

**Sunday, December 6, 2020**  
***“Stoking the Fire”***

**Welcome and Lighting of Chalice and Candles** – Rev. Betsy Tabor & Youth

Welcome. Here we seek justice and truth and understanding.  
Here we celebrate life and contemplate mystery.  
Here we seek healing and wholeness. Welcome, all.

Our service is about noticing light. In these weeks of surge and cold, with anxiety so prevalent today, “little projects of light” make a difference. They don’t have to be epic – and they glimmer all around us in acts of kindness and warm presence to others. As the days become shorter and darker, let us create “little projects of light” and stoke the fire with these moments.

**Centering Music** - “Bright Morning Stars are Rising” (Appalachian folk)

**Shared Affirmation**

**Hymn** - “This Little Light of Mine”

**A Time for All Ages** - Alice Posner

**Reflection** - “Cooking Together by Zoom Light” by Margaret Rieser

Our first family Zoom call took place on March 29th, as we began to learn the art of hunkering down. Pretty much every Sunday afternoon since then, at 5:30, my two brothers, my mother and I gather on Zoom to visit, with partners, children and pets passing through our screens. I see my beloved family more now, than I have since we all lived together, which was a long time ago.

One brother, Danny, is in Philadelphia. As is our mother, who’s 91. She lives on the independent living floor of a senior housing community. And while she’s pretty amazing for her age, Zoom is a little beyond her technical skills. Our big brother, Michael, gets on her computer remotely, from his apartment in Brooklyn, and sets up the call for her. My brothers. Two true bright lights in my life.

I’m not sure when it started, but we discovered early on that we could put our computers on our kitchen counters, and then we could cook supper for our families as we visit together. My mother eats the meal that the facility delivers to her door in a styrofoam container, which thankfully, doesn’t look too bad.

Our family has always enjoyed cooking together. When we are in the same house we all pitch in, one at the cutting board, one at the stove, and one working the sink, we rotate through the acts, roles constantly changing. While I initially felt sad that we couldn’t be in the same kitchen, it’s actually pretty nice sharing a Zoom kitchen.

I look forward to the joy of being able to cook together every week. I plan our meal so I can maximize my attention to the screen. Stir fries, with lots of chopping and sautéing work great. As long as there’s chicken and noodles, the teenagers in my house are happy. Michael always

cooks beans, rice and vegetables, a gentle meal for his wife who struggles with acid reflux. Danny, who cooks for his partner and her three kids, often starts the call as he's driving home from the store, with meat and vegetables to roast, usually including broccoli.

We hold spoons up to our cameras to trade tastes, we ask if the vegetables are cooked enough, and we tease Michael, the vegetarian, as we have for the last 51 years, asking if he wants a bite of chicken. My mother chimes in from time to time, and after an hour or so, as things get pretty silly, she asks without joking whose kitchen we're in and who is going to drive her home after supper. I think we all sense that shimmery confusion. Where are we? Are we actually together?

Our weekly zoom time no longer feels like a way to hunker down and survive. It feels like a way for people who love each other and live apart to feel the light and lightness of being together.

I feel the same way about the 5:30 Thursday, UUFES zoom calls. While they're called "Seriously," they also feel to me like little celebrations. The joy and light that comes from being together.

Coincidentally, in "Seriously" last week, we talked about memory, which led to a discussion of family recipes. We decided to try cooking together in next week's call, which coincides with the first night of Hanukkah. John Banderob, who reportedly makes a mean latke, will guide us as we make and hopefully eat some together.

I encourage you to zoom in and participate in this experiment of making potato pancakes together and find some light during these darkest of days, which is what Hanukkah is all about. Make sure you have some potatoes, an onion, some flour and a little milk. Oil too. And don't forget the sour cream and applesauce.

Look out for the Tuesday UUFES Midweek email for the recipe, so you can prep ahead of time and be ready to go. We will light the Menorah at the Banderobs' house and Ricky will say blessings. Feel free to bring your Menorah if you have one. And most important, find a good spot for your computer, ipad or phone on the kitchen counter where you won't get food on it.

I'm excited.

**Joys & Concerns** "Girl with the Flaxen Hair" by Claude Debussy, played by Eve Goss

**Music** - "Spirit of Life"

### **Meditation and Prayer**

We give thanks

for warm houses and fleece and down and wool

We're grateful for food on the table, for friends and family

for the beauty of fresh-fallen snow

Let us remember with our *hands*  
 those who would appreciate a gift of bread or soup  
 Let us remember with our *time*  
 those who would appreciate a call or a visit  
 Let us remember, if we can, with our *wallets*  
 those in need of food, gas money and heat

This morning we pray for the Earth and for our country and for all people everywhere  
 Watchful and protective of democracy  
 Of human rights  
 Determined to dismantle white supremacy  
 Pledged to truth  
 Our hearts and eyes open to each other.  
 In the name of all that is good and true and holy. Blessed be.

[Respond to Joys and Concerns.]

**Reading** - "XI" from *Leavings* by Wendell Berry, read by Margaret Rieser

Though he was ill and in pain,  
 in disobedience to the instruction he  
 would have received if he had asked,  
 the old man got up from his bed,  
 dressed, and went to the barn.  
 The bare branches of winter had emerged  
 through the last leaf-colors of fall,  
 the loveliest of all, browns and yellows  
 delicate and nameless in the gray light  
 and the sifting rain. He put feed  
 in the troughs for eighteen ewe lambs,  
 sent the dog for them, and she  
 brought them. They came eager  
 to their feed, and he who felt  
 their hunger was by their feeding  
 eased. From no place in the time  
 of present places, within no boundary  
 nameable in human thought,  
 they had gathered once again  
 the shepherd, his sheep, and his dog  
 with all the known and the unknown  
 round about to the heavens' limit.  
 Was this his stubbornness or bravado?  
 No. Only an ordinary act  
 of profoundest intimacy in a day  
 that might have been better. Still  
 the world persisted in its beauty,  
 he in his gratitude, and for this  
 he had most earnestly prayed.

**Homily - Rev. Betsy**

Ignoring doctor's orders – leaving his bed and feeding the lambs – was far from a stubborn, brash thing for the old, sick man to do. It was a light-filled moment, one of my favorites in literature: “an ordinary act/of profoundest intimacy in a day/that might have been better.”

Sometimes an ordinary act, a little bit of light, is the best we can muster. Sometimes the hardest circumstances bring out our best. And circumstances in the year 2020 have been hard.

Signs around my town praise healthcare professionals - people who, at great risk and great cost, have risen to the occasion of Covid. Whose families watch them go back to the front lines day after day. One tells me that her partner, a doctor, seems to be thriving in these times, working harder and better and more generously with colleagues than ever before, all of them giving their very best. May we who count on the bright light they shine, hold them in our prayers.

How - and where – are you shining your light today? Yes, your bright light!

Last week, a friend expressed doubts about a new relationship. “She’s not seeing my best,” he said, “and that doesn’t feel good.” I came to his defense: Hey, hardly anyone’s giving their best right now. How can we, with Covid raging? We may think we’re adjusted to this new way of being, taking it all in stride, but being vigilant 24/7 taxes our energy.

Everyone today – everyone in the world – is carrying a heavy, unrelenting burden of anxiety and loss. We’ve been bearing it a long time now, and we simply don’t have access right now to our normal resources. This makes it hard to be at our best, to give our best. Moreover, if we have a personal burden in addition to that collective burden – an illness, a loss, a concern for someone we love – we need to accept that the best we can do is enough.

This doesn’t mean that we’re failing. It only means that we need to be gentle with ourselves, as if we are learning to live with an injury or a handicap that slows us down. Sometimes a little bit of light is all we can offer. The good news is that this makes a difference. And if you look around, that’s what you’ll see – people finding new pathways, new openings for “little projects of light.” In these wintry days, this is a fire we can stoke.

Have you noticed that it takes more effort than before to get yourself going these days? It helps to start small. As when we build a fire, we have to begin with just a few bits of kindling and lots of air in between them to allow it to take. If you toss in a big log too soon, you’ll probably have to start over. In her poem “Fire” Judy Brown points to those open spaces, so important. Stoking a fire, you have to feed it slowly.

When we are able to build  
open spaces  
in the same way  
we have learned  
to pile on the logs,  
then we can come to see how  
it is fuel, and absence of the fuel  
together, that make fire possible.

We only need to lay a log  
 lightly from time to time.  
 A fire  
 grows  
 simply because the space is there,  
 with openings  
 in which the flame  
 that knows just how it wants to burn  
 can find its way.<sup>1</sup>

The pandemic has given us such open spaces. Places we can create “little projects of light.”

Shana organized one last week. She put out a call to musicians to meet outdoors at Ingrid’s house. Ingrid, an ER nurse, is home now on medical leave. So they came Thursday afternoon. A merry troupe in colorful puffies and hats, leggings and handwarmers. They brought violins, a ukelele, a guitar, a bassoon. Masked and distanced, music stands on the grass, they played and recorded carols for our Christmas Eve service.

Now there’s no lack of Christmas music on YouTube – you’ll find the best in the world there– but these carols, this Christmas Eve, will ring with wintry afternoon air, the smoke of a wood stove, and the warmth of fellowship.

Marion sent out a note afterward: “I was very touched,” she said, “listening to the recordings... as we happily tried to keep our fingers warm enough to play our strings by Ingrid’s wood stove.” She said it brought to mind Dylan Thomas and “A Child’s Christmas in Wales. Making music in Ingrid’s backyard was “soul-nourishing,” said Betsy Ginsberg. “Uplifting and very heartwarming,” said John Flanigan. “Communal joy, to play live music,” said Shana. “The joy of the simple!” said Marion. Simple presence. Let’s stoke the fire with moments like these.

You never know what will get you through this pandemic. It might be throwing all your energies into decorating the dollhouse your friend found at the Waste Station. This has brought surprising pleasure, even joy, Bobbi said the other day as Ted, who’s enthusiastically installed 70 feet of molding in the dollhouse, added a pantry the other day. Just because! What joy this “little project of light” will bring when it lands under someone’s tree.

Sometimes a little bit of light is all we can offer. Ordinary acts of intimacy come in many forms. Letting someone know you remember them with a phone call - some soup - or cookies. A note in the mailbox can make someone’s day. Our friend Bill Lotz makes such ordinary acts his ministry. He called this week with a report on all the people he’s reached out to, brightening lives. We thank you, Bill.

We create “little projects of light” every time we pray in the quiet – which is to say every time we think of someone, every time we wonder how they’re doing or when we remember the burden they bear. You may have seen Pope Francis’s piece in the NYTimes recently – a

---

<sup>1</sup> Judy Brown, “Fire,” *The Sea Accepts All Rivers*, Trafford Publishing, 2016.

reminder of those whose life's purpose is to pray for the world. In the article, the Pope recalls a time when, as a boy, he was quite sick, and a little extra attention from two nurses saved his life.

In this past year of change, my mind and heart have overflowed with people. People I think of and pray for, and sometimes cry with, people with names and faces, people who died without saying goodbye to those they loved, families in difficulty, even going hungry, because there's no work....  
[And then he added]...the serious illness I lived through taught me to depend on the goodness and wisdom of others.<sup>2</sup>

Giving our best is a tall order any day, and more so this trying year. But coaxing the best out of these days will get us all through the darkness. Let us look for openings – places to kindle “little projects of light.” And then, we shall stoke the fire with these moments.

So may it be.

**The Morning Offering** – “O’Carolan’s Draught” (17th c Irish)

### **Community Response**

What “little projects of light” have landed on your doorstep? How have you experienced the kindness of others? And, as we hunker down for the winter, what fire do you want to stoke? What embers do you want to keep? What “little projects of light” do you want to kindle this season?

**Hymn** - “Fire of Commitment”

**Extinguish Chalice/Candles**

### **Reminders**

- Fellowship event: Hanukkah Latkes Thursday the 10<sup>th</sup> at 5:30
- Doll House - the bid is now \$225
- Coffee Hour

### **Benediction**

May the miracle of “little projects of light” comfort and inspire us: “ordinary acts/of profoundest intimacy in days/that might be better.” May we be so blessed. Amen.

**Postlude** - “Fire on the Mountain” (American fiddle tune)

This service can be viewed until February 6 at:

<https://uuma.zoom.us/rec/share/XEiQ1yFWW1SKPft3jcyKBhGTd4xQ91D3s5BmRPOg0UJN-W96TyhkpuVugygXlxY.saJr15e2mts7BBFf>

Passcode: %a6i@k?#

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/26/opinion/pope-francis-covid.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>