

## **O, Hanukkah**

**A sermon preached by Rev. Christine Robinson  
On December 13, 2009**

From the beginning of recorded history and through the present day, Palestine has been a disputed land and Hanukkah, a holiday that began as a celebration of a temporary victory, steeped in paradox and ambiguity . . . perhaps an appropriate tone for a holiday celebrated with light at the darkest time of the year.

When Greece defeated the Persians under the leadership of Alexander the Great in the year 311 BCE and set out to bring Hellenic culture to the known world, the Jews of Palestine changed masters yet again, and were required to trade with Greece, to mold their culture after Greece, and to see their daughters marry the occupying Greek soldiers. Naturally this rankled, in spite of the fact that the Greeks had lots of good ideas: about democracy, the use of reason, and, ironically, the importance of the individual conscience. Under the Greeks, the standard of living went up, especially in Jerusalem. The Jewish people were split into uneasy camps about all this. Some embraced what they thought of as modernization. Others decried the loss of freedom, sovereignty, and the good old ways.

A century and a half later, the Greeks began to feel threatened by the Romans, and, to the end of shoring themselves up against that growing threat, set about a campaign of cultural and religious unification of all the Greek holdings. The Jews attempted compromise, and those compromises worked until a new and difficult ruler ascended the throne in 174 BCE. He called himself Antiochus Epiphanies, which means “Antiochus, God manifest on Earth.” The Greek historian Polebius called him Antiochus Epimanes, which means “Antiochus, the madman.”

This fanatical man, obsessed with his ideal of national unification and in contrast with the liberal ideals of his culture, desecrated the temple, banned Jewish religious practice, and confiscated wealth. This shattered the uneasy peace. Some Jewish fighters fled to the hills and began what some have called the first guerrilla war. The first person killed by the insurrection was a fellow Jew, who was attempting to perform a sacrifice on a new Greek-established altar. Ironic, isn't it? The culture most responsible for Western ideals of religious freedom became so repressive that believers were driven to violence, and the first victim of their violence was one of their own.

After the death of the first leader, his son, Judas Maccabeus took over the ragtag army. Taking as their motto “It is better for us to die in battle than to look upon the evils that have come upon our nation and our sanctuary” (I Macc. 3:59), they fought, and, unaccountably, they won.

They returned to liberate Jerusalem, and, in particular, to cleanse and rededicate their temple. On the morning of the twenty-fifth of Kislev, in the year 165 BCE, they had their first ceremony there. The story told later was that they found only enough consecrated oil to light the lamps for one day, but by a miracle the oil lasted for eight days, which was enough time to reconsecrate a new stock of oil.

Then, in a painful parallel to our own time, the Maccabees “built high walls and strong towers around Mount Zion so that the gentiles could never again come and destroy them.” (I Macc. 4:60–61) The judgment of history is that the Maccabean reign was corrupt, brutal, backward looking. Like so many human endeavors begun in vision

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and promise, it ended in internal and external failure. The Romans eventually took over, and Jews lived under Roman rule for generations. During that time Jewish leaders considered it expedient to play down the revolutionary themes of Hanukkah and began to celebrate the holiday, not as a commemoration of a military victory but as a spiritual one, focused on the rededication of the temple and the story of the miracle of the oil. In the year 70 of our era, the Romans destroyed the temple forever and drove the Jews from their land for nearly two thousand years.

The Jewish people learned to survive, even to thrive, without land and temple. They established new homes all over Europe and eventually in the new world, and they learned to practice their faith in a new way. The twenty-fifth day of the month of Kislev is still celebrated by Jewish people as the first day of Hanukkah. Last Friday night the first candle was lit for the holiday, which falls sometime between late November and late December.

For most of the past twenty centuries, Hanukkah was quite a minor holiday in the Jewish year. It was celebrated with half days at school and warm evenings at home, playing games like the dreidel game and eating special foods like latkes. A tradition of storytelling arose, which urged people to be hopeful in the growing dark, generous to those less fortunate in the days when cold brought death, and cheerful citizens of their communities. At the darkest time of the year, Jews join other Western traditions in lifting up light, community, generosity, and hope.

The word *Hanukkah* means “dedication,” and that word has been understood not only to refer to the rededication of the temple but the need we all have to dedicate ourselves to a larger purpose and a greater good. This is another of the universal themes of Hanukkah. All of us, after all, as a culture and as individuals, sometimes find that we have been separated, by force or habit, from the values and practices that we hold dear. Sometimes we must fight literal or figurative battles to regain what is ours. For Jews of old, the ultimate victory was not the victory of battle but the spiritual victory within the hearts and minds of men and women who were determined to practice their faith. So strong has this sentiment been over the years that the prophetic passage reserved for the sabbath in Hanukkah contains the words: “Not by might nor by power but my spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts.”

In the last century, when one-third of the world’s Jewish population was murdered and the nation of Israel was reborn, the significance of the holiday of Hanukkah has changed again. The minor holiday has become major, in part as a reaction to the Christmas frenzy of the dominant culture, but more significantly because of the pain and struggle of recent history. Now in many places, Hanukkah is celebrated as a nationalistic holiday commemorating, not the miracle of lights, but the courage and skill of the soldiers who fought for their homeland. It is a day to remember also those who have died in the past few generations that Israel might be free. And there is an increasingly strong concurrent peace movement, a movement that suggests that there is enough oil for the world if we will only learn to share, and translates the prophetic passage of Hanukkah thusly: “Not by might, not by power, but through the spirit of justice and compassion shall our world be transformed.” (Zechariah 4:6)

The winter holidays are all complex. Perhaps the cold and darkness encourages introspection. The Christmas story, after all, is not just the story of a joyful birth, but also the story of no room at the inn and the massacre of innocents, of a ruler mad with

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too much power and innocent folk threatened and displaced. Hanukkah contains the same ambiguities.

In a *New York Times* op ed piece this week, David Brooks points out that, while Hanukkah is mostly celebrated for children, it is a very adult holiday, for it “commemorates an event in which the good guys did horrible things, the bad guys did good things and in which everybody is flummoxed by insoluble conflicts that remain with us today. It’s a holiday that accurately reflects how politics is, how history is, how life is.”

In this, the darkest time of the year, our president, who is currently presiding over two wars, traveled to Oslo to accept the Nobel Peace Prize, and there gave a speech that was lauded even by his bitter enemies. After remarking that he owed his place in history to another Nobel winner, Martin Luther King, who espoused a consistent doctrine of pacifism, he laid out his own belief that there is also a time for the use of force, violence, and war, and then, communicating masterfully the paradox of our lives, he returned to the great messages of love, peace, and faith that are so much a part of this dark season. He said these words, appropriate for an acceptance speech but also for a Christmas card, a Hanukkah greeting, a Kwanza meditation:

We do not have to think that human nature is perfect for us to still believe that the human condition can be perfected. We do not have to live in an idealized world to still reach for those ideals that will make it a better place. The nonviolence practiced by men like Gandhi and King may not have been practical or possible in every circumstance, but the love that they preached—their faith in human progress—must always be the North Star that guides us on our journey.

We can acknowledge that oppression will always be with us, and still strive for justice. We can admit the intractability of deprivation, and still strive for dignity. We can understand that there will be war, and still strive for peace. We can do that—for that is the story of human progress, that is the hope of all the world, and at this moment of challenge, that must be our work here on Earth.

Our need for light in the darkness at this time of year is physical: the sun rises late, shines through thin clouds with the strength of a flu patient, and darkness descends early. And we who have lived through a few winters know that, even though the days will soon begin to lengthen, the cold will continue to deepen for at least a month to come. Still, we know that winter always comes to an end, and, hopefully, we can take some pleasure in the more introspective activities of winter. And we celebrate this time of year with lights, gifts, and generosity to loved ones and to strangers, and we do so honoring holidays that, at least for the grownups, have their bittersweet flavor of real life, real history, real politics. And in this season, we rededicate ourselves to the ideals that inspire our work and give us hope.

At this, the darkest time of the year, we crave the light and, in our own ways, bless the light. Our holiday celebration includes lights of many cultures: the Christian Advent lights, the Jewish Menorah, the American Christmas tree, the Hispanic luminarias, our own chalice, and the handheld candles that light our Christmas Eve. The Hanukkah lights remind us of the first struggle in written history fought, not for land or

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possessions, but for ideals, especially the ideal of religious liberty, an ideal that we share and fight for in our own ways. As we enjoy our Jewish neighbor's lights, let us pray that the peoples of our world continue to fight for such ideals, and never merely for gain or dominance, and that when the time comes to make peace, we will be able to make peace. Let us pray for hope in this time of darkness, for dedication to our ideals in the face of intractable problems that are, as always, a mixed bag of good and bad intentions, consequences, and experience. And let us above all pray for peace, the inner peace that comes from a dedicated life, and for peace in our world. Amen.