

I grew up in a community outside of Detroit, Michigan, with a large Jewish community; lots of Jewish friends growing up and the joke that my Jewish friends told then and still tell now about Jewish holidays, is that they all boil down to one plot: They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat!

Judaism is an ethnicity as well as religion. So the food is wonderful, like all ethnic food is. I think we get to eat latkes upstairs today. And it's true, you know, from the hamantaschen at Purim, to matzah at the Seder dinner, to the latkes and gelt of Hanukkah. Food is an important part of these holidays, and they celebrate Jewish triumph over foreign attempts to control and dominate the Jewish people. Many of Judaism's Holy Days are about survival - even triumph - over a foreign king. The history of Judaism is a history of tenacity in the face of power and Empire. The story of Hanukkah is the story of one such triumph. So over the course of history, different empires were in power. Judea is what we now think of as the country of Israel, which over different points in history included either one or two countries, but it was always been a very small country, and its much more powerful neighbors always were fighting over who should be in charge of Israel. And Hanukkah celebrates the Maccabean revolt. Around 200 BCE. the Syrian Greek Empire had come into power, and they wanted their vassal states to be Greek in their forms of worship. And there were certain Jewish leaders who were willing to make that deal. One man named Jason said "yeah, of course this is an opportunity." The Jews in Israel can take on Greek forms of worship. They will become Greek citizens. That's the carrot. They'll get to be Greek citizen, but they'll have to worship in the Greek manner. Jason said to the king of the Assyrians, "Yes, I can do that. I'll promote this idea. I'll just give a little bribe to become the high priest. I'll be in charge of the worship in the temple. Everything will be fine. We'll become just like everybody else." But you know, once you can give bribes to become the high priest as well, then you're open to a bigger bribe. Another man named Menelaus gave a bigger bribe. Menelaus and Jason got into a war over this. The Empire came in to squash the fighting to introduce Greek forms of worship into the temple by force. And it was at this point in this moment of chaos and weakness of leadership that the Maccabees, a band of brothers, rose up to lead a Jewish revolution for freedom and freedom of worship and self-governance in Israel. The story of Hanukkah is that at the end of his fighting, the Maccabees go into the temple, that had all of its treasures stolen, defeat the Syrian Treasury, and it's full of images of Greek gods and they want to consecrate the temple for Jewish worship. But in order to do that, they need to be able to light the sacred lamp and they only have enough oil for one day. It's going to take eight days to prepare more oil and miraculously, the lamp burns for eight days until more oil can be prepared and the temple is cleansed. There are scholars who think that this, this historical moment of the Jewish people, asserting their own form of government and self-control, self-governance in the face of Empire is something that has happened again and again in Jewish history. In fact, there are some scholars who think that that is the fundamental Jewish story, even the story of the Exodus itself. That coming out of Egypt coming out of slavery in Egypt, we don't have any evidence that that actually happened that Jewish people lived in Egypt and were slaves there. But there is evidence that Egypt was 1000 years before Hanukkah, One of those empires that had control over Judea, and that the revolt at that time and the claim of self-governance was a claim of economic justice and taking care of people in the face of empire. Empire whether it's Syria in a Greek, it meant domination, and violence and theft. And Empires want tribute. They want as many taxes as they can get. All corrupt officials are open to bribes, as we saw in the Hanukkah story. They want to extract resources from these states under their control, and some scholars believe that the Exodus, the moment of freedom, the creation of Israel, itself, was when Hebrew

people in the whole country of Canaan what is now Israel fought back against the Egyptian empire, because they believe in a different way of being together. You can see this in the Hebrew Bible. They believe in an ethic of care and taking care of orphans and widows. A forgiveness of debts, regulations that limited greed, respect for the land. Even care for the stranger remembering that everybody has been a stranger at some point in their lives. You can see this woven through the stories in Hebrew Bible. You can see a deep skepticism of having a king in the Maccabean revolt. You can see it, in fact, in the poem that we now know as the Magnificat and attached to Christmas in the Christian tradition: Mary's song probably came from a song that was written at the time of the Maccabean revolt and celebrates that moment of freedom. So we can hear the ethics of that moment of freedom in the song Mary says, "God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has scattered the proud and the imaginations of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away." If that song does come from the Maccabean revolt, then that is the ethic of the revolts. That's the world they were trying to get to through their revolution.

The revolution didn't necessarily mean that Israel ought to have a king. In the case of the Maccabean revolt, it did result in a Maccabean king. But it didn't necessarily turn out to be a good thing. Herod, the villain in the Christmas story, who we all celebrate when he dies up here during our pageant. He is in the line of the Hasmonean kings who are set up after the Maccabean revolt. So you start out with all these wonderful ideals, but somebody gets to be king and they get used to that power and they get used to the privilege of being king and then they begin to extract taxes from their people and they begin to live high on the hog and it doesn't last forever. Kings can win battles, but they can abuse their power. They can justify inequality. Israel has a strong tradition of resisting tyranny. We heard it in that story from Judges, from earlier in Israel and today's story about the king of the trees. A spiritual leader tells the story when a man is trying to become king in an unjust way. And the trees want a king, so they go to who they think are the most likely candidates, the trees who are doing the best job as trees. And they say to the olive tree, 'How about you?' but the olive tree says "I have a job already making olive oil and in order to be king I would have to stop doing this good work I'm already doing. They go to the fig tree who has to give the same answer "I would have to stop making figs in order to be king. It's a lot of work being king - I can't do two jobs at the same time. So then they go to the bramble and can you imagine a bramble? It's like the vine - maybe it might crawl up something that supports it but it's not making any grapes or figs or olives. Just making thorns, that catch your skin, brambles' something that has to be put back, out of the garden. Yet the bramble says "sure I'll be king. Just come sit under my shade here. I'll be a great king". But if you can imagine that the bramble doesn't have leaves. It doesn't give any shade at all. The Bramble is the worst choice to be king but the brambles the only tree that says yes, because it doesn't have a job to do already.

What I take from that story is that if each one of us can be leaders in our place, doing what we do with honesty and integrity and open communication, then we don't need a king over us. We don't need to submit to somebody's lordship. If each one of us takes responsibility for being a good and honest and open leader in whatever role we play in life. If olive tree is the best olive tree it can be, if the fig tree is the best fig tree, and the vine is the best vine, then the trees don't need a ruler because they can get along and work out problems amongst themselves. And they can work it out in a situation of equality and fairness with each other.

The Hanukkah story today still reminds us to resist economic injustice and tyranny and taking the lesson of the parable of the trees we should look for ways that we can be leaders and seek economic justice and fairness and wellbeing wherever we are. I think there are ways in Worcester that we can do this right now. In this church, one of the ways that we have been a leader, one of the fruits of our tree in recent years, has been our work with refugees. We have supported refugee families, most recently since 2015. I believe in years past we have done some work with African refugees before. When we started this work in 2015, there was a lot of federal support for refugee resettlement. We, you know, if we ran into a problem, we could go to a local organization, they would give us help and support, but a couple years later, we began working with another family in here in the church and by that time during the Trump administration, there was no federal support for refugees. We had trouble even knowing who to call, and if a call could go through there was no answer. But despite that, members of this community and the refugee families themselves working together, we found the right school for children and housing and medical care. Just this last weekend, we help support a Christmas party for Haitian refugees, who found themselves in Worcester with no legal status, no opportunity to work or seek housing, relying entirely on the goodwill of the community, which this church and others other parts of the Worcester community helped to provide. Although we are not directly involved, there are communities helping to support Afghan refugees as well, here in the city. This didn't happen because there was always somebody in the federal government who knew exactly how this should work, and what good work should be done and what the next steps were although we wish we lived in that world. A world where the United States accepted all the refugees it could and had robust support for them. But we don't live in that world. There's more or less support, things change. Despite that this community and the larger Worcester community came together to work with these families to provide what they needed. It's just a reminder that none of us here king, though we might know how things ought to be sometimes, but none of us sets national policy. Despite that, we can be leaders for justice, no matter who we are. We have the same opportunity right now in supporting affordable unjust housing in Worcester. There was just a report out this week that, **of all the cities**, and I think all the cities in Massachusetts, perhaps in England, the rents in Worcester have risen the fastest, and more and more of our neighbors here in Worcester are paying too much for their housing and living in unaffordable apartments. But we've been involved in supporting housing here at his church for a long time. We helped found IHN a family shelter on June street and we will be taking our Christmas Eve collection to support them. So if you're coming to Christmas Eve bring your checkbooks. Look for a link in the newsletter to donate online this week. We made a loan from our endowment to support affordable housing in Worcester. And right now, one of our fellow congregations here in Worcester, the Blessed Sacrament church a Holy Roman Catholic Church in Worcester on Pleasant Street, has said yes to allowing their parish hall to be an emergency overflow shelter for this winter. Open from the beginning of January until the end of March - just three months - so that no one needs to spend a night out in the cold. It's a shelter for everybody. You don't have to be sober to spend the night there. The parish has said yes, the priest has said yes, the city has said yes but the City Council is facing some pushback on this decision. So a way that we can be leaders right now is to contact the city manager or the mayor or the counselor. And if you're in district five, you can contact your district five counselor and just let them know that you support the shelter. Some of you might live near their parish near Pleasant Street and Elm Park. And especially, especially if you do, if you're in District 5, it's powerful to contact elected leaders and say this shelter makes a difference. This is in line with our values. We want this to happen. I

believe there will also be volunteer opportunities, and there are always volunteer opportunities at IHN to do evenings or overnight shifts there as well.

Doesn't take a king, it doesn't take one person in charge who makes sure that the right thing happens. Because each and every one of us has the opportunity through our volunteer work through our donations through our phone calls, to help support the kind of justice that we want to see in our city. The miracle of Hanukkah is that the light burned in the temple for eight days, even though there was only enough oil prepared for one. The miracle of the people's freedom was the ways in which they lead themselves with a vision of economic justice, throwing off the shackles of empire. We repeat this miracle every time we show up for justice, using whatever tools of leadership we have. We make a difference. No matter who we are. Our work for justice and transformation makes miracles. I love you all. Amen.