

Waiting in the Dark for Miracles

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UU Congregation of the South Jersey Shore

Waiting in the Dark for Miracles

When I was a child, in maybe eighth grade, we lived in a rough-finished house my father built about a mile and a half down a dirt road in the country. The house kept out the rain and snow, but it was unfinished. We didn't have drywall, and the floors were bare plywood. We had electricity in the house, that powered the pump that brought our water from the well out back. For heat we had a wood stove that my father made from an oil drum with a kit he got at the hardware store. The school bus didn't come down our road, not for just one kid, so I walked each morning and afternoon between the nearest village where I would wait with other kids.

In late January of 1979, Maine was hit with a nasty blizzard that dumped nearly three feet of snow in our yard and over the rest of rural Kennebec County. Down south, in Portland, they measured 27 inches of snow at the airport. For some reason, our little section of the map always managed to get more snow than other places. Perhaps it was because we were just between the coastal hills and the taller mountains and lakes regions further inland. At any rate, we got snowed in.

We didn't have a generator, so when the power went out, it was dark. We had one of those Coleman lanterns that you filled with special fuel, then pumped up the pressure, and lit with a match, hoping the whole business wouldn't explode in the process. We had flashlights, of course, but batteries were expensive, so we used those only sparingly. The wood stove kept us warm, and our gas stove allowed us to cook, so we got by. We had filled empty milk jugs with water as the storm approached so we had water to drink, and we brought in snow from outside and melted it on the wood stove so we could flush the toilet. We heated water in a kettle on the stove to wash both dishes and our bodies from a basin in the kitchen.

During that storm in 1979, it was three days before the town plow truck made it down our road, and something like that amount of time before the electricity finally came back on. In the meantime, we would listen to the battery-operated transistor radio in the kitchen to hear weather reports and went about our lives as best we could.

We waited.

Nights came early, of course, in January, and after we'd played all the cribbage and gin rummy we could stand, we'd retire early in our silent home.

There is a unique kind of silence that happens when a house has no electricity to make things hum. In the dark, we could hear the snow falling outside. We could hear the wind

whistling in the eaves and pelting against the windows. When it is that quiet, you can hear a mouse creep across the floor at the other end of the room, behind the silent refrigerator.

And there was nothing we could do but wait. We took turns shoveling the steps and the yard as much as we could, but until the town plow came down the road, the guy who plowed our driveway couldn't come near to dig us out. We shoveled around my father's truck, made a path out to the dog's kennel so he could be fed and tended, and we waited.

To be utterly cut off from the world is an alienating thing. Humans are social animals. We are creatures who live in community for our survival, both in terms of safety and sustenance, as well as emotional and spiritual connection.

We had no newspaper, only occasional radio, and no communication from other humans, although we could see the smoke rising from the chimney of the one neighbor whose house we could see. We could see their smoke, and they could see ours, so we each knew the other was ok. We were not friendly with those neighbors because of some long-past dispute, but we kept an eye on each other like rural folks do in tough times.

So, we waited.

We waited in the dark.

We waited through the storm that left us without power.

We were powerless in more ways than one, in that moment. We had no electricity to power the things that made life comfortable, like lights and the water pump, but we were powerless also in our capacity to move.

We could not get out.

We were stuck, in our house, behind three feet of heavy snow, and we could not leave.

For Americans to be unable to move around freely is a truly unsettling thing, particularly in the post-World War II era, when our culture had been taught to "see the USA in your Chevrolet."

We could not move.

And so, we waited.

We waited with the assurance of people who knew that help would arrive sooner or later in the form of a plow truck and maybe a truck with the guys from Central Maine Power to fix the lines where a tree limb had brought them down.

We waited with faith, and with hope, that the wait would be over, and we'd be ok.

This week is the festival of lights called Hanukkah, in which the Jewish people celebrate the miracle of lamp oil that burned for eight nights and lasted until the temple could be rededicated and celebrated.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent in the Christian calendar, known as Gaudette Sunday, when Christians light the pink candle on their advent wreath and shift their prayerful reflection from “the Lord is coming,” to “the Lord is near.”

We are one week from the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, when pagans and earth-based religions celebrate the shift from deepening darkness to emerging light as the wheel of time turns as it always does.

In the year 2020, it is the time between the reign of a would-be dictator and the return of democratic rule. It is the time of waiting for the vaccine to arrive and be distributed, bringing an end to our current experience of isolation and solitude.

This is a time to wait in patience. A time to wait with hope, and with faith, that something good is coming.

We know that the good things are coming. We know that our government will transition from one administration to another. We know that a treatment is available and is on the way.

It is easy to have faith when we know that rescue is coming, but I want to call to mind this morning what waiting must have been like for those early Hebrew women charged with holding vigil at the temple until the others returned. They tended their lamps, aware that they only had a limited supply of oil, but they used it carefully, and it lasted far longer than it should have.

They had hope and faith beyond the assurance of rescue. They had to act simply *as if they knew* they'd be ok, even if they had no idea how that would come to be.

I want to recall this morning the waiting of later Hebrew people, those who were waiting for a savior, for one anointed by God to save the world and return Judaism to the glory of the reign of King David. The scholars studied the stars, looking for answers and predictions, signs that the divine was sending some relief. Seeing the Christmas star, the magi left to find what miracle had happened. They had not read the story like we have, and they had no way of knowing what shape that miracle would take, but they had faith in what the heavens showed them, and they had hope that something grand was about to happen, and so they headed out to find it.

I wonder how many astronomers through the ages saw messages in the nightly dance of the stars, and interpreted them to mean one thing or another, only to have that event not come to pass. What must it mean, then, to wait in the dark, watching the night sky, trying to read the handwriting of God, hoping for relief from a life of suffering?

We can say that desperation can lead people to believe all manner of incredible things. Decades, centuries, even millennia of oppression and abuse – of slavery and occupation and exile – has followed the trajectory of the ancient Hebrews since the fall of Adam. What does it take, then, to have hope, to have faith, that a miracle will come?

This is far beyond “we know the snowplow will come eventually,” and into the realm of “we *must* act in faith and hope or all will be lost.” This is the notion of faith as a part of one’s identity. A key part of that identity. Faith in the face of that kind of hardship is not folly or madness, it is a statement of strength: We will *not* be beaten so badly that we concede. You can do what you like to our bodies, but you will not have our hearts. You will not steal from us our capacity for hope, our commitment to joy, our belief in miracles.

Those prisoners we heard about in our Time For All Ages today – the Jews imprisoned by the most brutal regime our world has seen in the last century – they kept the sabbath. They kept the Hanukkah tradition, lighting bits of grease-soaked threads in makeshift menorahs, to remind them of their ancient and cultural identity as people of faith, as people of hope, of people whose belief in miracles could not be erased.

We wait now, in the dark, for things to change.

We wait for the days to grow longer once again.

We wait for Christmas, and Santa, and all the joy that comes with that holiday.

We wait for a savior.

We wait for the return of our people, tending our oil, and keeping the flame lit.

We wait for a treatment, a cure.

We wait for a peaceful transition of power.

We wait in faith.

We wait in hope.

Even in the deepest darkness, we wait, embracing the dark and quiet, seeking what it might teach us, and what it might eventually provide.

In this season of waiting, may we remember that we are descended from humans through the ages who have waited at this time of the year, for a light of one kind or another to deliver us a miracle of hope.

May that hope and faith live in our hearts today and each day.

Amen.