

A Spark of Hope

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 21, 2025

Battles, destruction, rededication, miracles - we heard the blessed and hallowed recounting of Hanukkah in our Story for All Ages this morning. The tale embodies perseverance, determination, strength, hope, and light over darkness. There are myriad ways that this story could have unfolded. The Jewish people could have thrown up their hands in defeat when they discovered their defiled and desecrated Temple. They could have seen the meager amount of oil they were left with and simply given up, living in literal and figurative darkness until more oil arrived. Yet held deeply within them were the seeds of hope. They collected the oil and lit the menorah, having no idea that the flame would last eight days. Yet it did. The story and the symbol of the menorah embody sacred teachings that have so much to teach those of any faith tradition.

All we need is a flicker – a small flicker of hope to carry on. But one night's oil lasting eight, an offering of but a small flame in the overwhelming darkness. This is the flame of Hanukkah – it is tiny, and it is persistent. Quote, "The oil lasted because they refused to accept darkness as final."¹ The unexpected and inexplicable shining light of the menorah was, as Amanda Udis-Kessler offered, "a miracle of trust amidst anxiety... a miracle of courage in a time of fear ... a miracle of peace in a time of violence."² Today's reflection is not solely about hope - it is about those tiny seeds and flickers of hope that serve to make a true and lasting difference.

For what is a life without hope? Hope is not the promise that things will get better, but the reassurance that things can be better, as we see in the Hanukkah story. Without this, the future seems bleak and without possibility. There is no catalyst to change. We each know this emotion for it is inevitable in the trials and tribulations of our finite, human lives. We become

¹ "The Hidden Light Amid Uncertain Beginnings" by Yosef Rodrigues

² "Each Candle a Miracle" by Amanda Udis-Kessler

steeped in inaction. We reside in complacency and reside in despondency. We feel lonely and forgotten. We feel the poignancy of our individual pain. To some it is the loss of a loved one from which recovery seems impossible, even if it is perhaps inevitable. To another, it is dismay as politicians act in ways that drastically counter our values. Hopelessness can be personal, it can be political, it can be communal. In the story of Hanukkah, it was all three.

We each hold a spark of hope within, no matter how hidden it may feel. How can we kindle this flame? To me, it is my personal connection to all I hold sacred and holy. I make it a point to pray and meditate and walk through nature. Perhaps we pause to listen to that still, small voice within. Or we remind ourselves of all that we have overcome and reflect upon possibility. We have the ability to connect to the sacred which we learn will not abandon us. This flame is a reminder that the sun will always rise, that sorrow is not permanent and can be a catalyst to strength, that life is inherently good, that mistakes can be remedied. Note that none of this is profound, but that all of it can heal.

Renowned philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich writes, “There are many things and events in which we can see a reason for genuine hope, namely, the seed-like presence of that which is hoped for.”³ What does he mean by a seed-like hope? Anything we can imagine happening already has potential. If we hope for strength or endurance or growth, we do not have to begin from nowhere, we do not have to create our own way out of nothing. The seeds for these possibilities already exist. Furthermore, we are called “to sow the seed in hope for the fruit.”⁴ We tend to that small seed-like hope for the possibility of what is yet to come. A towering redwood grows from but a small, seemingly insignificant seed. Deep canyons are created from what appears to be an insignificant flow of water. Huge skyscrapers begin from an architectural design. I think of my life – my ministry, my husband whom I met at a Unitarian Universalist retreat, my seminary friends, my job here, my relocation to Maryland – this all came to fruition because one person invited me to church. I have a life of such joy and purpose and meaning

³ *The Shaking of the Foundations* by Paul Tillich

⁴ *ibid*

that I had not previously imagined. It was a possibility. Furthermore, we have no assurance that this seed will develop. No gardener is assured that a packet of seeds will yield a garden. But they tend to them with great care, regardless, in hopes of a beautiful future.

We are living in dark times. We see it and feel it on the news, overseas, and in our neighborhoods. There is uncertainty, despair, violence, and fascism. How do we maintain hope? It is focusing our attention on possibility. But each individual person can make a difference. Write postcards encouraging people to vote. Contact politicians. Videotape an interaction with ICE. Educate oneself on issues of racism and fascism. Think of the small seeds nurtured by Rosa Parks not giving up her seat. By each individual that has marched or voted. We have seen revolutions and their humble beginnings. And think of those seeds planted for our children or our children's children, victories we will never know. We may not see an end to prison labor, but we vote anyway. We may not see the end of healthcare disparities, but we march anyway. We may not see the environmental justice we have fought for, but we fight anyway.

Author Kent Nerburn wrote, quote, "We build tiny hearth fires, sometimes barely strong enough to give off warmth. But to the person lost in the darkness, our tiny flame may be the road to safety, the path to salvation."⁵ Our own hope can serve to guide others. We are both ordinary and extraordinary, insignificant and significant, and it is often the ordinary and the significant that can serve as a lifesaving flicker of hope to someone who is suffering. What is a "tiny hearth fire" you have tended to? It is whatever offers the presence of light. Standing up for yourself. Doing something of importance and meaning even though it scares you. Simply sitting with someone who is grieving. With each small flame, darkness dissipates. It is daily, weekly, monthly life. And in particularly dark and hopeless places we may need the small flame of guidance of someone who has come before us. There are so many things that cannot truly be understood unless they have been lived - addiction, grief. Seeing the survival of another offers a tangible possibility - for we see that it has already been overcome. Nerburn writes, "It is not

⁵ *Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace: Living in the Spirit of the Prayer of Saint Francis* by Kent Nerburn

given us to know who is lost in the darkness that surrounds us or even if our light is seen.”⁶ Yet, I offer, day by day, we persevere, and we carry on.

The Rubin Museum of Art in New York held an exhibit entitled *A Monument for the Anxious and Hopeful*. Each visitor was given a card on which they could write their anxieties and their hopes and hang on the lobby wall. The installation grew to 50,000 responses throughout the course of a year as myriad observers posted their uncertainties. On the wall, personal, theoretical, political, and spiritual reflections were posted. The first prompt offered was “I’m anxious because...” Answers ranged from “I care too much about what people think of me” to “I don’t want an addiction to control me” to “being misunderstood is scary.” Perhaps we hear our own woes echoed in these deeply personal quotations. The second prompt read, “I’m hopeful because...” in response, people wrote, “I believe in love when I never thought I would,” or “the world is full of good people, they just don’t make the news” or “music saves my life a little every day.”⁷ Self-consciousness, addiction, misunderstandings, holding us in despair. Love, goodness, and music serving as that flicker of hope, those seeds to be planted. The flame offered in the velvety darkness to guide someone home. These insights were nothing profound. They were flickers of hope. But they changed an orientation with the world regardless.

So may we embody hope - even a flicker of hope. Hope for a better future. A more compassionate world. A more just society. We hold it within us no matter how hidden it may feel - that unceasing flame within. May each action be born by the possibility of what can be. Healing. Justice. Strength. The seeds are there and they can grow into something mighty. May we offer a small act of courage, of bravery, when surrounded by fear. May we offer but a murmur of peace or compassion in times of violence. We are called to embody our deepest convictions of justice and equity and interdependence sowing the seeds for the world that is yet to come. May we embody our own values and convictions so that when someone needs that “small hearth flame” of hope we can offer the very best of ourselves. It is hope we need,

⁶ *Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace: Living in the Spirit of the Prayer of Saint Francis* by Kent Nerburn

⁷ “A Monument for the Anxious and Hopeful” <https://www.candychang.com/a-monument-for-the-anxious-and-hopeful/>

but it need not be profound, dear ones. For even the smallest flicker - the tiniest flame - throws light upon the shadows. So, as we celebrate Hanukkah, we embody that small menorah flame that gave hope to the marginalized and the oppressed - those who witnessed a miracle. May we learn how to embody strength by engaging with the story of the Maccabees - the few who overcame the many. With strength, dedication, and resolve we, too, can persevere. May we know the determination of each and every person who worked to rededicate the holy Temple - embodying an enduring and lasting faith. May we know the power of those who overcame oppression - persisting, persisting, persisting. It is this I leave you with - possibility. I invite you to imagine the possibility for all that lies ahead when we engage with but a flicker of hope. Tonight, Jews all around the world will light the eight flame in their menorah, a remembrance of a 2000 year journey of faith, perseverance, and hope. This can be our guiding light – that promise offered millennia ago. The people who survived. That tiny menorah flame that illuminated the way.

May it be so, and Amen