

**Kindle the Taper Like the Steadfast Star (Homily)**  
**December 12, 2010**

This morning we honor a time of the year in which darkness reigns and yet light perseveres. We light candles, string lights upon our trees, kindle fires in our fireplaces, behold the moon and the stars at night, let go of the sun as it sets earlier and earlier each day. It is a time in which our bodies, and the bodies of the animals around us, might curl in more often than they stretch out. It is a time in which we seek moments of silence to match the wonder we feel as we witness gentle, glowing illumination.

Winter. Solstice. A festival of lights. Night by night we light candles to commemorate what has slipped away, and yet as well, we light candles in celebration of all that is to come. We celebrate renewal. We celebrate hope. We celebrate our trust in this round, blue, green, grey, brown, red home we share called Earth, that it will continue its journey around the sun once more, and that with each of the Earth's spinings around its own axis, the days will lengthen, the sun will shine a little warmer, and spring and wildflowers and rebirth will be once more upon us.

It is a time in which we can say, as we heard Julian quote John Keats earlier, "Shed no tear-O, shed no tear! The flower will bloom another year!" And is also a time in which we can honor the words of Patricia Hampl, as read by Josie: "The cool was our pride, the snow was our beauty.... Winter

seemed to partake of religion in a way no other season did, hushed, solemn.”

You see, it is not just about waiting and hoping. It is about celebrating, honoring the here and now. The beauty of this moment. It remains a *mystery* as to whether we here in Austin will experience weather that will bring us the beauty of snow. But certainly we can see, as the philosopher Krishnamurti asks us to, a “tree standing naked against the sky, how beautiful it is...”

Similarly, we can see, in the words of Hannah Senesh, the blessedness of “the match consumed in kindling fire.” There is an element in these holy days, of sacrifice, of things, in other words, being made sacred. The match gives of itself to create something greater. During Hannukkah, the ninth candle, known as the shamash candle, serves, literally, as the attendant to the other candles. That is what the Hebrew word *shamash* means. Because the eight Hanukkah candles honor the eight miraculous nights in which the oil burned at the reclaiming of the Holy Temple, those candles cannot be used to light any other candles. So the ninth candle, the shamash candle, serves that purpose. In our own lives, we must seek times in which we too can serve as the shamash candle does--to help kindle other flames.

For in dark times, it is true that fear can mount. Many of us might wonder if things will ever brighten, if war will ever end, if hunger will ever

cease, if the flowers will ever return. The story of the Maccabees, the people who lead the revolt against their oppressors and won back their temple, is a triumphant story. As Emma Lazarus writes in her poem, "The Feast of Lights," "Chant psalms of victory till the heart take fire, the Maccabean spirit leap new-born."

But let us not forget the sacrifice that was made. Let us not forget the shamash candle while we also honor the eight candles of Hanukkah. It may be that we ourselves, in other people's dark days, in other people's times of war or hunger or fear, have a shamash role to play. For as Albert Schweitzer says, "At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us."

Who in your life, could use a little of your light? Who in your family or among your friends, could use a little extra warmth through a hug or a smile? Who among your neighbors could benefit from your neighborliness, whether through a greeting, a batch of cookies, or an offer to help with a simple task? Is there a stranger you see each day who has neither food, nor blanket nor shelter nor the simple human dignity of passersby acknowledging him or her as they go about their days? Can you be, in these days, part of the festival of lights? Can you help illuminate someone else's very soul? I know, for one, that you can. For I have seen you do so again and again.

Therefore, beloved Wildflowers--you beautiful, bright, tenacious bouquet of Wildflowers, I call you, in these dark, rich, holy days, to be shamash to one another and to the world out there. I call you to be the hope that winter solstice welcomes in. In this way, so may be beautiful the March of days.

Amen.

Please rise in body or spirit to join in singing hymn #57 All Beautiful the March of Days.