

Lessons from Hanukkah

Sermon, Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 19, 2010

Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, NY

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Isaiah 7:10-165, Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

It was Hanukkah a couple of weeks ago and I was invited to the home of some Jewish friends to help celebrate and eat latkes.¹ We were talking about the dreidel² and the letters on it: nun, gimel, he, and shin. They form the acronym for Nes Gadol Hayah Sham, which means, “A great miracle happened there.” Then someone commented that if you buy a dreidel in Jerusalem the letters on it are: nun, gimel, he, and peh; meaning, “A great miracle happened here.” I, immediately, from my Christian point of view, thought of the Incarnation, the miracle of the birth of Christ; but then thought that wasn’t in Jerusalem, and the Jews wouldn’t be celebrating it, so what miracle are they referring to? So they told me the story.

Several centuries before the birth of Christ, the Mediterranean world was being heavily influenced by the Greek culture. It was a powerful and sophisticated civilization and had been extended by the campaigns of Alexander the Great. The Ptolemies, who ruled Egypt, were Greek as were the Seleucids who ruled what had been Babylon and Persia. Originally Judea had been under the Ptolemies, but at the time of our story, Judea was ruled by the Seleucids. The Hellenizing (Greek) influences were very strong in Judea. There were deep divisions between the forward looking, modernizing Jews that wanted to become more Greek, and the conservative, Jews who wanted to preserve their traditions. Naturally, the Seleucid King supported the Hellenizing faction. Eventually – here I am skipping over a long, complicated and fascinating tale, which you can read about in Karen Armstrong’s book *Jerusalem*³ or in First and Second Maccabees in the Apocrypha. Eventually the Seleucid army invaded Jerusalem, slaughtered hundreds, plundered the Temple treasury and stripped all the lamps and gold ornamentation from the Temple, even the Holy of Holies. Practicing the Jewish faith was outlawed, pigs were sacrificed on the Temple altar and an altar to Zeus was built in the Temple court.

This desecration led to a major revolt led by the Jewish high priest, Mattathias Maccabeus, and his five sons. After several years of guerilla-style fighting, the revolt of the Maccabees was successful. In 164 the Temple was purified and rededicated to Yahweh. But only one small flask of ritual olive oil for the lamps could be found. This was insufficient to light the menorah for the eight days of the celebration. But they proceeded anyway, and the oil never ran out, it lasted for the whole eight days. This is the miracle of Hanukkah also called the Festival of Lights.

¹ Latkes are shallow-fried potato pancakes made from grated potato, flour and egg and are part of the traditional Hanukkah celebration. They may be eaten with applesauce, sour cream or sugar.

² A dreidel is a four-sided spinning top, played with during Hanukkah.

³ cf. Armstrong, Karen, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*, Random House, 1996, Chapter 6 “Antioch in Judea.”

There are a couple of things that we can learn from this story. One is to have faith in abundance. The fear of lack causes us to contract, to pull into a hard shell, like a turtle. This impenetrable shield formed by our fear prevents us from being open to other possibilities that may exist. We need to trust that God will look after us, but maybe not always in the way we expect. If we are hiding in the dark, we can't perceive His generosity. We can't help ourselves, and we certainly can't help others. The lesson here is to trust God and be open to His miracles.

The Gospel tells us that Joseph was expecting his espoused wife, Mary to be a virgin, but found that she did not appear to be so. Being a charitable sort, he had decided to dismiss her quietly when the angel intervened. Joseph was open to the miracles of God and followed his guidance. He could not have done this if he had been wrapped up in shame and recriminations.

The other night I watched an old program of "Murder, She Wrote." It was Christmas time and the doctor, Seth Hazlitt, was making himself miserable with the memory of the Christmas when he was 10 years old. He had wanted a train set very badly, but all he received was socks and underwear. The family didn't have the money for toys, only for necessities. But the painful memory of his disappointment many years before was spoiling the holiday for him in the present, as well as spoiling it for many around him with his curmudgeonly behavior. One of the very damaging things we can do is to hold on to our hurts; no matter how justified we may think they are. We need to let go of the past and focus on the present with good will.

The Collect today prays that the Lord will purify our consciences. In this season of preparation for the greatest miracle of all, what fears and expectations need to be purged from our hearts? What resentments are hardening our outer shell so that we cannot exchange love with others? Whom do we need to forgive? What do we need to do to prepare ourselves to welcome Jesus into the mansion of our hearts fully, completely and without restraint?

The other lesson to learn from Hanukkah concerns the menorah, the lamp used at Hanukkah. It has nine candles; eight are on the same level and one is lighted for each night of the celebration. The ninth candle, called the *shamash*, sits higher. It is the "servant" or "helper" candle and is used to light the others, so it is the first candle to be lit. Think about this, the *shamash* is the servant but is higher than the others and lighted first; the servant is exalted and honored before the others. This shows how important it is to bring light to others. Will you be a *shamash*, a helper candle, and bring light to someone this Christmas season?

And now to Him whose Power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.⁴

⁴ Ephesians 3:20-21