

Dec 22, 2019

Claire Feingold Thoryn

First sermon back after sabbatical

Theme: Awe

Welcome:

Good morning! Welcome to Follen Church!

I am Rev. Claire Feingold Thoryn. It is my special delight to be here in this pulpit having returned after a lovely and restful sabbatical. I am rejuvenated and grateful for my time away, and very glad to be back with you all again.

Welcome, everyone.

Whether you light the menorah or light the Christmas tree, you are welcome here.

Whether you say Happy Holidays or Bah humbug, you are welcome here.

Whether you are a white lights person or a rainbow lights person or a mix of both, you are welcome here.

Whether you have a fragrant pine tree in your home from Follen's own lot, or you assembled your faux tree out of a box, you are welcome here.

Whoever you are, whoever you have been, whoever you love, you are welcome here.

Our service today has lots of klezmer music, and klezmer music is almost impossible NOT to dance to, so if you get up and start dancing in the aisles, well, I might join you.

If you are visiting us for the first time, our community welcomes you to our new space, which is now fully accessible for people of all ages, abilities and genders. Hooray!

Please join us after the service for coffee and refreshments downstairs in our Community Center room, which you can reach by elevator or stairs through this door.

Our children are always welcome in the sanctuary, and many of our community's children are enjoying a pajama party right now. If there are any young folks here who want to join them, our ushers can show you where to go.

Speaking of ushers, we are grateful to them and to our hosts, for helping us get to our seats and get comfortable—ushers and hosts, please wave! If you have any questions about Follen Church, ask them or our Membership Coordinator Andy Wells-Bean, or one of the friendly faces in our pews.

Please join us on Tuesday for one of our three Christmas Eve services. Christmas Eve is truly my favorite church experience of the year.

At 4:00 we'll have a shorter service designed with our youngest members in mind, led by Director of Religious Education Beryl Aschenberg.

At 7:30 and 9:30 I will lead services of readings and carols, with a band at the first one and a traditional choir at the second one. Please come and celebrate with us.

Now let us begin our worship service by widening the welcome to those around us! Please greet your neighbor and introduce yourself.

Call to Worship: In honor of the first night of Hanukkah, beginning tonight, I bring us together in worship with this message of hope from Rabbi David Hartman.

He writes that ancient rabbis wondered why it was that the miracle of Hanukkah was celebrated for eight days, and not seven days. For, of course, there was sufficient oil to light the lamp for one day—the surprise was that the lamp continued to burn for seven more miraculous days.

What Rabbi Hartman suggests is that the miraculous feature of the initial day was “the community’s willingness to light the lamp in spite of the fact that the anticipated period of burning was short-lived.”

The community did not know if their efforts would succeed, and yet instead of giving up, they lit the lamp anyway.

Hanukkah, in this way, also celebrates the miracle of hope beyond hope, of taking the leap of faith even when the night seems impenetrably dark.

In honor of taking our own leaps of faith and taking action in our own way, we are going to sing the odd numbered verses of “Wake Now My Senses” number 298 in our Grey hymnal.

Reading: “The House of Belonging” by David Whyte

I awoke
this morning
in the gold light
turning this way
and that

thinking for
a moment
it was one
day
like any other.

But
the veil had gone
from my
darkened heart
and
I thought

it must have been the quiet
candlelight
that filled my room,

it must have been
the first

easy rhythm
with which I breathed
myself to sleep,

it must have been
the prayer I said
speaking to the otherness
of the night.

And
I thought
this is the good day
you could
meet your love,

this is the [bad] day
someone close
to you could die.

This is the day
you realize
how easily the thread
is broken
between this world
and the next

and I found myself
sitting up
in the quiet pathway
of light,

the tawny
close-grained cedar
burning round
me like fire
and all the angels of this house
heaven ascending
through the first
roof of light
the sun has made.

This is the bright home
in which I live,

this is where
I ask
my friends
to come,
this is where I want
to love all the things
it has taken me so long
to learn to love.

This is the temple
of my adult aloneness
and I belong
to that aloneness
as I belong to my life.

There is no house
like the house of belonging.

Sermon: “Coming Home”

This is the day that anything could happen.

“There is no house like the house of belonging.”

There is an ancient Irish story about a Celtic monk, who was out walking one day when he heard, carried along the breeze, the sound of his church bell calling him to worship.

He stopped and listened. “Ah,” he thought.

“Truly that is the most beautiful sound in the world.”

Just as he was about to turn and walk towards the sound of the bell, he heard another sound.

It was a blackbird’s call, her song carried along on the same breeze. “Ah,” he thought.

“Truly that is the most beautiful sound in the world.”

He stands there, frozen in that moment on Ireland’s green hills, two voices of beauty ringing in his ears.

The story does not say which way the monk turned to walk.

There is always the possibility of either, each time we hear the story.

Thank you for offering me the gift of answering the blackbird’s call for 6 months.

It is a joy to be back here, answering the call of the church bell.

Truly it is the most beautiful sound in the world.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, and tonight is the first night of Hanukkah.

Hanukkah came first, of course.

165 years before Jesus was ever born, Israel was under constant attack from the Greeks and Syrians.

The Greek king was trying to consolidate power, and his forces ransacked the great Hebrew temple and defiled their sacred space. The Jewish people revolted.

The Hebrew warriors were called the Macabees.

The Macabees seized back control of the temple.

It was dirty, defiled, but still standing.

They needed to cleanse the temple from the horrors it had seen, to build a new altar and create new holy vessels, to make the temple their sacred home again.

But to light their way, they could only find one small vial of pure holy kosher oil, enough for one night—and it would take eight nights to prepare more.

They lit the lamp anyway.

And they awoke that morning in the gold light
And in the quiet candlelight that filled the room,
They knew it was not a day like any other.

They were home again.

The temple the Macabees took back is the same temple that Jesus himself walked in, prayed in, flipped a few tables in. Home can be complicated.

The fourth Sunday in Advent in Christian tradition has the theme of Love.

On this day we imagine the travelers, Joseph and Mary, great with child, making their way to the town of Bethlehem that Joseph's family, the house of David, had called home.

But somehow in this story there is no home to go to—no familial homestead where Joseph's mother and father awaited with open arms.

Even though the book of Matthew names Joseph's family tree down to 42 generations, names Joseph's father, Matthan, names Joseph's grandfather, Eleazar, and on and on, still it seems that Joseph on returning home to Bethlehem is alone in the world.

No excited grandparents looking forward to holding their new grandbaby.

Not even a friend or a cousin or a great aunt opens a door to him and his pregnant wife.

They are alone in the world. There is no place for them, not even at an inn.

They settle in a stable, a roughshod temple of adult aloneness.
And after that long dark night, they heard their baby's first
breath, first cry.

Ah. That is the most beautiful sound in the world.

Celebrating these ancient holidays never gets old to me.

They connect us to *in illo tempore*, sacred time.

Mircea Eliade, one of the first religious historians I ever read,
published a book in 1957 called *The Sacred and the Profane*, in
which he called this human engagement with ancient myths and
ancient stories "the eternal return."

The eternal return, *in illo tempore*, the sacred time beyond time.

No matter what has happened to you this past year, or to your
family, no matter what happened in the world, or on your block,
the seasons circle around and we return, eternally, to the ancient
stories, to make sense of the world.

We eternally return to the Hanukkah story, the story of a home
that had been lost and is recovered and blessed once again by a
light shining in the darkness.

We eternally return to the Christmas story, the story of a home
that is rough and temporary and blessed by a great light shining
in the darkness.

These eternal stories remind us that even when the night is long
and cold and dark, perhaps if we listen carefully enough in the
silence, we can hear the angels' song above.

Truly, the most beautiful sound in the world.

These holidays hold spiritual meaning for us not because of the gifts and the cookies—though they are nice—but because of that *eternal return*, the way our memories layer on top of each other, and each Christmas we remember not only the year before, but every year before, and 2,000 years before that. The past becomes the present, and the present becomes full of possibility.

Now, people criticize Mircea Eliade for a lot of things. I'm not sure he's even taught any more in religious studies. It turns out he experimented both with fascism and meth, which makes it easy to dismiss him now. Hindsight. But sometimes he is criticized most virulently not for the fascism or the drugs, but because his idea of “eternal return,” and *in illo tempore*, which I remember thinking was such a beautiful idea when I first read it at 18, is just *nostalgia* dressed up in fancy historian clothes.

Nothing is more dismissive to a historian than calling his big theory *nostalgia*.

Nostalgia is a word with Greek roots: it means “Homecoming” and “pain.” The ache of longing for home. The ache of longing for a past that doesn’t exist anymore, and a home that is gone. And, if you are being negative, nostalgia means remembering with rose-colored glasses, allowing sentimentality to wipe away the complex truth of the past into something sweeter than it really was.

There is a complicated nostalgia that propels the Christmas season.

We are all susceptible to sentimental nostalgia for “the good old days,”
you know, when kids got an orange in their stocking
and were grateful about it,
instead of parents having to go to multiple Targets in one day to
find the bafflingly expensive yet still almost sold out
“LOL Doll glamper camper.”

But I hope, in this space, we can find a more eternal and sacred expression of nostalgia, the ache for home, a sacred yearning. Here we allow ourselves that homesickness for a time when humans imagined a great and powerful God in the most vulnerable of bodies.

Homesickness for a time when a baby—a crying, soft, incontinent, floppy-necked baby,

born to poor homeless parents—

was a reason for awe and wonder and love and compassion from angels and kings.

Homesickness for a time when a baby put fear into the heart of an emperor.

Homesickness for a time when powerful kings and lowly shepherds were brave enough to defy the emperor's laws, and help that baby and his family survive.

Homesick for a baby who will grow into a man who rebels against empire, oppression, and greed.

Homesick for the promised end of the story that still has yet to happen, when empire falls and hatred dies and oppression loses and love wins.

We are homesick for a story that hasn't happened yet, and we yearn for that happy ending, the coming of all the peace and joy we sing about on Christmas Eve.

Perhaps nostalgia is the tip of that immense iceberg in our hearts, our heart's desire for peace and justice.

And because we are humans, we express that heart's desire with funny sweaters and ornaments.

Sentimental nostalgia can feel good, but a sacred yearning for peace feels like a hole that can never be filled or an ache that can never be soothed, and those feelings are all too close to despair.

So we try to fill that hole with cookies.
I don't judge you. We live in hard times, my friends.

But folks, King Herod was just a man.
All kings, all tyrants are just humans, and time will continue on.
The eternal will return, the seasons will come round and round,
we will revisit the Advent story and the Hanukkah story again
and again, and our future selves will look back on this day
and think, "If only they knew."

What gifts will we give our future selves?
How shall we be inspired by the three wise Magi?
For King Herod had ordered them to report back where that
prophesied baby lay, so he could kill the baby and the hope and
love that came with him.
But the wise Magi refused King Herod, they broke the law, they
told the baby's parents how to travel to a safe place.
What laws, if we are wise, will we break?
What despots will we defy? What tyrants shall we unseat?
What ways will we help peace flourish and love win—
in our hearts, in our homes, and beyond?

This summer, I learned some of the story behind the poem that
is our reading.

David Whyte wrote that poem after he woke up in his new home, all alone, after his divorce.

He had gone through heartbreak and pain and despair and pushed through to the other side.

There is light on the other side of despair.

There is joy on the other side of pain.

There is love on the other side of heartbreak.

There is no way out but through.

These truths are eternal and we can always return to them.

David Whyte writes,

this is where I want
to love all the things
it has taken me so long
to learn to love.

There is no house
like the house of belonging.

I'll end with a return to that Hanukkah story of the temple, the sacred home, finding blessing after terrible tragedy.

As Rabbi Hartman writes, perhaps the miracle is not simply that the light burned for eight days.

It is also that the people, even as they despaired, still found the hope and faith within them to light that flame at all.

For a song of defiant hope in the face of despair is the most beautiful sound of all.

Even the tiniest action in the service of the good can make a difference.

This is the day that anything could happen.

In this holiday season of darkness and light, in the words of the song, may we

Light one candle for the strength that we need
To never become our own foe
And light one candle for those who are suffering
Pain we learned so long ago
Light one candle for all we believe in
That anger not tear us apart
And light one candle to find us together
With peace as the song in our hearts

So may it be, and may we sing it into being.

Amen.

And please join me in singing, "Light One Candle."

