

"I Will Endure the Darkness for It Shows Me the Stars"

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

December 6, 2015

"Sweet Darkness" David Whyte

When your eyes are tired

the world is tired also.

When your vision is gone

no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark

where the night has eyes

to recognize its own.

There you can be sure

you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb

tonight.

The night will give you a horizon

further than you can see.

You must learn one more thing ...

The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds

except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet

confinement of your aloneness

to learn

anything or anyone

that does not bring you alive
is too small for you.

We are drawn to the shadow. Drawn to the shadow as in traffic slowing to a crawl as we try to catch sight of the victims crawling from the wreckage.

And now the highway is everywhere and wide. The highway comes to us in a steady stream of news ... blogs ... podcasts. We can slow to a crawl and observe the wreckage from the comfort of any easy chair.

And there is wreckage everywhere of late. There are not enough candles on the altar to represent each horror. And we cannot divert our gaze and look away. The horror transfixes.

The wise women sing:

Well, darkness has a hunger that's insatiable

And lightness has a call that's hard to hear

And I wrap my fear around me like a blanket

I sail my ship of safety til I sank it.

I'm crawling on your shores.

We are crawling on the shore. ("Closer to Fine" by Emily Saliers)

But the shore, as we well know here on the shoreline, is as much a place of peace as it is the place where the storm meets the land.

How might we move through this shadow time without sacrificing the core of who we are as religious and spiritual people? How might we heed the light's call amidst the din?

Tonight is the first night of Hanukkah. This Jewish holiday is more rabbinic than it is biblical. It's a story rooted in a military triumph that over the generations has been played down as the miracle story of the lamp oil has been played up. It is a story that few of us remember if we ever knew it at all.

In a nutshell: Antiochus was the king of Greco-Syria. He's the bad guy in this story. He aspired to even more power than he already had in a part of the world that was even then (175 BCE) the center of great conflict. Hellenistic / Greek culture was taking over, edging out Jewish religious

traditions that were somehow surviving ... until this moment. Antiochus wanted control of Egypt but to increase his chances he first had to consolidate political support by eliminating cultural, social, and religious differences in his own country – which was located where present day Syria now sits in devastated rubble.

Let that sink in for a moment.

Religious practices foreign and deeply offensive to the Jews were forced upon them. The temple and everything in it was destroyed. There was a revolt that's gently alluded to in "Light One Candle" – our opening hymn ... famously sung by the folk trio "Peter, Paul, & Mary".

And over 2000 years later we are less engaged with this story's brutality than we are with the miracle of the light. "What is the mem'ry that's valued to so highly we keep it alive in that flame?" ("Light One Candle" Peter Yarrow)

Two thousand years from now – it's hard to imagine, I know – but 2000 years from now, when humanity considers the 21st century, what beauty, what light will outshine the brutality? In the midst of the brutality, what light are we generating? What is the miracle valued so highly that will be kept alive?

And for now, for us dwelling in this darkness, how do we nurture our hearts and souls? Do we set sail on a ship of safety ... that is sure to sink? Do we wrap our fear around ourselves like a blanket? Or do we heed the phrase most often spoken in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament:

"Be not afraid."

Be not afraid, for there is wisdom in darkness. Be not afraid for it is in darkness that we see the stars. Indeed, there is reason to be afraid. Angry. Sad.

There's some truly scary stuff out there right about now. And besides the scary stuff "out there" each of us may well have some scary stuff going on "in here" that we're trying to deal with. 'Tis the season.

But all of these must be kept in check. Rationally considered. Spiritually considered. As Caitlin said earlier, "We put things in the dark - scary things – that really aren't there and we realize that once the lantern is lit."

Our task right now is to go down deep and find and cultivate within the spiritual resources that bring light our lives and to the world.

What are those spiritual resources? Resilience. Courage. Hope.

These are the antidotes to fear.

When we are resilient, courageous, and hopeful we shed the blanket of fear and are free. We are free to be more kind and loving and peaceful. And by being more kind, loving, and peaceful we are doing our part to make the world more kind, loving, and peaceful even though we may feel that the world has gone mad.

Alas, we are witnessing the many adverse affects of being so tightly swaddled in fear. Skyrocketing gun sales is one of those adverse affects, for example. But we have a choice and we choose resilience, courage, and hope.

And once again, I invite Pope Francis to our pulpit.

When in Rome last summer a friend returned with a gift for me from the Vatican. It is a medal with this plea from Papa Francesco: "Please do not let yourselves be robbed of hope!"

Well, okay then! That certainly puts a different spin on it. "*I will not be robbed of hope.*" Let's say that in the face of a new day.

"We will not be robbed of hope!"

And take heed:

When your vision is gone

no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark

where the night has eyes

to recognize its own.

There you can be sure

you are not beyond love. David Whyte

Some of you have heard this story. When I was 11 years old – 1971 – I nearly derailed Christmas at my house. President Nixon had promised that the troops would be home from Vietnam for Christmas. At least I thought he had. When I did some research on this memory, I could find no such promise recorded. But for some reason, I had it in my 11 year-old mind that he promised ... but, the troops were not home. The war raged on and I was filled with sorrow.

Okay so this is where this story gets a little funny. And then we'll get back to the heart of it.

So, I'm moping around all brokenhearted and my poor mother – mother of 3, the youngest of whom is 6; she's working full time by then – is trying to figure out what the heck is the matter with me, her eldest child on Christmas morning. I tell her, "The president promised that the troops would be home for Christmas." And just like that she says with the full force of holiday exasperation,

"The troops would want you to be happy for Christmas!"

Back to the heart of it.

For the past couple of weeks, I have felt like my 11 year-old self – bereft, without mooring, and curiously feeling at a loss as to how to keep hope kindled. If I wasn't on the verge of tears, I was weeping without ceasing. *My eyes were tired and so the world was tired, too.* (D. Whyte) And it's Advent. Hanukah. Solstice and Christmas on the wing. All those rich and ancient stories of rich darkness, the light, and miracles. But the power of those stories eluded me.

My vision was gone. No part of the world could find me. D. Whyte

That is a difficult burden to sustain. This is how it manifest for me: my mind was wandering and unfocused. I behaved with a level of flakiness that I find difficult to laugh off. And normally, I can laugh off very high levels of flakiness in my own behavior. I was in the darkness but not allowing it to nourish my heart, mind and soul.

Resilience. Courage. Hope. They require certain determination and energy. I had forgotten.

And then I found David Whyte's poem that offered me this wisdom:

The night will give you a horizon

further than you can see.

I remembered to trust in the night. To trust in the dark.

Here's what happened next.

The "Daily News" one of NY's dailies, runs a righteous front page headline that mirrors my own anger and theology. Here it is: "God Isn't Fixing This". As I first saw this headline on Facebook, I stop to buy the paper on my way to a meeting in Hartford.

On the drive I listen an interview with the Indigo Girls talking about music and justice and religion and spirituality. Fantastic.

I visit with colleagues at my district ministers chapter meeting. We sing, "Angels We Have Heard On High" and "O Come O Come Emanuel" standing around the piano. We laugh. Do some good work together.

I drive back. I receive an excellent piece of spectacular news. I listen to "Closer to Fine" on a continuous loop for the rest of the drive.

I call my mother.

Once back at All Souls, I pick up a memento from Pope Francis and determine that I will not be robbed of hope by those who are swaddled in a blanket of fear.

I sit with the Souls who serve on the Worship Team and allow their company, wisdom, and generosity to feed me.

And then I go home and watch "The Wiz" live on television. One of my favorite musicals. "Can you feel a brand new day?"

And then the next day comes ... a brand new day ... the day I sit down to write this sermonI find a ladybug on the orange juice carton ... in our refrigerator.

I was in darkness for a longer stretch of time than I care to say. But when I was reminded of darkness' nourishing power there was restoration. There was re-membering.

The night will give you a horizon

further than you can see.

You must learn one more thing ...

The world was made to be free in.

"The world was made to be free in." Our hearts break for the victims of violence everywhere whose world is anything but free. We will do what we can do to provide safe harbor to refugees seeking to escape worlds made only of fear and brutality. Some not from countries far away but from right here – a block away. In your neighborhood. At your house or shelter. Your own heart.

Resilience. Courage. Hope.

We will not be robbed of hope.

Shine on, dear Souls.

Amen.