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“Hope’s Holy Impatience”
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Once upon a time, 168 BCE to be exact, there was a modest community of merchants and teachers and farmers living in Judea, a part of the Greek empire. They had known hardships, but they hoped to live in peace in the Greek world, practicing their religion undisturbed. They had built a modest temple in Jerusalem where they could worship the God of their understanding in the ways prescribed by Torah.

The Greek ruler at that time was Antiochus Epiphanes IV. Like every tyrant in every age, he considered non-conformists like the Jews a threat to his power and influence. Because he was well armed and well-funded, he decided that the easiest way to deal with this strange group of people was to destroy their way of life. He marched into Jerusalem with an army and stormed the temple they erected statues of Greek gods and ordered the Jews to bow down to them. No more Torah study, no more Sabbath observance. From Jerusalem Antiochus and the Greek army under his command took their campaign of terror and intimidation to all of Judea.

One morning the army arrived in the village of Modine, and set up a statue and altar in the village square. The villagers were forced to surround the square for the usual test of obedience. The village elder, Mattathias, was then ordered, on behalf of the entire village, to sacrifice a pig to the Greek god, and bow down. According to Jewish law, a pig is an unclean animal. To sacrifice a pig was to defile oneself in a dreadful way.

Mattathias could not bring himself, even on pain of death, to obey the soldiers. He reminded his fellow Judeans of the commandment "Thou shalt make no false idols beside me," The soldiers, in fury, struck the old man. This galvanized his sons and the rest of the village into action. Judas, one of his sons, led the attack on the soldiers. They tore down the statue and chased the army out of town. This Greek army was so accustomed to obedience from their subjects that they had no idea how to respond to

unexpected resistance. The villagers ran to the surrounding hillsides and hid in caves. Thus began one of the earliest guerillas war in history. Using tactics of surprise, the Maccabees resisted the mighty Greek army. Word spread of their successes, and more Judeans joined them. Three years later the Greek army withdrew, and the Israelites were able to return to their villages and towns.

When they approached the Temple grounds in Jerusalem, they found burned doors, a destroyed altar, weeds growing in the courtyard. They wept, then got to work restoring their holy site. When the Temple was ready for use again, people came from all over Judea for a service of dedication - the word Hanukkah means Dedication. When it was time to light the temple lamps, they realized they had only one small jar of sanctified oil; just enough for one evening. So, they lit the lamp, and it burned, miraculously, for eight days and nights. Or so the story goes. For eight days and nights, they celebrated, danced, sang and prayed in gratitude for the restoration of their house of worship.

The Hanukkah story is a story of hope. Against all odds the rag-tag resistance defeated the Empire. Against all odds, love overcame fear and hate. Against all odds religious freedom prevailed against intolerance. Every year, Jews tell the story again, in good times and in bad. In remembering that ancient story, we are reminded of the resilience of the human spirit, of the power of working in community, of the miracles that can happen when, against all odds, we light the little lamps once again.

As the orthodox Jewish author Herman Wouk wrote, "Our whole history is a fantastic legend of a single day's supply of oil lasting eight days; of a flaming bush that was not consumed; of a national life that in the logic of events should have flickered and gone out long ago, still burning on." We can learn something from Jewish history.

We are living through some challenging times. Logic might dictate that we all become discouraged. But we cannot afford the luxury of discouragement, nor can the world afford our discouragement. We must find

ways to keep resisting, to keep advocating, to keep finding joy and love, to keep hope alive. As the historian Howard Zinn reminds us, “If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.”

This month, our Soul Matters theme asks us to reflect on what it means to be a people of hope. Most months there are several spiritual exercises to choose from. This month there is only this one simple exercise: Spend some time remembering how you’ve been saved by hope. And then bring that story of hope to your group to share. That is what Carmen and I have tried to do this morning; to bring you stories of hope. As Scott Tayler writes in his introduction to the spiritual exercise, “Hope rarely descends or magically appears. Most often, it’s passed on. It comes to us as a gift. We don’t find it, as much as we receive it. And almost always, that gift comes in the form of a story. Hearing tales of others finding their way through the dark helps us trust that light is waiting at the end our tunnels as well. Listening to others talk about their sources of hope helps us notice the many resources available to us. Simply put, hope can’t spread without our stories. Light doesn’t travel through the dark on its own. It hitchhikes on the tales we tell each other.”

That is the reason for religious holidays. Each faith creates a liturgical calendar that assures that the core stories of that faith will be retold and remembered and celebrated year after year. Hanukkah. Solstice. Christmas. Bodhi Day, which celebrates the enlightenment of the Buddha. Kwanzaa. All December holidays that bring hope to those who observe them. Not a passive and unrealistic optimism that somehow everything will turn out all right in the end. But hope, the holy impatience of hope, that which impels us to embody, nay, to incarnate that which we hope will come to pass.

Remember the Maccabees. Remember your own stories of perseverance against all odds. Remember the stories. Share the stories. Be inspired by the stories.

