

Light A Candle

Sermon by Audette Fulbright
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All Souls Church, New York City

We have entered the season of light. From Eid and Diwali, through Advent, Christmas, Yule and Hanukkah, with Kwanzaa, Yalda, Los Posadas...the darker seasons of our lives have always called forth a physical and spiritual light – bringing response in us. Humans are, at root, a hope-filled, story-telling creature, and we so often respond to the cold by kindling a flame together.

So as we enter the season of snow and early night, I believe we also are struggling with the reality that we are living again through spiritually dim days. The kind of days that gave rise to our most central Unitarian Universalist religious symbol: the flaming chalice. As Dan Hotchiss describes, the story of our chalice came about like this:

“The chalice and the flame were brought together as a Unitarian symbol by an Austrian artist, Hans Deutsch, in 1941. Living in Paris during the 1930s, Deutsch drew critical cartoons of Adolf Hitler. When the Nazis invaded Paris in 1940, he abandoned all he had and fled to the South of France, then to Spain, and finally, with an altered passport, into Portugal.

“There, he met the Reverend Charles Joy, executive director of the Unitarian Service Committee (USC). The Service Committee was new, founded in Boston to assist Eastern Europeans, among them Unitarians as well as Jews, who needed to escape Nazi persecution. From his Lisbon headquarters, Joy oversaw a secret network of couriers and agents. ...

“But the USC was an unknown organization in 1941. This was a special handicap in the cloak-and-dagger world, where establishing trust quickly across barriers of language, nationality, and faith could mean life instead of death. Disguises, signs and countersigns, and midnight runs across guarded borders were the means of freedom in those days. Joy asked Deutsch to create a symbol for their papers "to make them look official, to give dignity and importance to them, and at the same time to symbolize the spirit of our work.... When a document may keep a man out of jail, give him standing with governments and police, it is important that it look important." Thus, Hans Deutsch made his lasting contribution to the USC and, as it turned out, to Unitarian Universalism. With pencil and ink he drew a chalice with a flame...

“The flaming chalice design was made into a seal for papers and a badge for agents moving refugees to freedom. In time, it became a symbol of Unitarian Universalism all around the world...

The story of Hans Deutsch reminds us that the symbol of a flaming chalice stood in the beginning for a life of service. When Deutsch designed the flaming chalice, he had never seen a Unitarian or Universalist church or heard a sermon. What he had seen was faith in action—people who were willing to risk all for others in a time of urgent need.”¹

If I were going to choose a text for today, it would be James 2:26: “Just as the body without Spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.” This is a very Unitarian Christian verse; our

¹ “The Flaming Chalice,” by Dan Hotchiss (pamphlet) <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/who-we-are/chalice/flaming-chalice>

Unitarian foreparents believed in “deeds, not creeds.” If you remember, too, that both our Unitarian and Universalist forebearers taught that we must join with God in the holy work of repairing a broken world, then the simplicity and challenge put forth by James is even clearer: faith without works is dead.

I don't have to tell you about the sorrows and pain of this world. You already feel it in your lives: you know we face the challenges of a warming planet, of unchecked greed and corruption in both our political and consumer cultures, of the sufferings of our beloveds for whom our systems of power were always created to keep down. A litany of woe isn't what we need - what we need are stories of strength, the guidance of mentors who, facing the evils and injustice of their age, agreed with James, that faith without works is dead, and so stepped out to do the work.

Our Unitarian and Universalist lineage is filled to the brim with heroes and heretics – brave people who faced challenges with spiritual vigor, even unto death. I want to start this morning with two who have been lifted up into the public sphere recently, thanks to the historian Ken Burns. I hope you've heard about and perhaps even have seen Ken Burns' new documentary, *Defying the Nazis: the Sharps' War*. I want to pause here, before launching into the Sharps' story, because it's important that we acknowledge some difficult realities. I think many of us in the U.S. have lived with a comfortable sense that some of the fears and excesses of other countries could never take root here: Spain under Franco, the Estado Novo in Portugal under Salazar, Italy under Mussolini, and of course, Germany under Hitler. This is by no means an exhaustive list, of course, and fascistic regimes have plagued parts of the world other than Europe, to be sure.

I also think it's important to note that the rise of fascism anywhere follows a fairly predictable set of circumstances – I'm going to list them, but not expand on them, because I want to go in another direction. But we should be aware of them, and hold them in consideration. The following list is just a few of the things that indicate a fall into fascism: a powerful and continuing nationalism; disdain for the recognition of human rights; rampant sexism; a crackdown on the media; protection of corporate power; suppression of labor; rampant cronyism and corruption; and fraudulent elections.

I hope this list without much further exploration right now, speaks volumes. No country is free from the risks of fascism or fascistic regimes without vigilance and active resistance, and that includes the United States, which, and I'm going to quote that great statesman Glenn Beck, who reminds us that the United States is an idea, not merely a place.

In case my point in all of this is a little lost, it's simply this: our country faces risks to its freedoms and its people. This is always true, but it's true at this moment in ways we have not quite seen before. You may wonder why. Again, in this, Germany prior to Hitler's ascendancy is informative. Ordinary people in the US are afraid. The economy has stratified worse than we have ever seen, beginning to eclipse the wealth gap prior to the Great Depression. Stable jobs that pay a living wage with health care and benefits are scarce, and many people, even those doing reasonably well, are aware that they are one illness or one pink slip away from real hardship. On top of that, culture is changing quickly, and it's hard not to pine for an imaginary past where things were simpler. In such times, we are easily fractured into us-vs.-them thinking, we – by our most basic human instincts! - look for scapegoats and people to blame. When you throw into the mix 24 hours a day of polarizing “news,” it's toxic. It's such a time of risk. So when you wonder how your neighbor can make the choices they seem to be making, when you see their bumper stickers or signs, please – pause. There are real issues underlying the choices, and the stakes have never been higher.

That's why it matters that each and every one of you is a person of faith, who steps out of that toxic mix for at least this hour each week – and hopefully more. That is why, too, we need the stories and examples of our religious heroes who faced and fought the evils of their day. And that is why I'm going to tell you a little about the Sharps today.

You have to see the documentary to fully appreciate the bravery and compassion of Waitstill and Martha Sharp, but the brief sketch is something like this. Waitstill Sharp was a Unitarian Sunday school teacher who was inspired to enter the ministry. He met Martha Sharp, a woman who had been disowned at the age of 16 by her family when she earned a college scholarship and insisted on pursuing her education, rather than going to work to support her family. She became a social worker, and did amazing work in the US before the more famous part of her story began. These two bright people were drawn to each other, both having a strong sense of service to the world. They married and had two young children as war was heating up in Europe.

Waitstill was serving as minister to a Unitarian parish in Wellesley, Massachusetts when one night he received a phone call from a colleague – the Rev. Everett Baker. Baker asked the Sharps to come over right away so he could speak with them, and so they did. When they sat with Baker at his home, he asked them, very seriously, if they would pack up, leave their children in the care of others, and go to Czechoslovakia to help endangered refugees in a new program called the Unitarian Service Committee. During the conversation, Sharp asked Baker how many other people he had approached first; Baker confessed gravely, "17." 17 people had turned Baker down, choosing instead to stay home with their own people, their own children. I'm sure each of you can understand that choice.

The Sharps talked it over, and felt that they had to go. They had come to understand the grave risks facing Jews and others in Europe, something that most Americans did not, living, as we still do, somewhat isolated from the concerns of the larger world. So Martha and Waitstill faced their fears, made arrangements for their children to be cared for by others, and began a long journey of faith that would ultimately result in them saving the lives of almost 2,000 people - children, dissidents, intellectuals, political leaders and more.

This is always the choice: what will we do, personally, when times grow dangerous? Before watching *The Sharps' War*, one thing I said fairly regularly was that doing my best to raise my own children to become healthy, engaged adults and to serve the people in my congregations was my primary responsibility. But the sacrifices that Waitstill and Martha, and their children Hastings and Martha, made saved the lives of thousands. Is that not a reasonable trade? Am I like the Sharps, or am I one of the 17 Unitarian ministers who turned down the risks? What does one personally risk to turn the tide of fear and danger?

Faith without works is dead. But works require faith in something, too. For some of us, it's faith in God, that holy presence of something greater than each of us that inspires and uplifts us. For others, it is faith that humankind is worthy and good, that we can nurture and love one another into wholeness. For still others, it is the hope that though the arc of the universe is long, it does bend toward justice. Call it what you may, we are here, and each of us must make choices in a dangerous age. How will you serve? Will you be an agent of hope, or will you turn away and hope the tide of history does not harm much of what you love?

Our Unitarian and Universalist history is filled with the names of the righteous – names like Julia Ward Howe, Susan B. Anthony, Dorothea Dix, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper... or Servetus, Frederick Douglass, Thomas Paine, Daniel Webster, Paul Revere. Their stories might

inspire, but in the end, what matters most in this moment is your name... your story. What will you do in a dangerous time? What works will your faith yield?

In the coming days here at All Souls, we will, on January 21 after the second service, have a congregational conversation on what works we feel this historical moment calls us to take on. A public conversation on who we are and what we will be known for. Look for calls to witness and to respond as people of faith to the demands of a dangerous age. But in closing, I want to share a few words of love – because our faith is a candle lit, to provide warmth and light and comfort.

Will you join me in concluding this sermon with the words of our Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka, with reading six hundred and sixty six, “A Legacy of Caring?”

Amen.