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Light Over Dark, Hope Over Despair

Melissa Spindler-Virgin

As I began to think about this service, my first sermon of my internship here, I realized that the music reflected the traditional Christian holiday of All Souls, a day to remember all those who have died in the past year, to mourn the losses of our lives. However, our middle school youth wanted to share what they were learning about Hinduism - as October 30th marked the beginning of the new year festival of Diwali. On top of All Souls and Diwali, I also knew that our children would be dressed in Halloween costumes – a nod to the original pagan holiday of Sah-win ...

To make matters even more complicated, I have heard from so many of you over the past few weeks, that our current presidential election is weighing heavily on your hearts. There does seem to be a different kind of heaviness, a thick darkness hanging over this particular election.

How was I to preach on all of this? To be perfectly honest, I wondered whether I was being hazed.

Let me start with All Souls. The Christian holiday marks a remembrance for friends and loved ones who have left this life for their heavenly abode. Candles were placed in windows to help guide those souls as they transitioned to heaven. This grew into requiem masses, as clergy brought communities together into their sanctuaries to offer special prayers and litanies to nurture this transition from death to the Heaven that awaited. There is some special wisdom in this tradition of coming together to recognize our losses and ease the transitions of the life cycle.

Halloween originally stemmed from the Pagan celebration of Sahwin. This holiday marks the line between the harvest half of the year and the dark half of the year. All Hallows Eve marked the day when ghost were most likely to be on Earth; a holiday that seems to engage the other half of All Souls – the idea of those people who have died who might not be on their way to a heavenly abode. Jack-o-lanterns, lit with candles to burn through the night, are meant to keep those mischievous spirits at bay.

If you look around our sanctuary, you will see that our younger children have also started studying Hinduism, and have created colorful Diwali lanterns. Like the end of the Pagan harvest festival, and the deaths at the center of All Souls, Diwali marks the end of one year, one piece of life as we have known it. Diwali, usually celebrated with fireworks and bright colored Sari dresses, has a joyful air as the new year is entered and the unknown awaits each of us.

All of these holidays share the acknowledgement of the death of the known, the death of crops and loved ones and all that the previous year was. And each of these holidays turn to candles as crucially important in this transition, this crossing of a binary. All of these holidays ask us to celebrate the light over the dark, the move to heaven over death, the choice of hope over despair.

Last Sunday our youngest Church School students heard the story of a young girl, maybe 8 or 9 years old, whose family had recently relocated from India to the U.S.. This young girl had been dreaming of the party she would throw to celebrate her native Diwali festival with her new American friends. She had a bright new colorful dress... they would play games with vibrant music... and her parents would light magnificent fireworks in the back yard – and she would share the joy of this new year festival with her friends.

However, this young girl's party ends up being canceled after freezing rain makes the roads too dangerous for her friends to come over, and makes fireworks completely impossible. While she is crestfallen, her parents help her understand that Diwali – the festival of lights – is all about how we shine light into the darkness around us.

This story struck me. How do we shine light into the darkness?

The next day, I was driving home, up the darkest part of 84 – the part where you really have to pay attention to see your way in that deep darkness. I flipped on the radio and was greeted by the voices of our presidential candidates in their final debate. My heart fell. I should listen, I thought. It is important that I be informed. It is part of my job. ... It had been an especially long day already, and the conversation turned especially nasty... I just couldn't.

I switched the radio off, feeling the darkness fill the space around me, just as I was coming around a curve and there, sitting atop the trees, was the fattest, roundest moon I've seen in years. I had to laugh at the big wheel-of-cheese moon smiling down into the darkness... Ah, Diwali, I thought. The festival of lights. Can I choose to focus on this light *instead* of the darkness?

So here's the problem in all of this – this election – these celebrations of new years and of All Souls finding their way to Heaven – these concepts of life and death...

The problem is the delusion of the binary.... The either/or.

These binaries are garbage.

Life asks us to put ourselves into one of two opposing boxes, pitting us against each other:

Republican or Democrat

Masculine or Feminine

White or Black

Right or Wrong

Gay or Straight

Sad or Happy

The opposing boxes go on and on.

To be sure, some people and some choices fit into some of those boxes some of the time. And to be perfectly honest, we use these boxes to help us place people or situations into categories that makes sense with our life experiences.

But I claim that these binaries are garbage because they place one end of the spectrum as closer to the divine, closer to holy.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a former Episcopalian minister, has written a book titled Learning To Walk in the Dark. She describes this tendency to divide the world into these binaries: good vs. evil, sacred vs. profane, light vs. dark. She writes:

The language of opposition works by placing half of reality closer to God and the other half farther away. This not only simplifies life for people who do not want to spend a lot of time thinking about whether the divisions really hold; it also offers them a strong purpose by giving them daily battles to engage in. The more they win out over the world of the flesh, the better. The more they beat back the powers of darkness, the closer they get to God. The ultimate goal is to live with that God forever, in a bright heaven where the

bottom half of every earthly equation has finally returned to dust.... People of faith do not get much help in thinking of their ordinary, physical lives as being particularly sacred... [but what we all know is that] the days of [our] lives are not easily divisible into good and evil, spirit and flesh; that some of the best things that have ever happened to many of us have happened in the darkest places, and some of the worst in well-lit churches; that our bodies have been the source not only of great pain but also of great pleasure; that we experience the world as a place of wonder as well as brokenness; and that we have a hard time warming up to any kinds of salvation that divides reality in two and asks us to forsake the bottom half.

We lose people we love. We lose jobs... homes... status. We lose our health, we lose our dreams... we lose hope... Our hearts break. The pain can be suffocating. Darkness abounds.

Barbara Brown Taylor recounts of her own life: *Without benefit of maturity or therapy, I had no way of knowing that the darkness was as much inside me as it was outside me, or that I had any power to affect its hold on me. No one ever taught me to talk back to the dark or even to breathe into it.*

Winter is nearly upon us. As Diwali and Halloween's Sowhim roots celebrate, the harvest season is over and we now enter the season of darkness. Politics of hatred and fear surround us. We have lost loved ones and experienced heart ache. Could we learn to talk to this darkness? Is there space to learn to shine like the moon – waxing and waning but always trying to be light *IN* the darkness?

Let us look to the trees. The trees around us... the trees know they must lose their leaves, that they have a cold and icy winter to weather... but they do not simply lose their leaves – they face into the shortening days and they blaze afire, shouting out their love for life, singing to the heavens, reminding all of us of the breath-taking goodness of the cycles of life. To me, the fall colors are far more courageous and miraculous than the flowers of spring. For Spring flower to sing out in colorful joy, knowing that the buzz of animals and reproductive life and sunshine await them for months to come... well, of course - flower! Flower loudly and boldly and open yourself to the joy of summer.

But for a tree to color the sky, to demand our love and attention as the cold and darkness envelop us... ah, well... that is a courage I want to emulate... that is a song I want to sing.

The trees make it look easy.
So, how do we blaze brilliantly *in* the darkness?

I want to hold up an example of what it might look like to shine our light boldly in the darkness: One of our youth had recently been struggling with depression. Instead of hiding this in shame, she shared this with her peers, allowing them to pray for her, to send her support and a prayer shawl, allowing their light to embolden hers when the darkness was closing in around her. There are few things as courageous as naming our struggle, trusting that those around us will love us. To both name our darkness and still shine as boldly as we can... That to me is exactly what we are called to do with our lives.

While many of us shine working for any of the many parts of our amazing food ministry, or have traveled out of state to add their light to the campaign trail - we, as a church, are more than simply a service club. Our mission claims that we pursue spiritual growth. Its part of why I chose to intern here - because I believe in constant growth, year after year... that we push ourselves to reach our roots down into new soil, that we stretch our limbs up into new sky, to beacon new birds to come sing with us. The world offers endless possibilities to face ourselves into the NEW. What this congregation – together - offers is something unique. We offer a space for the growth that can only come from pruning.

I recently had to cut some large branches off a tree in my yard. The branches were diseased; they both threatened my home below and the health of the rest of the tree. While I did find a little Lorax figure in my heart: I speak for the trees! (shaking fists) – I knew that trimming back part of the tree would help this tree grow stronger and healthier next year and in years to come.

We can and must claim that both light and dark are part of us, we are not either/or, and that our light shines on boldly in the face of that darkness. But we, like trees, have parts that might need some trimming back for the health of the whole. I think the trees and the moon, and the encroaching dark season, and our national election are all calling us to consider what from our past is obscuring our hearts from shining clearly into a new year? As we lose

loved ones, as our hearts break, we have a tendency to build up some scar tissue, some tough and thick skin between the sore spot of that loss and the potential to connect with the next thing life brings our way.

We, like trees, might need some pruning.

Today you can come and begin to examine the beliefs and assumptions you have been given because of the color of your skin as you grew up in this country in the book discussion of *Waking Up White*.

In the next month or two, Tracey Wilson and Joan Twiggs are starting to work on a re-examination of our Welcoming Congregation status; what are we doing to recognize and change the fact that the strict boxes of male/female or gay/straight simply don't hold true for people among us. In your covenant groups, dig deeply into yourselves. Speak honestly to each other. Name your own dark struggle as part of the person who shines.

Consider the holiday of All Souls a chance to honor those people and things we have loved and lost by examining the shields we've put over those losses, and consider what it might take to open up those sensitive places and claim them as part of our own brilliance, even as we look into darkening days and our tendency toward the either/or binaries.

Let us claim the space between the binaries, that we are both light and dark! Let us claim our true selves. Let us come together into communities that pray and sing and question and brush away some of the layers that obstruct our unique colors from shining as bright and boldly as they can.