“Wonder in the Dark, Wonder in the Light”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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Part 1: Wonder in the Dark

“In Celebration of the Winter Solstice,” by Stephanie Noble[1]

Do not be afraid of the darkness.
Dark is the rich fertile earth
that cradles the seed, nourishing growth.
Dark is the soft night that cradles us to rest.
Only in darkness
can stars shine across the vastness of space.
Only in darkness
is the moon's dance so clear.
There is mystery woven in the dark quiet hours.
There is magic in the darkness…

So, do not rush the coming of the sun.
Do not crave the lengthening of the day.
Celebrate the darkness.
Here and now. A time of richness. A time of joy.

…

This weekend, many people have marked the Winter Solstice celebrating the slow lengthening of days as we rotate back into greater proximity to the Sun.

While some of us may celebrate the return of the light, it is also just now the official start of winter, and the lengthening of days happens ever so slowly. In fact, the amount of daylight we have today is just five seconds longer than yesterday, and tomorrow we will gain eleven seconds.

[1] https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/celebration-winter-solstice

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Winter can be a difficult time for many of us in Vermont. The cold temperatures, icy roads and sidewalks, the lack of sunshine. If you struggle with mobility issues or with seasonal depression, winter can be a challenging time to feel a sense of well-being.

Darkness is still very much a reality during this season especially here in Vermont with our bounty of cloud-covered winter days. As for some of our ancient ancestors, this winter darkness can feel like a kind of death. A lack of vitality. The dark can be frightening, and we may not want to linger here for too long.

Yet, darkness is a natural part of the cycles and rhythms of the natural world. These cycles, rhythms, and seasons can also offer us grounding and a way to reconnect especially in a time when the stressors of a seemingly collapsing world are so great.

The ancient cycles - as old as our solar system - can remind us of our place in something greater than ourselves - our connection to forces beyond our control.

I imagine those ancient people, who without astronomical tools and years of observation and scientific research, watched as the sun seemed to stand still, and accordingly named this point in the year "Solstice."

This "sun standing still" time can be for us a time of pause.

With the long nights of winter still to come (though the longest night has now passed), we can also invite more of a pause into our lives. We might view this pause as a time of preparation. It is in the dark of winter that the seed is being prepared for something new to grow. This preparation time is a time all of its own. A time of waiting, resting, and noticing.

The spiritual challenge I think we face is whether we can hold ourselves in this place of darkness without wishing it away and look for the lessons that darkness might offer.

Darkness can be our teacher. It can provide the vast space to dream and re-envision. Darkness gives us space to wonder. It is vast but not empty, ever-present, and full of possibility.

As Stephanie Noble writes, "Dark is the gestation of our deep and knowing self.
Dark is the cave where we rest and renew our soul."

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For those of you who are engaged in the long-haul work of bringing about justice, liberation, and peace and protecting our planet, the darkness can be where you give your bodies and hearts a break and where you cast forward new visions, trusting that the light will return again.

Sometimes it is only in darkness that we can see the sources of light, however dim they may be.

During my junior year of college, I was living abroad in Nicaragua, in a mountain, farming community way up in the northern part of the country. It was a very remote area. The closest town was a one and a half-hour bus ride away. There was little electricity available in this area. A few homes had it as did the health clinic. There were no street lights.

One day the community was visited by a medical team from the United States to provide simple medical services. People came from miles away and lined up at the clinic to be seen and cared for. I helped out all day in any way I could - offering meager translation services when needed, entertaining children, fetching supplies. We wrapped up our work at the end of a long day, and set out to return by foot about a mile down the road to our home.

At this point in my life, I hadn't spent very much time at all in rural areas with no electricity. My eyes were most accustomed to the constant din of city lights after dark. I had never had to navigate without light. For my hosts, however, walking in the dark was as natural as breathing.

I had no flash light. The road we walked on was a dirt road with a good number of rocks. I remember the sensation of feeling adrift and frightened. Yet, my companions were right there. I listened to their voices and their laughter as I stumbled forward.

Soon, my eyes did adjust, the dim light of the night sky with its stars and the moon lit our way. With that light, I could make out enough shapes and forms to walk forward. And, most of all, I could follow the voices of my companions. They would lead me. I was not alone. Together, we would find our way.

"Do not be afraid of the darkness," Stephanie Noble writes. "Only in darkness/ can stars shine across the vastness of space./ Only in darkness/ is the moon's dance so clear."

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Part 2: Wonder in the Light

"Where the Light Begins," Jan Richardson, from *Circle of Grace* (janrichardson.com)

Perhaps it does not begin.
Perhaps it is always.

Perhaps it takes
a lifetime
to open our eyes,
to learn to see
what has forever
shimmered in front of us

the luminous line
of the map
in the dark

the vigil flame
in the house
of the heart,

the love
so searing
we cannot keep
from singing,

from crying out
in testimony
and praise.

Perhaps this day
will be the mountain
over which
the dawn breaks.

Perhaps we
will turn our face
toward it,
toward what has been
always.

Perhaps
our eyes
will finally open
in ancient recognition,
willingly dazzled,
illuminated at last.

Perhaps this day
the light begins
in us.

…

The presence of light is so compelling.

The string of holy days that we are now in - Solstice, Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa - all have light at the heart.

Candles and fires burning; images of light entering the world. We need the light.

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Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of lights, begins this Wednesday night. It falls during the Jewish month of Kislev, the darkest part of the year. Hanukkah commemorates a time of oppression in Jewish history when the Jewish people fought for the freedom to practice their religion and reconsecrated the Temple in Jerusalem. The legend of Hanukkah says that as the temple was being rededicated they lit the *ner tamid*, the light above the ark, with the oil that was present, which should have been enough for just one night. But miraculously, the candle stayed lit for eight nights.

In today's festival of lights, as each candle of the menorah is lit, the nights get darker and darker as the moonlight wanes, and the lighting of the menorah candles represent the perseverance and faith needed to believe that love will conquer fear and hope will endure.

In this season, so many of us are searching for the light. Illumination in the murky uncertainty. Clarity of vision in an overwhelming time.

This is probably why hundreds of people showed up last month to celebrate the lighting of the bridges here in Montpelier. The lights contain their own beauty as they shine in the winter darkness and reflect in the river's water below. And for each of us who is captivated by those lights, they speak to some need we have - the need for connection, the need for reassurance, the need for hope.

While we often look outside ourselves for the light, what if, as Jan Richardson writes, "Perhaps this day the light begins in us."

With our own presence and our actions, we too can be light for one another. We too can offer one another connection, reassurance, and hope.

The light begins in you and in the one beside you. It begins in the one you encounter on the dimly lit street holding a sign that says "Anything helps." The light begins in the one to whom you serve a meal and in you, the one serving the meal.

Finding the light in one another can be just the kind of hope we need.

The Rabbi Yael Levy writes: "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.

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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."[2]

As the flames of the candles are lit this season, on the Solstice candle, the menorah, the kinara, and the Christmas candle, we can each rededicate ourselves to all we hold sacred. We can be light to one another.

As the long nights give way to the growing days, let us remember the ancient wisdom of this season: the darkness can shelter our boldest dreams and the return of the light can reassure us that dawn will break yet again.

So may it be.

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[2] Rabbi Yael Levy, "We Will Rise: Hanukkah Lights for Dark Times" found in RitualWell, December 12, 2017, https://ritualwell.org/blog/we-will-rise-hanukkah-lights-dark-times/.

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