

Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick, Intern Minister
December 21, 2015
Theme: Time
Sermon: "If You Believe"

Does anyone here believe in ghosts?
Ghosts of Christmas pasts, presents, or yet to come?

Growing up in New England on spooky old boarding school campuses where my parents worked, I can say without flinching that I believe in ghosts. Murmurs in the halls, moving shadows in the windows, footsteps in the rooms, and disembodied taps on the shoulder were as common in my childhood as grass stains on my clothes and macaroni and cheese dinners. These ghostly encounters continue to this day, I might add. Just the other week home for thanksgiving in the midst of a blackout power outage on campus, I turned to my head to look at an empty building and noticed a light turning on and off in the room, and there was also that time fairly recently I woke up in the night in my to find that "save yourself" had been scrawled on my bedroom wall.

I believe in ghosts.

Now before I continue, I know, I know, you're thinking, Intern - Hillary, it's December, it's ok, we'll go with this ghost theme cause we're nice, but Halloween and the time for a haunted house sermon was a couple months ago.

Worry not though, I am well aware that it is not October, well aware that today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sixth day of Hanukah, the Wiccan Yuletide feast, and Samuel L. Jackson's birthday. And I also realize none of those holidays are traditionally associated with ghosts. But, I would like to point out that today is the winter solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year. And on top of being the longest night of the year, it is also a New Moon, so not only will tonight be the longest night of the year, it will also be the longest darkest night of the year. And in my opinion, the longest darkest night of the year is a fine time to talk about ghosts.

So good morning! Happy Hannukah, Merry Christmas, Happy Birthday Samuel L. Jackson, Yuletide greetings, and a big shout out to the ghosts!

When I was a child our household hauntings tended to drive me running to my parent's room night after night. Sleeping on the edge of their bed next to the warm safety of my mother was the only way I could fall asleep. There was one night of the year, however, that I wasn't scared and always stayed in my bed the whole night, Christmas Eve. Despite my English Teacher father's penchant for Dickens' Christmas Carol, I always felt safe from ghosts on Christmas Eve. The peaceful and joyful songs we would sing before bed, the colorful lights that we would leave on all night long, the Oreos and eggnog left on our kitchen table for ol St. Nick along with carrots for his reindeer, all seemed to create a shield of magic and light that I could play and dance, and sleep in peace behind just for Christmas. Any footsteps on Christmas Eve were those of Santa, and strange lights were

from Rudolph's nose, any rustlings in my room were those of the dancing sugar plum fairies, any pokes on my feet or neck were the elves. Not the ghosts. The night and day always felt so safe, always felt like a time when even scary things lightened up a bit and became merry.

As I've grown older this feeling of safety at Christmas has lingered with me. However, it's evolved to manifest more as a feeling of vulnerability than security. I expect that it will be safe this time of year, and thus I let my guard down thinking that all is calm and all is bright. The fairies are out and the ghosts are at peace, a magical shield surrounds us all. So when news of horrific school shootings, of torture reports, of campus assaults, and ongoing racial injustice pour in day after day, not only does each headline startle and upset me, like a bodiless moan or slamming door in the night, it makes me wonder where all the magic is and where all the fairies went.

As Christmastime comes and goes, and with it each year a new set of horrors or disasters, sometimes I find myself asking not where the magic went, but rather whether it ever existed at all.

If your penchant for the story of Peter Pan is half as great as mine, you will know that the last thing you ever want to do is say that you don't believe in fairies. Whereas every time you do, one drops down dead. This really does not help the crisis at hand. Thus I try to avoid this doubtful state at all costs, and hold on to magical moments where all is calm and all is bright extra tightly this time of year. Slowing my wheels to look at Christmas light displays, lifting my nose in the air as I pass Christmas tree sellers, eating a lot of fudge, singing carols with friends just to be silly, pausing in the midst of a bustling city square just to watch and listen for a moment or two. The magic and brightness is there. It is always there. The fairies are just hopping around on our heads and peaking in our bags as we sip our eggnog lattes and bustle about town, caught up in the spirit and pizzazz of it all.

In the midst of the holiday festivities it is easy to find magic, and what is great about this time of year is that sources of joy, play, beauty, and sweetness become obvious in December. In some ways though, getting lost in the shopping, the sugar, and spirit of it all can feel like a turning away of sorts, a forgetting, or a denial of the suffering and ghosts swarming our world, or simply our neighborhood, or family. I suppose in times of sadness, darkness, and ghosts, a little shop and sugar therapy never hurt anyone, but this is yuletide, Christmastime, a festival of light, hope and peace. It is a month of light in the darkness, the longest darkest darkness. It is not a month of light and only light.

As I've grown older and worked to hold close the light of these times while also respecting the darkness, I've begun to understand December as a teaching month. The lights and darks of these weeks are so extreme, joy and sorrow, hope and doubt, company and loneliness, peace and stress are available to us at almost any given moment to experience on a wide spectrum of intensities. If we pause to feel the push and pull of the fairies and ghosts in one direction or the other, we can learn a great deal about the flexibility of our minds and hearts, opening and closing, guarding and welcoming. We

can also come to understand just how ephemeral our thoughts and feelings are. There is solace in recognizing the transience of our minds, there is peace in the thought of impermanence, in realizing, this will pass and something else will come. In December things pass and things arrive, pass, and arrive, pass and arrive with such noticeable frequency, there are many opportunities to play with our minds, watch our hearts, and feel our bodies carried along for the ride.

And in the midst of all the comings and goings, there is December. Bleak, grey, stark, dark December. Just making space, being still, and quiet. The world around us is so naked right now. The trees are bare, the brown ground is not insulated by any clean snow, the sky is blank and unmoving. It is as though nature is reminding us to be vulnerable now. To just feel it all. The sun keeps the days short so we can go to sleep early, when all the feelings are just too much. The darkness of these days in this sense serves as a symbol of peace and comfort. Nature's permission to stop hurrying and fretting, and just rest.

But the worry is still there, though. And the news keeps coming in, and bleakness can all just seem so cold and sad. Don't you think?

As I've grown older, the option to run whimpering into my parent's room at the sound of a grumble or pound in the night is no longer available to me. Thus, there was a time at one point in my life when I had to learn to just stay in my bed and deal. It was by forcing myself to be brave in the dark that I learned to pray. Not prayers to a God to protect me, or Hail Mary's, or Buddhist mantras, not even pleas to the fairies, rather I would recite prayers to the ghosts.

"I mean you no harm, please be at peace. I mean you no harm, please be at peace. I mean you no harm please be at peace. I pray that you want the same peace for me."

Lying in my bed, curled up in a tight ball, with my head under the covers and pillows guarding me on all sides around the edge of the bed, I would repeat this prayer over and over again. Sometimes I still do. What I find after the second or third repetition is that I usually begin to feel a great wave of happiness and peace wash over me, relaxing my stomach and chest, and leading me to lift my from under the blankets. Before long, like magic, I am fast asleep.

What comforts me in this prayer is the great and honest desire expressed in it to relieve others, ghosts in this case, of suffering. When I am feeling low and the world seems broken beyond repair, I find that this prayer will, magically, come into my mind. And as I walk the streets, ride to work, stand in line at Market Basket, or read the times, I will repeat the lines, "I mean you know harm, please be at peace, I mean you know harm, please be at peace, I mean you no harm, please be at peace, I pray that you want the same for me." Until my heart feels swollen three times too large, I notice the eyes and voices of people, I feel the sadness and joy ebbing through it all, and I am in love again with the magic of the world.

When I was a child I dressed up as Peter Pan, pretty much every single day from ages 4 to 7. When I got home from school I would immediately dawn my green shorts, green polo shirt, green tights, and green hat with a seagull feather in it that I got from the beach colored with a red marker. I would spend the majority of my afternoons, much to the chagrin of my parents yelling happy thoughts and jumping on and off the furniture hoping to fly. When told to go outside, which eventually always happened, I would then get to work wandering around the back yard clapping my hands and yelling “I believe!” “I believe!” I was of course, bringing the fairies back to life.

My prayer to the ghosts is no different than my calls to the fairies. It is all shadow work, acceptance of the dark, welcoming the light and finding the space for love in both. Find love in the dark, and the love of the light will carry you onward.

Clap if you believe in ghosts.

Clap if you believe in fairies.

Clap if you believe.

The darkness is not bad. It should not be cast as the evil character in our December holiday pageant. In it there is space. There is good.