



Children's Story "Latkes and Applesauce – A Hanukkah Story" by Fran Manushkin

Message – In the Bleak Midwinter

I always find it important to take some time during the holidays to talk about the fact that there are those in our midst for whom this holiday time isn't going to be easy. If you've sustained a loss this year, whether that is a death, or some other kind of separation, this can be a difficult time. Any kind of loss can easily be magnified and may become more difficult to carry. So let us hold in our hearts those known and unknown who face the holidays with a heaviness of heart.

The holidays are also difficult for those who struggle to be with family. Being related doesn't necessarily mean that people treat each other well or like each other or know how to be with each other in a healthy way. The holidays can make abundantly clear all the reasons that we struggle throughout the year to relate in healthy boundaried ways with our families.

These are also difficult times if you are experiencing financial hardship. This is supposed to be a time of abundance and generosity, but if you don't have much to be generous with, especially with your children, that can be hard too. This is the time of year that your kids make their lists of all the things they want, and if you know in your heart that you're not going to be able to get the things on that list, the holidays can turn into a time of mental gymnastics to reassure yourself that you are still a good parent, even if you can't pile up presents under the tree.

This is why we've been encouraging everyone who can to help stock that red wheelbarrow in the vestibule for Circle of Concern. We are doing our part to make sure that the shelves of our local food-bank are well stocked so that the families in our community who depend on them will have what they need. Sometimes getting a little extra food frees up some of the family's resources so there is something under the tree. We know that food banks do little to change the larger systemic issues that cause hunger, and we need to pay attention to those too, but at the least we can address the immediate suffering of those caught in its grasp.

Our children's story this morning is about finding abundance in the midst of scarcity.

Can you imagine being the parents in this story and seeing several days of feasting before you and knowing there is not enough to feed your family through that time? So you're already under a lot of stress, and then your children welcome two animals into your household, two more mouths to feed, when you're worrying about the mouths you are already responsible for? You see your children's joy as they hold their new treasures, and you know the light will go out of their eyes when you put your foot down and say no. We all know that one of the primary roles of a parent is to be the boundary keeper and it's not easy. It is not going to make you a hero in your children's eyes and they're not going to thank you for it until they're parents years later. But that just can't stop you from doing what you have to do. So the parents in our story try the quick and dirty. They put their foot down as soon as possible to get it over with. And, the children will have none of it. In fact, wouldn't you know, and I'm sure many of you parents have experienced exactly this, it's those lovely memorable moments when your kids use your own words against you! "But you told us that Hanukkah is a time of generosity! You told us that Hanukkah is a time of feasting!"

Sometimes when they argue you just have to put down your foot harder. But sometimes, you have to be able to put aside your pride, and accept that a truth has been spoken. Your children are right.

Generosity and abundance is the central theme of Hanukkah. In the original story, which emerged from Ancient Israel, the Israelites are fighting for the existence of their people against the Greeks, who are trying to wipe out Judaism and everything connected to it. The small Jewish army has succeeded, against all odds, in taking back their precious temple, which the Greeks have completely ransacked. All they want to do is to light the temple flame because in their tradition, the temple flame burns night and day as a symbol of God's presence with them. Lighting that flame would be a sign that God was with them once more. The problem is that there is only one day's supply of oil and it will take eight days to make more. The battles continues outside the doors of the temple. Do they wait to light the flame, or do they light it now and pray there is enough oil to keep the flame burning until they get more? I can only imagine some of their fears. What if they light the flame, only to watch it die because there is not enough oil? Would that mean that God had left them again?

They take the risk, and light the flame, even if it means possibly losing it again. And then a miracle happens! The flame burns for eight days, long enough for them to make more oil. Hanukkah is a celebration of hope and a commitment to abundance and generosity. Even when there is only one day's supply of oil, light the flame, and celebrate!

Now the moral of this story is not to get out your credit card and go to a "big-box-toy-store" and rack up a big bill that you can't pay off just so you can pile all the things your children want under the tree and wait for some miracle so you can make the payments! That would be too simplistic and is more about desperation and consumerism than about abundance. The moral of this story is to live in the spirit of abundance regardless of your circumstances. Even if there is a blizzard raging outside and your potatoes are frozen under the snow and the apples are gone, there is always something to be thankful for. You can sit with your family and eat the soup lovingly prepared for you and sing the songs you love. You can sit at the holiday dinner table and there's someone missing, and you can feel the grief keenly, while being thankful for those who are sitting around that table with you. You can spend a long day with relatives who drive you crazy, but somehow, it's important enough that everyone shows up. You may even choose not to see those relatives and spend a quiet day at home, and isn't the quietness a blessing in our over filled lives? You can worry about how you're going to pay the utility bill next month, but you can also kiss your child good night and marvel that this miraculous complicated being has come into your life.

As we move into this time of celebration and gratitude, who or what is crying at your back door? What flame is asking to be lit? What are you being asked to let into your miraculous and precious life?

Let us enter into a time of silent meditation.

Musical Interlude – "Winter Solstice" [Words and music by Ruth Elaine Schram]

Message – The New Path

How many of you are old enough to remember the record breaking snows in the winter of 1977-78? I was 7 years old, we lived on the north shore of Lake Erie, and one January blizzard dumped 7 feet of snow over three days, which was thrilling, because I love winter! Even though I can't stand hockey (which makes me very bad Canadian), and I don't at all like or understand how St. Louisans drive in winter, and I still fail to understand why Schnucks sells out of eggs and milk when there's a prediction of half an inch of snow and the schools close before the snow arrives, in spite of all that, give me a sparkly snow-covered landscape from December to March and a good set of snow tires and I'm a happy camper!

I still remember the blizzard of January 78 because the water froze in the barn. We had goats, chickens and 80 pregnant sheep in that barn and no water. My father dug a trench through the snow drifts so that we could carry pails of water from the house to the barn twice a day, and me being a hopelessly romantic child, thought it was beyond adventurous to walk through the frigid winter between the towering walls of snow, hearing the wind wailing above us, carrying that precious water to the barn. When we finished, we would hang our wet clothes over the heating vents and huddle around the old oil stove in the living room and my mother would make us hot chocolate. It is one of my most treasured childhood memories.

When the blizzards finally stopped and the snow stopped scouring the windows and the sun came out, it was an amazing world. Everything was so pure and clean and bright. The fresh cold air was intoxicating. I could have stood there forever drinking in the beauty of that winter wonderland.

Whenever the holidays come, I yearn for some kind of emotional return to that state of amazement. Our world seems so tragically flawed in so many ways. I believe that inside every one of us is a deep yearning to return to those fleeting moments of amazement, moments where our disappointments fade and the things that trouble us seem far away. If only seven feet of driving snow could set aside the ongoing voices in our minds telling us who we should be and what we should feel and what we should be doing. If only seven feet of driving snow could give us permission to set aside the doubt and the questions and the cynicism and the despair and the anxiety, and simply become a seven year old child in absolute awe of the world around us.

A few days from now will be winter solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year, and for those who follow the earth centered traditions, this journey into the darkening days and back out to the returning sun is considered sacred, beautiful and powerful beyond measure. It echoes a time when our species, in its evolutionary infancy, may not have realized that the sun would return. The dances and stories told today may have arisen out of the desperation of a species that watched the sun retreat and did not yet have the cognitive ability to understand that it was going to come back. Just as the lighting of the temple flame was literally about bringing God back on the side of the Ancient Jewish people, the solstice rituals may have been about actually convincing the sun to come back.

Even though today's rituals reflect a poetic spiritual reality, I think that its original raw elements are still there. In solstice, certainty and desperation dance with each other. Doubt and trust dance with each other. We may know the sun is coming back, but in our own hearts, we have all faced times when we did not know if we could come back.

Today is actually a very momentous day because in the earliest hours of this morning, the final American troops left Iraq, crossing into Kuwait as the sun rose. The Iraq war is over, at last.

This war has been divisive since it began, and I'm sure that will continue, but the bigger story is where the end of this war leaves those women and men who lived out our foreign policy in Iraq. They have been through the blizzard of their lives, and there was rarely a father trudging ahead making sure the trenches were safe, or a mother making hot chocolate, and you never simply opened the front door, especially if someone was crying outside. This was war. These soldiers have seen things we should never have to see and they've been in situations most of us, including me, will never understand.

Our soldiers are on a solstice journey. They've seen the sun go away many times and now are waiting for it to come back. Will it come back when they see their families? Will it come back when they step on American soil? Will it come back when they start to rebuild their lives? They know the experiences of fellow soldiers who have already returned. Some find new lives despite physical injuries, and some don't. Some find jobs. Some don't. Some get the medical support they need, and some don't. Some can sleep the night through, and others are imprisoned in Iraq regardless of where they lay their heads at night. They and their families are

looking for the sun, and more than likely they are going to have to find new ways to find its reassuring warmth. They will be doing the dance of cynicism and hope, certainty and desperation. They will be unwinding bodies trained to leap into combat, while yearning for moments of amazement and wonder, waiting for those precious moments when they can kiss their children good night and marvel at the complicated and miraculous beings that they brought into this world.

Solstice tells us that you can come back from war with something broken inside you that may never heal, and you can find new life. Solstice tells us that you can lose someone and feel their absence so keenly you think it will never end, and you can find new life. You can sit across the holiday table with people that you have hurt and who have hurt you, and you can find new life. You can face hunger, physical and spiritual, and find new life.

Everything we do in the holiday season – shopping for presents, putting cans in the red wheel barrow, lighting menorah and advent candles, building a bonfire, singing songs, listening to carols, hanging lights and decorations, putting up a tree, sharing meals with relatives loved and not so loved, is about discovering old and new ways to hold on to hope and to find new life.

The sun will come back. The oil will last. A baby will be born safely and laid in a manger. The God of our understanding will be and has always been among us and with us.

“These moments are precious and holy. They are powerful. They are full of hope and possibility. This moment is all we need.”* May the spirit of love and compassion be with you and yours in the days to come. Amen and blessed be.

*adapted from a holiday prayer by Sara Eileen Lawal