether we are living as we should; it is the candle of our faith. This is the candle Vermeer saw and painted; it sheds the light which illuminates our lives; it is the inner light.

Our purpose in life, after all, is to live good lives, to do what we can to make this a better world than we received it, to do no harm and help those in need.

This ninth candle, the candle of your life. May that burn brightly.

Amen