
LIGHT ONE CANDLE

a sermon given by the Rev. Rosemary Lloyd
Sunday, December 21, 2008
at the First Church in Boston

Today is the longest day of the year...in Antarctica! Indeed, the sun will not set on Emperor penguins, tabular icebergs, or majestic glaciers today.

But for us, people living in New England, this is the shortest day and the longest night of the year. It is Winter Solstice. Good Solstice to you all!

We reveled in the darkness by candlelight here in this Sanctuary on Thursday night, finding peace in winter poems and silence and lyrical Celtic music. And we lifted up the gifts that are to be discovered in this, the darkest time of the year. Simple gifts like the sound of children's voices, patience, the spirits of our departed loved ones, hope for peace, this loving community of free faith.

It is a season of gifts, of giving and receiving. Of remembering our friends and those we love. Of coming together for warm company, sharing the shelter of good cheer, food, songs, stories and light.

Still, it is a dark time. We flick on the lights at 4:00 to chase the gloom of early dusk away...unless you happen to be living in a large swath of Massachusetts, New Hampshire or Maine and are still without electricity all these days later. Let us take a moment to send the light and warmth of our prayers to all who are cold, especially to the men and women working the lines and driving the trucks and managing the logistics to restore power quickly. May they get home safe and warm soon.

We are grateful that so many people are living out the maxim, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

But my, oh my, the cursing comes so easily! This season has been deeply marred on a grand scale by grand scheme betrayals. So, it is not altogether surprising that we may be having trouble finding the inherent blessings, lessons and grace of the season.

My small gift to you this morning is to try to brush away the icy debris that may be piling up on your otherwise holly-decked and holy holiday spirit. Taking a page from one of my favorite NPR programs, *This American Life* with Ira Glass, I give you a sermon in three short parts:

Chapter 1: The Generator

Chapter 2: Zach

Chapter 3: Babies

The Generator

Nearly 1 million people in New England were without power last week. Thousands are still waiting for electricity to be restored. But from throughout the region, stories are emerging of neighbors helping neighbors...and complete strangers, too.

Midweek, in Central Massachusetts, the power was coming back on, street by street. But one young family with a 3-year old still didn't have heat or light. Mom couldn't go to work because the daycare center was closed (no power). During the day,

she was spending time at her in-law's small house where they had a generator that was working. Meanwhile, her husband, a lumberjack, was out with the repair crews clearing fallen trees and branches. At night they did their best to keep warm.

The mother-in-law wished she could do more. She went out to find a generator for the young family's house, but area suppliers were completely sold out! She noticed, though, that some of the houses very close to the town center had power again. Seeing a nearby house with its lights ablaze, she summoned up her mother-lion courage and knocked on a total stranger's door. When the door was answered, she said: "I see your power is back on..." "Yes," answered the woman, "What a relief!"

Mother-in-law, nerve in hand, continued: "Do you, by any chance, have a generator we could borrow until our power comes back on?"

Without pausing a beat, the welcoming stranger said, "Of course!"

The lumberjack husband came with his truck to the stranger's house that dark, cold afternoon and hauled the loaned generator home, where it is now warm and light again.

Chapter 2: Zach

Zach grew up hearing the "apocryphal but revealing myth of King Christian and the Danish stars"¹ from his mother, Chaplain Kate Braestrup. Kate's father's family was Danish, so this story belongs to their family narrative. This is how she told it to her children:

"When the Nazis marched in and took over a country, one of the first things they did was to see who was a Jew and who wasn't. In Denmark they told the king that he must order all his Jewish subjects to sew a star onto their clothes. King Christian was afraid. He knew that the Nazis hated the Jews, but he didn't always know who the Jews were. The yellow stars would make it easier to find the Jews in Denmark, [and] take them away to a prison..."

"King Christian couldn't refuse to do what the Nazis told him to do. They were too powerful. So he did something very simple and smart. He ordered all the Jews to wear the yellow star..."

"But then he gave a second order. All the people in Denmark, whether they were Jewish or not, had to wear a yellow star. And he [the King] proudly sewed a yellow star onto his own royal robe. The Nazis would search in vain for their victims among all the stars in Denmark." In this way, the Danes managed to preserve the lives of nearly all its Jewish citizens during that dark era.

This was a formative story for Zach. For us, it is inspiring to learn how deeply it took root and was lived out when Zach was in middle school. He told his mother, "When the other kids want to say someone is wrong or dumb, they call him gay or a fag. They said I must be gay, too, when I told them to knock it off....I've decided....I'm going to sew a rainbow patch onto my backpack. It stands for being gay, and proud, too....It's like the stars for the Danish Jews, right, Mom?"

Zach is grown now. He has joined the Marines. This isn't easy for his mother, a chaplain. There is a war on, and no mother wants her son to go into harms way. No

¹ From a story by Chaplain Kate Braestrup in *Reader's Digest*, Dec. 2008, p 190-194.

mother raises a son to kill other mothers' sons....But Zach thought carefully about this and he thought about all the other young men and women who are serving in Afghanistan and Iraq and he asked himself: "Why them and not me?"

Chapter 3: Babies

My Uncle Mike used to say that babies are like fires; we can just sit and watch them without speaking for long stretches of time, alone with our thoughts and the imaginings of our hearts. Just watching a tiny baby yawn and stretch, breathe and sleep, all our hopes and our fears flicker behind our eyes, and are reflected in the light of a newborn child.

This is part of our family narrative.

We were all born into this world babies. Like light. Like fire. We were all born to let our light shine and the fire of our passion for life flame!

"You are the light of the world," says the book of Matthew (5:14-16) "A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

A very interesting characteristic of a lighted candle is this: it doesn't cost the candle anything to share its flame. Sure, the candle burns down over time, and a harsh wind can whip it about and even extinguish it. But another dry wick leaning into the flame doesn't take anything from the burning candle. It only increases the light.

"At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person," wrote Albert Schweitzer. "Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us."

Sometimes, a long walk is part of the gift.

Sometimes it takes courag--just plain being nervy--to generate light.

Sometimes we can look into a baby's face and see our hope, our possibility, reflected there.

Sometimes we can harvest our family stories, our guiding myths, to bolster our sense of solidarity with others--especially those who are marginalized, trampled on, or in harm's way.

Sometimes we need to resist asking, "Why me?" It's really not a helpful question. Instead, our inner light needs to ask, "Why them and not me?"

Sometimes, we only have to be ourselves, open, willing to share. Not hiding our light under a bushel basket, but out, shining like a light on a lampstand, giving light to all in the house, the congregation, the community, the world. Because sometimes, others need to be able to simply lean in a little to catch a spark from you.

In a commentary on the Hanukkah story, Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote: "There is no use pretending that the sun is always bright; there is no use pretending that the moon is always full. It is only by recognizing the season of darkness that we know it is time to light the candles."

May this season of Light be brightened by the candles we choose to light. May you feel their warmth and glow this holy season. Share your light and know the joy that lives in your heart even in the darkness.

Good Solstice. Happy Hanukah. Merry Christmas.
AMEN.