

WELCOME TO THIS FRIENDLY CHURCH
November 7, 2010

Our mission, as we live our historic, liberal faith, is to nurture spiritual growth, honor diversity, and offer service with love”

PRELUDE(s) Heather

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

OPENING WORDS

I forget where I heard the phrase “the lights are going out all over Europe.” The movie Casablanca, perhaps. People have felt the lights going out in many places over the centuries, for many different reasons, for many national and personal disappointments. But most people, not all but most people, have seen reasons to hope that the darkness affecting their town, county, nation or life will be temporary, and light will shine for them again.

The great symbol for this, of course, is the annual darkening of the year as the earth’s slant as it rotates the sun weakens the sun’s rays, then, as it continues its sweep about its star, the light grows stronger again and the earth awakens from its sleep. In most countries the most significant holidays have to do with this annual rebirth of light and subsequently life.

Today we’ll take note of such symbolic holidays in India, celebrated there by three of the world’s great religions: Jainism, Sikhism, and Hinduism. For Hindus the festival of Diwali is the greatest of their celebrations, and is not only a festival of lights but also of the eventual victory of good over evil, of peace over war and resolution over conflict. All over the sub-continent of India, from the Himalayas to Tamil Nadu at its southernmost tip, indeed in many of the lands around India, millions of small lights are flickering even as we meet here. In the Golden Temple of the Sikhs at Amritsar, in the Punjab, thousands and thousands of small lights illuminate the entire temple and have brought Sikh pilgrims from all over the world.

In the *Times of India* an editor wrote “Regardless of the mythological

explanation one prefers, what the festival of lights really stands for today is a reaffirmation of hope, a renewed commitment to friendship and goodwill, and a religiously sanctioned celebration of the simple - and some not so simple - joys of life.”

Our own festivals of lights will come later, as Autumn turns to Winter, as Daylight Savings time ends and the days seem suddenly to shorten, so this seemed a good time to look at Diwali, a holiday observed in some of our churches, but usually only those with members who grew up, or whose parents grew up, in India.

INTROIT Heather and the Choir

CHALICE LIGHTING WORDS

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COVENANT

Love is the spirit of this church. These are our goals.

To worship God in Freedom,

To affirm the dignity of all people,

To dwell together in peace,

To serve one another,

And to seek the truth in love.

HYMN

Your Mercy, O Eternal One

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words by Rabindranath Tagore

RESPONSIVE READING

“Brahman”

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from the Bhagavad-Gita

CANDLES OF JOY and CONCERN

OFFERING, OFFERTORY, and Sung Response

From you I receive, to you I give

Together we share, and from this we live.

ANTHEM Heather and the Choir

SPOKEN and SILENT

PRAYER, MEDITATION, REFLECTION

from the Hindu

Illuminate Your Inner Self

The light of lights, the self-luminous inner light of the Self is ever shining steadily in the chamber of your heart. Sit quietly. Close your eyes. Withdraw the senses. Fix the mind on this supreme light and enjoy the real Deepavali, by attaining illumination of the soul. He who Himself sees all but whom no one beholds, who illumines the intellect, the sun, the moon and the stars and the whole universe but whom they cannot illumine, He indeed is Brahman, He is the inner Self. Celebrate the real Deepavali by living in Brahman, and enjoy the eternal bliss of the soul.

The sun does not shine there, nor do the moon and the stars, nor do lightnings shine and much less fire. All the lights of the world cannot be compared even to a ray of the inner light of the Self. Merge yourself in this light of lights and enjoy the supreme Deepavali.

Many Deepavali festivals have come and gone. Yet the hearts of the vast majority are as dark as the night of the new moon. The house is lit with lamps, but the heart is full of the darkness of ignorance.

O [people]! Wake up from the slumber of ignorance. Realize the constant and eternal light of the Soul, which neither rises nor sets, through meditation and deep inquiry.

May you all attain full inner illumination! May the supreme light of lights enlighten your understanding! May you all attain the inexhaustible spiritual wealth of the [Infinite]Self! May you all prosper gloriously on the material as well as spiritual planes!

SILENCE So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.

CHORAL RESPONSE

READING (s) from an article on Diwali available from a Hindu information agency, author unknown, somewhat adapted

Historically, the origin of Diwali can be traced back to ancient India, when it was probably an important harvest festival. However, there are various

legends pointing to the origin of Diwali or 'Deepawali.' Some believe it to be the celebration of the marriage of [the goddess] Lakshmi with Lord Vishnu. Whereas in Bengal the festival is dedicated to the worship of Mother Kali, the dark goddess of strength. Lord Ganesha, the elephant headed God, the symbol of auspiciousness and wisdom, is also worshiped in most Hindu homes on this day. In Jainism, Deepawali has an added significance to the great event of Lord Mahavira attaining the eternal bliss of nirvana. Diwali also commemorates the return of Lord Rama along with Sita and Lakshman from his fourteen year long exile and vanquishing the demon-king Ravana. In joyous celebration of the return of their king, the people of Ayodhya, the Capital of Rama, illuminated the kingdom with earthen diyas (oil lamps) and burst crackers ... Each day of Diwali has its own tale, legend and myth to tell. The first day of the festival Naraka Chaturdasi marks the vanquishing of the demon Naraka by Lord Krishna and his wife Satyabhama. Amavasya, the second day of Deepawali, marks the worship of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth in her most benevolent mood, fulfilling the wishes of her devotees. *Amavasya* also tells the story of Lord Vishnu, who in his dwarf incarnation vanquished the tyrant Bali, and banished him to hell. Bali was allowed to return to earth once a year, to light millions of lamps to dispel the darkness and ignorance, and spread the radiance of love and wisdom. It is on the third day of Deepawali [today]— Kartika Shudda Padyami that Bali steps out of hell and rules the earth according to [this blessing] given by Lord Vishnu. The fourth day is referred to as Yama Dvitiya (also called Bhai Dooj) and on this day sisters invite their brothers to their homes. All the simple rituals of Diwali have a significance and a

story to tell. The illumination of homes with lights and the skies with firecrackers is an expression of [bowing] to the heavens for the attainment of health, wealth, knowledge, peace and prosperity. According to one belief, the sound of fire-crackers are an indication of the joy of the people living on earth, making the gods aware of [their gratitude]. Still another possible reason has a more scientific basis: the fumes produced by the crackers kill a lot of insects and mosquitoes, found in plenty after the rains. The tradition of gambling on Diwali also has a legend behind it. It is believed that on this day, the Goddess Parvati played dice with her husband Lord Shiva, and she decreed that whosoever gambled on Diwali night would prosper throughout the ensuing year. Diwali is associated with wealth and prosperity in many ways.

In each legend, myth and story of Deepawali lies the significance of the victory of good over evil; and it is with each Deepawali and the lights that illuminate our homes and hearts, that this simple truth finds new reason and hope. From darkness unto light the light that empowers us to commit ourselves to good deeds, that which brings us closer to divinity. During Diwali, lights illuminate every corner of India and the scent of incense sticks hangs in the air, mingled with the sounds of fire-crackers, and joy, . Outside India, it is more than a Hindu festival, it's a celebration of South-Asian identities. If you are away from the sights and sounds of Diwali, light a diya sit quietly, shut your eyes, withdraw the senses, concentrate on this supreme light and illuminate the soul

I have been thinking about our lighting the chalice at the beginning of our services, thinking about it prompted by the idea of so many of the earth’s peoples, perhaps all of the earth’s peoples, having festival of light, celebrating light, taking joy in it. When I was a child I was fairly afraid of the dark. Afraid of what was there in the dark that could hurt or harm me. When I’d go to bed I take two protectors with me to take care of me while I lay in the dark waiting to go to sleep, and then to watch over me as I slipped into the vulnerability of sleep.

Now I don’t want you to laugh at this, because at the time it wasn’t amusing, it was important. One of my protectors was Uncle Wiggly, a stuffed rabbit. The other was Nurse Jane Fuzzy Wuzzy, a stuffed teddy bear. I’d draw the covers up over my head, arrange them so there was a small opening through which I could breathe, and, none of me showing, was invisible. No one, no thing, no monster could see me and so I was safe. It didn’t matter in the slightest that a stuffed rabbit and a stuffed bear were not in fact very adequate protection, even from imaginary monsters. Nor, being a pretty fat kid, was I really invisible. Any monster worth his or her salt would have easily noticed there was a small human shaped lump in the bed.

But I felt safe. And of course it was the feeling rather than the reality which was important to me. As its our feelings rather than our realities which, I think, are ultimately important to most of us, whether we’re feeling vulnerable and needy or capable and competent. Our symbols, I

think, are at some level projections of our feelings. If we're just getting by financially, or are really suffering because we're unemployed, or worried about the soundness of the company or business we work for and whether our employers are going to be able to stay open and continue to be able to furnish us a paycheck, then the people who promise they'll create jobs, balance the local, state, and national budget while paying off government debt, become very important. They serve as Uncle Wiggly or Nurse Jane Fuzzy Wuzzy. Uncle Wiggly dressed up like a Native American and dumping politicians over the side of the ship into Boston Harbor. Or Aunt Jane Fuzzy Wuzzy being not just a little, kind of loveable teddy bear, but a real Mama Grizzly who's going to cut those taxes with her long sharp teeth. It's the symbols and their real or imaginary powers that appeal to and reassure us, rather than any actual power to do too much to improve the realities of our lives. But that doesn't, except for the most thoroughly rational of us, make them any less important to us.

There were no monsters, either in my closet or under my bed. The real monsters were on the playground at school. But that was in the daylight, and though they were far more threatening and occasionally painful than the monsters I couldn't see, they were somehow less scary. I turned out, in the end, to be better at protecting myself than my symbolic protectors did. Over the years I've learned to deal with most of my monsters. That doesn't mean they can't still be scary. And it doesn't mean I don't usually sleep with the covers over my head. But mostly I've learned to live my life in the light of day and recognize the dark times of the night and the soul for the imaginary things they are.

The Hindus kindle rows of small lights at Divali. The Sikhs outline their temples with small lights. We outline our houses or place candles in our windows at Christmas and build yule fires at the Winter Solstice. The Jews light nine-fingered candelabra at Hanukkah and the Japanese set tiny boats with flaming wicks adrift on lakes and rivers when they commemorate Hiroshima and hope that work for peace will prevent any kind of repetition. We kindle a chalice at the beginning of our services. And all of us are creating living symbols of the sun, and the daylight and the warmth it brings.

We have, the religions and the cultures of the world have, many, many symbols. We surround ourselves with them. We turn to them constantly for comfort and reassurance. We feel better when the paper cup says Starbucks, the soda pop bottle says Coke or Pepsi, the tea bag says Lipton's, the bar of dark chocolate says Godiva, and the box of laundry soap says Organic. Or whatever brands you find reassuring.

Food brands, clothing brands, political brands. Some can be comforting. Some can be threatening. All of them are symbols. Few of them are the realities we rely on them to be. As are the gods and goddesses. Hinduism, like all religions, has many levels, ranging highly abstract and philosophical to crude and simplistic. And like other religions it has both highly developed and merely popular schools that its practitioners choose between to follow.

Brahman, about whom we read in the Responsive Reading, is life, all life. Is Being itself. "I am time without end: I am the sustainer: my face is

everywhere. I am the beginning, the middle, and the end ... I am the knowledge of things spiritual ... I am the knowledge of the knower. There is no limit to my divine manifestations,” the Bhagavad-Gita says of Brahman. In other words Brahman is all things. And in that respect Hinduism is in its highest form monotheistic. There is one God, or one divinity beyond a God, and there are endless manifestations of that oneness, including the vast number of Hindu gods and goddesses to which temples are built, statues carved, prayers offered and customs and religious practices created. Yet in the end they are but aspects, manifestations of the one Ultimate Divinity.

We are not, I think, terribly different. Though we come from western monotheism, and of Unitarian Universalism it's been said we have, at most, one god/goddess, in fact most of us have many gods and goddesses that come in all shapes and sizes, qualities and aspects. We turn to one or another depending on the need of the moment. We turn to the goddess of time when we're trying to catch a flight at the airport, and turn to the Sky Pilot god to pray the plane will not take off without us. We have gods and goddesses we turn to when we can't find our car keys. In the final analysis we don't appeal to Divinity Itself/Being Itself to keep it from raining on our picnic or our parade. We have tiny gods and goddesses for that, gods and goddesses we have not given names to nor built temples to house.

One of the things I like about Diwali is that there are many stories about it and about how it came to be. Many different gods and goddesses are said to be involved in it, celebrated in it. But no one god or goddess solely identified with it. Behind it lies Brahman, the All that Is and Was

and Will Be. In Hinduism light is celebrated, rather than worshiped, though there are gods and goddesses of fire and brightness and warmth.

Light is welcomed and celebrated. As it is in all religions. As it is in ours.

HYMN

Our World Is One World

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CLOSING WORDS

Martin Luther King’s words remind us that “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny,” and therefore we must recognize ourselves in other peoples, other religions, other customs and practices and ways of celebrating. One day we must “narrow the gaping chasms between” the things we say and the things we do, “between our proclamations of peace and our ... deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war. One day we must come to see that peace” and justice, respect and acceptance, are not just distant goals, “but a means by which we arrive at” those goals.

PARTING CIRCLE

“Carry the flame of peace and love until we meet again.”

POSTLUDE(s)

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