

Lighting Candles in the Darkness

Sermon For All Ages (Intergenerational Service)

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Unity Church of North Easton

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Is there anybody here who has ever been afraid of the dark? I was, when I was a kid, but I'm not really, anymore. Now I kind of like this dark time of the year, with long nights for going to bed early. It's kind of weird to most kids to think that going to bed early could ever be a good thing, but most grown-ups understand how great it can be.

Lots of kids and adults are afraid of the dark, even though we have strong houses to protect us. Scared even though there aren't many dangerous animals out there, anymore. Scared even though there isn't much chance anyone would ever break in and hurt us. That almost never happens.

But still, lots of kids are afraid of the dark, even though they have strong houses and strong parents to protect them, even though it doesn't really make sense to be afraid. But the thing about fear is that it usually doesn't make sense.

I think people being afraid of the dark goes back thousands of years, to the time when humans did not know how to build strong houses to keep them safe, way back when humans lived in caves. Cave people were afraid of the dark because we humans aren't as good as most animals at telling when danger is coming. Our noses are not as good at smelling as dog and cat noses are, so our noses are no great help. Our ears are stuck to the sides of our heads and we can't move them around like deer or horses can, so our ears are pretty useless.

My uncle Hub could move his ears without using his hands. He'd

sit in a chair and do this (arching eyebrows) and his ears would move! My brothers and I would stand and watch him, then try to do it ourselves. But even Uncle Hub could only move his ears up and down, not around like horses or dogs can which helps them hear really well. Our eyes are the best way for us to tell if danger is coming, and at night we can't see very well.

So I think we are afraid of the dark not really because it's dark but because we can't tell what's coming. Sometimes in our lives it's like that. We can't tell what's coming, what to expect, and we become afraid it will be bad.

What if what's coming is something really good, not bad? If we're sitting there all scared and worried, when it shows up we might yell and scare that good thing away, by mistake. It's kind of like what happens in this poem by Shel Silverstein (a Christmas poem from a Jewish guy!). It's called Christmas Dog

Tonight's my first night as a watchdog,
And here it is Christmas Eve.
The children are sleeping all cozy upstairs,
While I'm guardin' the stockin's and tree.

What's that now---footsteps on the rooftop?
Could it be a cat or a mouse?
Who's this down the chimney?
A thief with a beard--- And a big sack for robbin' the house?

I'm barkin', I'm growlin', I'm bitin' his butt.
He howls and jumps back in his sleigh.
I scare his strange horses, they leap in the air.
I've frightened the whole bunch away.

Now the house is all peaceful and quiet again.
The stockin's are safe as can be.
Won't the kiddies be glad when they wake up tomorrow

And see how I've guarded the tree.

The Christmas Dog scared Santa Claus away! Not what we'd want, huh? So what can we do instead of being afraid of the dark? One thing we can do is to practice the virtue of hope. While you kids have been in your classes or in children's' chapel on Sundays this fall, we in here have been talking about virtues.

What is virtue? It means a good habit of the heart. You get these good habits the same way you get bad habits- by practicing them over and over again! Some of the virtues we've talked about include being brave, which is a good thing to do when you're afraid. We've talked about making wise decisions like not scaring good things away. We've talked about being fair to others and not taking or doing too much of anything. We've talked about being loving and kind to everyone. We have talked about trusting ourselves to come through things that are scary or sad.

Hope is a virtue, a good habit of the heart. It's about more than just hoping for certain things to happen, like when we hope for certain presents for the holidays. Hope is more a habit of trying to stay positive and to trust that things will be okay.

It seems to me that Hanukkah is all about hope. The Jewish people who fought the Greeks hoped to be free to practice their religion in peace. That happened. The priests hoped the oil would last long enough to bless the temple. It did.

Now things don't always turn out the way we hope they will, but we can still be hopeful if we remember two things. First, remember that we are strong enough to make it through hard times when things don't go the

way we want. Second, remember that there are lots of loving people around us to help us through those times.

There's a saying – it's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness. To me this means that we don't have to sit in the dark alone. There are others there with us, we just can't see them if it's dark. If we light a candle (or turn on a light – don't light candles without an adult around, kids!) we might see those other people. The other thing that happens when we light candles in the darkness is that other people who might be sitting there afraid and feeling alone can see our light and know they are not alone.

So by lighting the candle of hope within ourselves, we light up any darkness. We show our selves and others that we are not alone. If we all light those candles, those vessels of sacred oil inside ourselves that nothing can ever harm, we can find the way to gather together. We can light up the paths that connect us. When we gather together with our lights burning, it helps keep us warm through even the longest, darkest night. This gives us courage, it shows our love, and it helps us to keep on hoping. So may it be with us this holiday season.