

“When the Fuel Runs Out”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

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When I was a child, I watched way more television than I'd care to admit. And, one of my favorite shows was “Unsolved Mysteries.” I would sit in front of the television with a mix of fascination and fright unable to pull myself away as Robert Stack would say, “Join me. Perhaps you may be able to solve a mystery.” And, then the eery music would begin, and I would be hooked.

The show would usually explore unsolved crimes - murders and bank robberies - as well as cases of missing people, UFO sightings, and sometimes supernatural occurrences.

Perhaps these are things that shouldn't have been filling my young brain, but I was riveted by the clues and questions.

Our worship theme this month is mystery and wonder. And, we will explore the question, what does it mean to be people of mystery and wonder?

The show, “Unsolved Mysteries,” dealt with one aspect of the mysterious - those unexplained things that happen that fill us with dread and can leave us worrying over the “what ifs.”

There is also a more playful side of mystery. One that comes out with the gift-giving and gift-receiving aspect of the holidays. The mystery of what might be contained in a wrapped box fills us with delight rather than dread, and the anticipation of opening up a present or watching someone else unwrap a gift we have given them can be a welcome companion.

Exploring mystery can certainly take us in many different directions.

For me, grappling with mystery and the wonder that often goes with it is at the heart of being religious and spiritual people. Religion deals with those experiences that are impossible or difficult to explain and those questions that seem to be without clear answers - as we sang in our gathering song: "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Why does suffering exist? Is there a "God"?

Answering these questions, however, isn't as straightforward as solving the kinds of mysteries Robert Stack presented to his audience for decades. Hard and indisputable evidence can't be pieced together to solve the mystery of the meaning of life.

In this way, religion is somewhat of a paradox - inviting us to ponder these enormous mysteries but in no way being able to offer conclusive answers. And, I believe that the purpose of religion isn't to attempt to solve these ultimate mysteries and find definite answers but to help us live with the questions. As the song goes, "even to question, truly is an answer."

Emil Homerin, Professor of Religion at the University of Rochester, puts it this way: "What if life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived?"

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Direct experience of mystery and wonder is one of the primary sources of religious truth that we Unitarian Universalists identify. As a denomination, we affirm that the living tradition we share draws from many sources, including: "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life."¹

Have you ever experienced something that was both mysterious and wonderful?

¹ "Sources of Our Living Tradition," <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/sources>

I believe that one ancient story of this season that elicits both the mysterious and wonder-ful, in the sense of filling one with true wonder, is the Jewish story of the origins of Hanukkah, the eight-day Festival of Lights that begins at sundown this evening.

The story is based on real life events that took place thousands of years ago in 165 BCE. The Jewish people living in Judea were under the rule of the Greek-Assyrian empire. The king of the time, Antiochus Epiphanes, had outlawed the practice of Judaism and tried to force the Jewish people to worship Greek gods. Three years earlier in 168 BCE, the army of Antiochus had stormed into Jerusalem and into the Jewish temple and destroyed everything desecrating that holy space. They erected a statue of Zeus and slaughtered pigs in the temple. (Unlike the recent history-making raising of Ceres atop the State House dome, this was not a cause for celebration. People weren't lining up to have their picture taken with Zeus.)

A man named Mattathias who came from a priestly family and his sons decided that they could no longer live under these oppressive conditions, and they led a rebellion against the Greek Assyrian forces that lasted for three years. In 165 BCE, the Maccabees, as this group of rebels came to be known, regained control of Jerusalem and were able to reclaim the Temple for the Jewish people.

The heart of the Hanukkah story takes place when they enter the Temple and attempt to re-light the Menorah, the symbol of knowledge and creation, which was supposed to remain continuously lit. The Temple had been vandalized and nothing of their ritual items have been saved. But, they did find one jar of oil to pour into the Menorah. This was enough for one night. But after the first night, the menorah continued to stay lit and again the next night and the next for eight nights and eight days. This was enough time for them to produce more oil. Each night they celebrated that the light remained lit. And, with this miraculous light burning bright, they were able to rededicate their temple.

Many of our Jewish neighbors and friends will commemorate this ancient story and festival beginning tonight and for the next eight days. Ritual blessings are recited and a new candle is added each night.

The story contains within it universal questions: what do we do to bring light into darkness? How do we respond when our own source of light seems to be diminished?

And, there are certainly times when it seems that our own fuel has run out.

Right about now is probably that time for many of you. Some of you have suffered immense losses in recent days. Some of you are enduring illness and health challenges that make each day a struggle. Some of you have been living with the impossible strain of not enough income and mounting housing and health care costs. Many of you feel the horror and depletion of day after day witnessing the continued dehumanization of so many different people and the denial of our planetary crisis.

These are indeed difficult times when it can feel like the tank is running dry.

In this context, the part of the Hanukkah story that my mind wanders to is those eight days when they would have been making more oil to pour into the menorah.

I don't know too much about making olive oil but I do know that the process is slow and it certainly would have been in 165 BCE before all the advanced technology we have today.² First, the olives would have to be crushed so that the pits could be removed. These crushed olives would probably have then been placed in a basket or bag that would then have to be pressed. Two thousand plus years ago this pressure likely would have come from some kind of large stone. Enough pressure would have to be placed on this olive pulp to release the juices of the olives - a mixture of water and oil. The juice would be collected into a basin and then would have to sit for a while to allow the water to separate from the oil. As this was all happening, I can just imagine people continuing to return to the temple and checking to see if the light was in fact still lit. I can imagine their surprise that it still was and the deep sense of mystery and wonder that this would stir up. Just how could this be possible? And, how AWE-some was it. As the oil became separated from the water, they would then have to skim the oil off. Usually this oil was then placed in another separate vat for further separation. And again, I can just imagine them collecting those first drops of newly made oil and rushing to the temple with a sense of relief as they filled the supply in the menorah to ensure it would continue to stay lit.

How nerve-wracking this would have been and also how wondrous.

² <https://www.thoughtco.com/ancient-history-of-making-olive-oil-4047748>

The fuel that we need in our own difficult times may be just as arduously produced.

To get to that source of our own inner strength we might need to endure some pressure and wait for our own supply of hope and resolve to rise to the surface.

I also have to imagine that it wouldn't have been just one person's job alone to make that new oil. It would have been a communal effort just as our own efforts to get to those inner spiritual gifts is undertaken in community.

Another mystery in the Hanukkah story in my mind is why they even went ahead and lit the menorah in the first place. What inner resolve and hope it would have taken to pour those remaining drops and light the flame despite all the signs that the light would not last.

In our own difficult times, we can ask ourselves: where are the drops of fuel that might still be available to you, that can still be counted on to keep you going?

And, who can you join with to take that which has been crushed and turn it into something that can sustain the light?

I close with these words written by Rabbi Yael Levy last December:

“As we come to Hanukkah this year, we witness our country being desecrated. The sacred trust to care for people and the earth, to uphold justice, to afford respect and dignity to all, the commitment to fair taxes, to welcoming immigrants, to seeking peace —lies in ruin.

Like the Temple menorah that ran out of oil, the battering of each new assault on our values and democracy has exhausted many of us.

It can be so easy to despair, realizing how many things have happened despite the opposition of so many people. But Hanukkah implores us to act, even as we do not know if our actions will succeed.

Hanukkah urges us not to get stuck in hopelessness. This season reminds us that a small light illuminates much darkness. We never know what will result from our deeds.

This season calls us to act for the sake of the goodness of the action itself. Act for the sake of the sacred. Act with reverence and love. Experience the power of taking action in the face of ruin, of stepping forward even when so much feels lost.

And this season also calls us to take time to renew ourselves, to welcome joy, and to practice gratitude.

The flames of Hanukkah are lights of rededication. Each night we rededicate ourselves to our sacred values. As the light increases, we declare: We will rise. In the face of ruin, amid the rubble, we will rise together. We will act for goodness. We will act for justice. We will act with kindness, compassion and generosity. We will act to sanctify the earth and honor all people...

In this season, people of many traditions kindle flames in the darkness. In the coming days...may we be strengthened by each other. May we be inspired by the sacred and by all that we love. May we shine our lights for and with each other.”³

And so may it be.

Amen.

³ <https://www.ritualwell.org/blog/we-will-rise-hanukkah-lights-dark-times>