

## WHY THESE HOLY DAYS?

Sermon by Audette Fulbright  
Sunday, December 1, 2019  
All Souls Church, New York City

It was with great joy that I first met with Bishop Latimer of Love!Alive, the evangelical LGBTQ-centered congregation which worships here at All Souls each Sunday afternoon. He brought with him Jennifer Bailey, of Watchful Eye, and the conversation was one of those energizing, spirited ones - the kind where opportunities unfold before you. The connections we hope to form will be a blessing to us, and hopefully, a blessing to all who may need us in the days to come. The center of the work, as Bishop Latimer and Ms. Bailey painted so effectively, is that taking care of ourselves as bodies is a critical *spiritual* practice. It is to care for a vessel of God's love. It is to take the time to be aware of our bodies, and to bless each other and ourselves with knowledge, compassion, and care. And there is no better way to begin the last month of the year, the season of so many religious holy days, with this kind of attention and awareness.

The Rev. Meg Barnhouse reminds us, "This is the season when dark is growing strong, reaching its peak at the winter solstice on December 21. On December 22, the earth begins tilting the Northern Hemisphere gradually back toward our sun. The light begins to grow stronger, and every culture in the Northern Hemisphere celebrates the rebirth of the light. Hindus have Diwali, Jews have Hanukkah, Pagans have Yule, Christians have Christmas."

In times past, we humans were much more in tune with the rhythms of darkness and light. Especially in places like "the city that never sleeps," we can light our way at will. Even so, we're affected by the shorter and colder days, and we still measure by calendar the turning of the year. The need for rituals and feast days is a profoundly human thing, and yet we underestimate it gravely in our modern lives. Yet it often seeps out this time of year, and we, the meaning-makers, should take seriously the possibilities of these holy days.

Of course, how we go about it matters. The average amount of energy used by one American is equivalent to that used by 3 Germans, 6 Mexicans, 14 Chinese, 38 Indians, or 168 Bangladeshi. It would require the resources of four Earths to support every human being in an American lifestyle – and we know that we are on an unsustainable course. But despite the commercials and the comics, crass consumption is not what makes a holiday special.

Let me tell you a story. It's about a particular family called the Dorchts, but you probably know someone like the Dorchts yourself. It might not even be what we call a "nuclear family;" the story I am about to tell also reminds me very much of a gay couple I know in Colorado, and of a group of friends I had in California when we were house-sharing. But this story is about the Dorchts. They are a family of four with two teens. The parents are John and Melinda, the daughter, Jenna, is 14, and their son, Grant, is 16. John and Melinda both have full time jobs, and that can make things challenging – they get tired and have to negotiate all those tasks such as who will get off work when to do what, especially because the kids are doing afterschool things like soccer and piano. But the Dorchts are what you might call "gifted at loving." They have a lot of family friends, and quite a number of rituals they keep such as a yearly inner-tubing day with old friends, a week-long summer camping trip, things like this.

The Dorchts are lucky – they have enough money to get by. But there are so many things they do that don't require a lot of money. For instance, they have one night a week where no one plans

anything and they don't answer the phone, they cook together and talk and play games and sometimes they sing. And everyone has a "birthday month," where for one whole month, the other family members take special effort to let the birthday person know how much they are valued. And there are the winter holidays. The Dorchts are Christian; in the winter they celebrate Christmas. Every year they have potluck dinner with their friends. Melinda remembers lean Christmases when she was a child and so they always adopt a family at Christmas and together plan and choose the gifts and food they give. They have a tree-decorating ritual; every family member can invite one guest, and they always get the tree the second week of December. Every year one family member is responsible for making a new ornament for the tree, and when the tree goes up inside, they also make a popcorn and cranberry string to decorate an outside trees for the birds, along with a few peanut-butter and birdseed treats.

Traditions. They enter into us when we enter into them, they create sacred space and they have the power to hold us. They can become literally a way of life – a way of being alive in the world.

That is why the winter holidays are such a potential-filled moment in our lives. All beings seem to resonate with the cycle that is so apparent in winter – a movement toward indwelling, a quietness, the death of a year. But we also reach out for something else – the hope that from this dark time something is being born. Think of it – our major worship-oriented religious traditions all have a winter holiday: there is Hanukkah, the Jewish celebration of temple and the miracle of the light, when God provided light for eight days from oil only enough for one. A celebration of renewal and light. There is Christmas, when Christians celebrate the birth of a child who changed the world, a child who would one day tell us, "You are the light of the world!" A child whose relationship with God and through God would be an example for over 2000 years. The stories around this child's birth would come to be illustrated by the presence of a star giving unusual light to all the world. Light shining within the darkness. And there is the ritual lighting of Kwanzaa candles, each of which stands for a principle by which the community chooses to live, such as unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility. Once again the tradition is to invoke fire and light to express this hope and tradition. The celebration of solstice and Yule, among the oldest of our winter celebrations, is ritual to invoke the rebirth of the Sun. We light our Yule fires and the tradition is about darkness and light, coexisting, being in one another, rising from one another. Without dark, there is no light. Without light, darkness consumes.

And so the darkness and light are symbolic, mythic, and literal, and at no other time of the year are we as aware of the power of darkness and light than at this time, and at no other time of the year do we have as many rituals and traditions and celebrations. It is a rich, potential-filled time. It is worthwhile to consider that in terms of our interactions with one another, there is a lot of power in this time of the year. Just as our awareness of joy and hope and fellowship is burning more brightly, equally strong is the power of pain and sadness for some of us for whom this season does not evoke joy. Suicide and depression go up in this season. Loss of loved ones is even more apparent when a holiday approaches. Loneliness and alienation increase when one is surrounded by messages which assume we are all spending this time with warm relationships of kin and connection.

Many people are alone right now – or feel alone. To top it all off, there is the pervasive message and expectation that we will be happy! during this holiday time. There is even less room than usual for expressing feelings of sadness or hopelessness this time of year when all the songs say, "may your days be merry and bright" and "let nothing you dismay." One of the greatest gifts we can give in this holiday season is to offer the comfort of simple acceptance. This is the season of

light *and* dark. It is good to celebrate our hopes and joys, our longing for the returning of the light, to light the fires of our best intentions. It is also good to allow ourselves the awareness that the reason we celebrate and need the warmth of these traditions is because we also share the human experience of sadness, fear, the power of nature, and the brokenness of our connections.

I hope in the coming days, you will seriously consider what you have ritualized, what celebrations and connections bring you joy - if any do - and how you choose to spend the last month of the year. Sometimes, we need to set aside old habits or rituals that no longer serve. What may bring the most meaning to our lives now might be different from what once was. Being able to embrace change can be difficult, but freeing.

Who will you embrace with your time, attention, and love this season? Will you transform these holidays into holy days? Don't let this opportunity pass by. Slow down. Consider moments. Love people. Give kindness.

To close, I'd like to offer the gift of this poem by Galway Kinnell. It's called, "That Silent Evening:"

### **That Silent Evening**

I will go back to that silent evening  
when we lay together and talked in low, silent voices,  
while outside slow lumps of soft snow  
fell, hushing as they got near the ground,  
with a fire in the room, in which centuries  
of tree went up in continuous ghost-giving-up,  
without a crackle, into morning light.  
Not until what hastens went slower did we sleep.  
When we got home we turned and looked back  
at our tracks twining out of the woods,  
where the branches we brushed against let fall  
puffs of sparkling snow, quickly, in silence,  
like stolen kisses, and where the scritch scritch scritch  
among the trees, which is the sound that dies  
inside the sparks from the wedge when the sledge  
hits it off center telling everything inside  
it is fire, jumped to a black branch, puffed up  
but without arms and so to our eyes lonesome,  
and yet also - how could we know this? - happy!  
in shape of chickadee. Lying still in snow,  
not iron-willed, like railroad tracks, willing  
not to meet until heaven, but here and there  
making slubby kissing stops in the field,  
our tracks wobble across the snow their long scratch.  
Everything that happens here is really little more,  
if even that, than a scratch, too. Words, in our mouths,  
are almost ready, already, to bandage the one  
whom the scritch scritch scritch, meaning if how when  
we might lose each other, scratches scratches scratches  
from this moment to that. Then I will go back

to that silent evening, when the past just managed  
to overlap the future, if only by a trace,  
and the light doubles and shines  
through the dark the sparkling that heavens the earth.