

“Waiting on the LORD”

Today is the last full day of Hanukkah. It began last Sunday, as Rev Deb pointed out last week, and that got me thinking about it and made me realize I really don't know very much about this ancient Jewish tradition. I did already know that it always coincides with the Christian Advent and Christmas seasons and I'm familiar with a few of its associated traditions, like lighting the menorah and spinning the dreidel. But I wanted to dive into it a bit more, especially since all I really knew about Hanukkah came from the Adam Sandler song!

At sundown tonight, Jews will light the last of the Hanukkah Menorah candles. They will light it outside or at a window. It's candle number 8, signifying the miracle of the 8 nights that the temple menorah burned, even though there was only enough blessed oil to keep it burning for one. You see, it took eight days to consecrate the oil and the miracle was that the menorah continued to burn until the new oil was ready.

[Notes: The temple menorah had 7 lamps and is lit every night in the temple. The Hanukkah menorah has 9, including the *shamash* candle, which is lit every night and is used to light the other candles. The Hanukkah menorah is lit outside or at a window.]

But how did Hanukkah get to be a festival, anyway? Well, it's a pretty long story that goes back to the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE and continues through the conquests of Alexander the Macedonian, who became Alexander the Great, to the Maccabean revolt in 167 BCE. After being sent back to Jerusalem and Palestine by Cyrus the Persian after the Babylonian exile, the Jews were allowed to practice their religion freely and the temple was rebuilt. This relationship, which included freedom of religion, between the Jews and their conquerors continued, unabated for centuries, even after Alexander's conquests and the establishment of a Hellenistic (i.e. Greek) culture throughout the middle east.

But some 150 years after Alexander's death, when his empire was divided between two of his generals, Ptolemy ruling over Egypt and Seleucid ruling over Palestine, Syria, and all the way to India, things began to fall apart for the Jews. Antiochus IV Epiphanes, in 167 tried to put his own people in charge of the temple. These were Hellenistic Jews who were not accepted by the orthodox Jews, who refused to accept them. This outraged Antiochus and he began a program to eliminate Judaism, outlawing the Sabbath and circumcision and then sacrificing to a statue of Zeus at the altar of the temple. Jews were killed en masse, especially on the Sabbath when many refused to fight because of their dedication to the Torah law.

However, many Jews took up arms against this persecution, the primary family being that of Mattathias, who, with his 5 sons successfully led a revolt that led to the ouster of Antiochus and the reclaiming of the temple. One of his sons was Judah, nicknamed “the Hammer”, which in Aramaic is “Maccabee” and from which the term “Maccabean Revolt” gets his name. This history is all recounted in the 4 books of Maccabees in the Apocryphal books of the Bible.

Upon defeating the tyrant and retaking the temple, the Jews went to restart their tradition of the nightly lighting of the temple menorah, and this is when they found only one day's supply of sanctified oil. But they lit it. And while they waited for the menorah to burn out as they undertook the 8 days required to sanctify more oil, they were amazed that it kept burning. And

so they declared a festival of Hanukkah, which means “dedication”, to mark the miracle they witnessed as they rededicated the temple. As a footnote, the Maccabeans ruled for over 100 years, had their own problems, and were eventually ousted by the Romans in 63 BCE.

Which brings me, finally, to my sermon topic. Waiting. The Jews waited for 60 years to be released from Babylon and returned to their homeland. The Maccabeans waited for 8 days for the menorah flame to go out, and yet it did not. Patience and trust and faith in God were rewarded with unexpected blessings.

Advent is a season of waiting. Just as one candle on the menorah is lit to mark the passing of the 8 nights waiting on the sanctified oil to be prepared, we light one Advent candle each week as we wait, with anticipation, for the coming of Christ, the light of the world. A yearly rededication of the temples of our hearts.

Waiting is a funny thing. Sometimes joyful... waiting to go on vacation, waiting for a birthday. Sometimes fearful... waiting for surgery for yourself or a loved one. Sometimes frustrating... waiting in a long line, waiting on hold on the telephone. Children everywhere wait for the coming of Christmas with the opening of doors and windows on their Advent calendars. But the thing about waiting is that it's time we can prepare ourselves for what comes next, what we are expecting, and what we may not be expecting.

Adam and Eve couldn't wait to have their eyes opened; to have the knowledge of good and evil, even though they already had more than enough. Think of how things might have changed if they had just waited a bit, considered what they were doing, instead of acting impulsively. Because they couldn't wait, shame and suffering were the rewards.

But Isaiah tells us to hang in there. Wait on the LORD and the rewards will be beyond comprehension. The world will be changed. Suffering will be no more. “We shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away”. “Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed”.

“Look toward the east” says Baruch. To the rising of the sun. To a new day. “Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction” and “put on forever the beauty of the glory of God”!

The prophets knew a better day was coming and they waited for it, patiently perhaps, but enthusiastically for sure. “The LORD your God is in your midst”, says Zephaniah. Not “will be in your midst”, but HE is here and now! And HE rejoices over us with gladness, renews us in his love, and exults over our loud singing as on a day of festival.

Surely Zechariah and Elizabeth heeded the words of the prophets. As our reading from Luke said, “They were righteous before God and lived blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” And yet Zechariah could not believe the words the angel spoke to him. And so he waited, in silence, for the birth of his son John, given to prepare the ground as Isaiah foretold.

But even with all this joyful anticipation, we know one thing about ourselves, don't we... that original sin lives in us still? If you're like me, you may often be asking yourself, “Why did I say that? How can I be so mean and inconsiderate? Why am I always falling short of God's goals for me? I'm sorry, God. I'll try to do better. How can I know what you want me to do? Lead me Lord. I want to be like you. But I know I never will.”

So the thing about Advent is that it gives us a chance to dive into these feelings, to offer them up to God, to seek His help, to ask for guidance... simply to take comfort leaning on the everlasting arms of our Father in heaven; to make ready to welcome God's son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, and to prepare, once again, to walk with him hand-in-hand through life's journey;

Let's do our best to take to heart the words we have heard today, to wait patiently and actively, to listen for that still small voice, and, like the Virgin Mary, respond, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

~ Amen.