

Hope in a Dark Time
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
December 6, 2015

Reading

from *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*, by Arthur Waskow

From the standpoint of the Rabbi, Hanukkah celebrated God's saving Spirit.
From the standpoint of the Maccabee, Hanukkah celebrated human courage and doggedness, the human ability to make history bend and change...

(However) The real conflict is not between the Rabbi and the Maccabee, between the spiritual and political, but between apathy and hope, between a blind surrendering to darkness and an acting to light up new pathways. Sometimes the arena will be in outward action, sometimes in inward meditation. But always the question is whether to recognize the darkness – and transcend it.

The necessity of recognizing the moment of darkness is what we learn from seeing Hanukkah in its context of the sun and the moon. There is no use pretending that the sun is always bright; there is no use pretending that the moon is always full. It is only by recognizing the season of darkness that we know it is time to light the candles, to sow a seed of light that can sprout and spring forth later in the year.

Seen this way, Hanukkah can become a time for accepting both the Maccabee and the Rabbi within us, seeing them as different expressions of the need to experience despair and turn toward hope.

Song “God’s Counting on Me, God’s Counting on You”
by Pete Seeger and Lorre Wyatt

When we look and we see things that should not be.
God’s counting on me, God’s counting on you. *(repeat both lines)*

Chorus: Hoping we’ll all pull through (3X) / Me and you.

It’s time to turn things around, trickle up, not trickle down.
God’s counting on me, God’s counting on you. *(repeat both lines)*

Don’t give up, don’t give in, working together we all can win.
God’s counting on me, God’s counting on you. *(repeat both lines)*

There’s big problems to be solved, let’s get everyone involved.
God’s counting on me, God’s counting on you. *(repeat both lines)*

What we do now you and me will affect eternity.
God’s counting on me, God’s counting on you. *(repeat both lines)*

When we sing with younger folks, we can never give up hope,
God’s counting on me, God’s counting on you. *(repeat both lines)*

Sermon

We've just been singing Pete Seeger's "God's Counting on Me, God's Counting on You."

For those of you who may have difficulty with the word "God" – a word which has after all been misused and abused for centuries – it might be worth noting how Pete understood the word.

Writing a little more than twenty years ago, when he was in his seventies, he said he thought that God is... everything. Not *in* everything, but *everything*. He wrote that if someone looking at the smallest electron or the furthest galaxy were to say to him, "God is *in* that..." or "That's the handiwork of God," Pete would gently disagree and say that in his opinion when looking at the electron or the galaxy he was looking at God... because God is everything

In the same article and in the same spirit, Pete wrote that the older he'd gotten the more he came to realize how closely interconnected everything is – the world, the so-called political and social issues in the world, and so on – and "how much we depend on others – sometimes those near and dear to us, sometimes those faraway and unknown."

Well, Pete Seeger was a folk singer and activist, not a philosopher or theologian. But all of this works pretty well for me. And it helps explain the song too.

Since when he (along with Lorre Wyatt) wrote "God's counting on me, God's counting on you," turns out he wasn't thinking of a personal God up there or out there. Rather we might put it this way: The universe is counting on all of us and we are counting on each other, intertwined with all life as we are.

Partnership.

A few years ago on Thanksgiving I shared a Thanksgiving morning diary entry written in 1793 by a New Hampshire farmer named Samuel Lane. He began with quite a long list of things for which he was grateful: his family, his remarkably diverse and varied crops and livestock, his many tools, his house and barn and land... and then he ended with thanks to God.

But here's the thing. Isn't it clear from all the tools he used everyday that Samuel Lane didn't expect some God out there or up there to do all the work for him? Rather, farmer Lane simply knew that he hadn't made the world or made himself – so he was, as I would put it, giving thanks to the mystery that had made his life possible... and then he set to work!

Partnership.

God (however we understand God) counting on me... and on you... and on our working together.

And partnership in this interdependent world... along with what I think is a most important realization, which is that in fact we do not know enough to be either pessimistic or optimistic... all this keeps me going – you might say gives me hope (see the chorus of Pete's song...).

I do have my moments of despair about the condition of our nation and our world, for sure – maybe some of you do too.

Because though we don't and can't know how the next few decades will go on the planet, we do know enough to be very concerned indeed. We know enough to know that the seas *are* already rising because the temperature *has* been rising for some time now – and it is quite likely our doing; we know that droughts are getting worse, that more

destructive storms are getting more frequent; we know that those who are already among the poorest and most marginalized are experiencing these effects first and worst; we know too that there are clear links in this interdependent world between climate change and the flow of refugees, all making the ground more fertile for extremism and terror.

So, yes, moments of despair are understandable.

And I also know that hope alone, as it is usually understood, is seriously inadequate. Hope alone won't solve anything, won't change anything, won't make a whit of difference.

Unless hope – another partnership here – is paired with intention and action.

Arthur Waskow's reflection about the Maccabees and the Rabbis is relevant here.

It was with military strength that the Maccabees successfully rebelled against their oppressors and reclaimed and purified the Temple, giving rise to the festival of Hanukkah.

But later Rabbis were a little disturbed about a religious festival that seemed to glorify a military victory; so they put increasing emphasis on the role of God in securing the victory and then in creating the miracle of the Hanukkah lights: enough oil for only one day miraculously lasting for eight days as the story goes.

Well, putting aside whatever feelings we may have one way or another as to whether there is ever a place for a military response to oppression or terror, Waskow's point is that to live in this world *as it is* we need a Maccabean spirit of activism paired with a Rabbinical spirit of inward spiritual reflection. We heard his words:

Hanukkah can become a time for accepting both the Maccabee and the Rabbi within us, seeing them as different expressions of the need to experience despair and turn toward hope.

We have no choice, you see, but to live in the world *as it is*; but this does not at all mean accepting that it always has been and always will be this way. It *does* mean looking at the world (whether our personal lives or the whole earth community) with clear eyes and seeing both the challenges that sometimes may lead to our moments of despair and at the same time also the reality of the bigger picture, the cosmic picture (as Pete suggested) of interdependence (God?) that can nourish our hope. And then deciding how we want to live in this world as it is, what we will choose to do in the midst of and in relation to the world as it is.

One of my colleagues, Kit Ketcham, defines hope in terms of this big picture and reality of interdependence. She writes:

Hope is my awareness, my deep understanding, that I am connected to the inextinguishable stream of life, that I am part of the whole.

So she says she loses hope when she has lost this sense of belonging “to the universe, to the web, to life itself.” Instead:

...hope is strengthened in me with every reminder I receive of that connection... Hope is found in relationship, whether with my pets, friends and family, strangers, all of nature or with God...

So: World leaders from almost two hundred nations were in Paris early this week, then left the nitty-gritty of negotiating a climate change agreement to diplomats and technocrats.

But it seems to me that the mere fact that this conference is taking place in Paris following the horrific attacks there is in itself remarkable; for whatever cynicism we might sometimes and with more than a little justification have about politics and about the selfish motives of individuals, politicians, and nations..... here they are going forward with this conference in this place at such a time with the knowledge that the sort of future our children and grandchildren will have depends in some measure on them.

Observing this in itself gives me a measure of hope!

This said, perhaps it goes without saying that how the world goes in coming years and decades depends not on one global conference, not on national policies or global agreements only, but on *all* of us – God’s counting on me... and on you.

And though we may well have our understandable times of despair... the world does not need our despair, it needs our energy and our love.

In any case, as I’ve already said, what do I know? What do you know? How *do* we know we’re not about to turn a corner towards the light, each night one more candle, more illumination and awakening, turning the corner towards global climate sanity, maybe global sanity of all kinds?

What makes me think I could be so smart that I *know* things are going to hell in a hand basket? Goodness, I’m not even sure what a hand basket is!

What I do know is this. I do know that together we can make a heaven on earth – not in some future time, but in this time, here and now, quite simply each moment that we turn toward each other, welcome each other into the circle of life – all of us partners in the great work, all colors and religions and backgrounds, whether privileged and for the moment safe, or refugees from war and oppression, turn to each other and be kind to each other because we know in our bones that we are kin.

And this bit of immediately accessible heaven on earth is, not incidentally, enough to get me out of bed each morning with a little more hope.

I hope it is so for you as well.

So may it always be.