

"Make Yourself a Light"
Christmas Eve, 2014
Reverend Carolyn Patierno

"I just need a minute!"

Whoopie Goldberg was talking to Jimmy Fallon. The world was making the comic – like so many of us – weary. As though her back was to the ocean & the waves throwing her down, one piece of bad news after another had her feeling overwhelmed and nearly over powered.

"I just need a minute!" she exclaimed. "and then I'll go back to being mad about stuff." And to the studio audience she said, "Shout it out with me!" And they obliged. "I just need a minute!"

She looked into the camera and said to the folks at home, "Throw open your windows and shout it out, 'I just need a minute!'".

Out loud there in my den I said, "Jeez. Do I ever need a minute."

We all need a minute ... a break from the wild ride that the past few months has been. And tonight – Christmas Eve – beautiful, glowing Christmas Eve – is our chance to take a minute ...

A minute to be present to the ancient story ...

A minute to let go of anger – current and ancient. After all, we can get back to being mad later – or not.

Here's a story for you ...

It's November 10 and I am heading down to Westchester County. My friend Noelle's father died and he is being buried there. Noelle has had an extremely tough year. She's heartbroken, exhausted and to add to the heartbroken & exhausted, November 10th is her birthday.

She asked me to preside over the graveside service.

Of course of course of course. It will be an honor.

So I head down 95 straight to the part of the interstate that inevitably confounds me – the part where CT turns into NY. As if I am a player in a scripted scene, I take the wrong exit. Cursing the Bermuda triangle that is the CT / NY border - I realize my mistake immediately. But it's not because my GPS has told me so, for my GPS has chosen this moment to go mute.

And here's where things go off the beam.

I reach for my phone – which does double duty as my GPS – in order to check my error. And in order to check my error I'm looking at the phone and not at the road.

You can guess where this is headed. Where the car – and I behind the wheel – is headed. The car with me in it is headed straight over the low-to-the-ground, steel stakes that serve as an evil type of guard rail.

I have broken the car. I have broken the car *badly*.

Welcome to the minister's nightmare, Friends. I have a graveside service to get to and a broken, undriveable car.

Think quickly, Reverend.

AAA arrives in 20 minutes. The car is towed. A rental car is procured a mere mile from the auto body shop. Forty five minutes later, I am back on the road.

The little miracle of this story is that I arrive at the cemetery 10 minutes after the funeral procession has arrived.

All in all, it's a pretty good day.

What feels less like a pretty good day is when weeks later I learn that the auto body shop that supposedly fixed the car, essentially collected a bucket load of money for parts they never replaced and for work they never did.

I know this because my beloved, trusted, local auto mechanic is standing under the car pointing it all out to me. The car had been making sounds that only sick cars make. Clunk clunk clunk. Rattle rattle rattle sputtered ... *something* under the hood.

Frustrated and disgusted, Dave says to me, "This is the worst rip off I've ever seen!"

But I'm having a hard time reconciling the lovely experience I had had with the folks at the auto body shop with the sad, hard truth that is lurking under the hood. "But they were so *nice!*" I counter.

"Yeah, well, they *niced* you to death." said Dave who is not not-even-a-smidgeon-naive.

In the grand scheme of things, this mere bump in the road is just that: pretty minor. But still I ask and ask and ask myself: was I indeed niced to death?

I just need a minute ...

Finally, finally, finally ... I decide to resist the temptation to believe that I've been nice to death.

We must always resist the temptation – and sometimes the overwhelming evidence to the contrary – to believe otherwise. “Despite everything, people are really good at heart”, said the young, wise, compassionate and persecuted Anne Frank.

Twice last week the same poem floated into my day, once at a class and again on Facebook. Twice means I best pay attention.

“Make yourself a light, / said the Buddha, / before he died. ... No doubt he thought of everything / that had happened in his difficult life. “Buddha’s Last Instruction” by Mary Oliver

Make yourself a light. No doubt you are considering everything that has happened in your difficult life. Still, make yourself a light. So long as you are alive, you have light to share. Sometimes, that’s all we have. And all the time, it is enough.

Because the world needs your light. Perhaps more now than ever.

We are perhaps on the brink. The ground is shifting. We best not look away from the road upon which we travel for there is too much at stake. There’s too much to lose.

We lift up the story ...

Among the common people was born a savior. By the light of a star went kings and shepherds to the one within whom liberation was promised. In a dream they were warned: “Don’t go back.” Like the family they traveled to meet, so they too, became fugitives in need of the gifts that the camels describe:

the gift of perseverance, of continuing on the hard way,
making do with what there is,
living on what you have inside.

The gift of holding up under a burden,
of lifting another with grace, of kneeling
to accept the weight of what you must bear. “The Camels Speak” by Lynn Unger

Yet, the weight of what we bear is sometimes too much even for the strongest of Souls.

“I can’t come to Christmas Eve services. It’s too emotional for me. I’ll come apart.” she says to me.

Christmas Eve. When sorrow is as much in this sanctuary as is the glowing beauty that surrounds us. When we look back on difficult days just past and wonder how we made it through.

And when we look forward and wonder, will we make it through?

We will. By the gifts offered by the wisdom of the camels. We will make ourselves a light. We will maintain our faith in humanity despite proof everywhere of inhumanity.

Despite everything. Because of everything.

Merry Christmas, Friends.