

“Dark of Winter”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered December 20, 2020

Reading: “The Last Leaf” by David M. Horst, adapted.

Once, many grey autumns ago, I came upon a poplar tree that had dropped all of its leaves but for one, just one. Exactly one leaf remained near the topmost part of the tree, fluttering in the breeze like a little reddish-brown flag.

I stopped and looked and marveled at the sight. I wondered what the odds might be that I was the one person who happened to arrive at that one tree at that one moment when but one leaf remained. What were the odds?

I felt an instant kinship with the one leaf. I admired its stubbornness. I spoke quietly to it, “Hang on. Never give up. Don’t let go!”

I gazed at the last leaf for a time, though I did not stay to witness its falling. I did not want to witness its falling. The leaf was not ready to let go and drop silently to the ground, and neither was I—though I knew we both would, in time, let go.

I praised the last leaf on that autumn day many years ago, when I was still young. I walked on and slowly, imperceptibly, a sense of calm came over me. A sense of acceptance. A sense of peace.

The exuberance of summer is gone. Grand plans and high hopes give way to chilly reality. We loved as best we could, we’ve reaped as much as we could, we’ve traveled life’s journey as far as we could. We count our blessings and our losses. All leaves must fall.

The circle of the year comes round. Our hemisphere tilts away from the sun. Green turns to gold. Life returns to the soil. Animals retreat. The nights grow long. The natural world lies fallow. The season of letting go comes as it always comes. Winter begins.

Sermon/Homily

Tomorrow is the Winter Solstice, the shortest day and the longest night of the year. While science tells us that it is the tilt of the Earth's axis as we rotate around the sun that causes the longest night, there is something magical about this time. The seasons change from Autumn to Winter, and we know the days will get longer with the coming of Spring. This year as we look to the stars, the Winter Solstice is even more magical with a celestial event that has not visibly occurred for almost 400 years- the planets Jupiter and Saturn will be in conjunction, meaning the two planets will be close together, astronomically anyway. While the planets come together every 20 years, this year, the planets will be unusually close so they appear to be touching, creating what some call a bright Christmas Star. I hope we'll be able to stargaze tomorrow evening on this magical night.

Jupiter is the Roman god of the sky and thunder. Saturn is the Roman god of regeneration, periodic renewal, and liberation. I have been wondering what it means that these two mythological gods will be so close together this season—thunder and regeneration, storms and liberation. Somehow, those images seem to fit well as we approach the end of this extraordinary year.

As we come to the shortest day and longest night, let's take a moment to acknowledge the dark times in this year. In the US, we are experiencing the highest daily infection and death rates of the pandemic with 315,000 people lost, now losing one person every 33 seconds. Racial injustice and hate crimes are at an all time high. Systemic racism, classism and other oppressions are more entrenched than ever before. The institutions of our government and our democracy have been assaulted and badly damaged. Trust is strained, respect and civility are rare. There is so much that we have had to let go of.

These can feel like dark times in so many ways.

Lately I have turned to the words of activist and civil right lawyer Valerie Kaur (core) for inspiration and hope. Kaur (core) is of the Sikh faith, grounded in her family and community's experience of discrimination, especially in the US following 9-11. You may recall that the first person killed after the terrorist attack was a Sikh man, mistaken for a Muslim and targeted for wearing a turban.

Kaur (core) speaks of her fear and anguish in the aftermath of the 2016 election, as white nationalists saw that moment as their rise to power and hate crime skyrocketed. As she held her infant son, shaking, weeping, breathless, she realized that she last felt that way when she was in labor, giving birth. The most painful stage of labor is transition, the stage that can feel like death but brings new life. Kaur's words have been recited these past years as a beacon of hope in dark times: "...what if this darkness in our nation, in our world right now, what if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb but the darkness of the womb?" (not the darkness of the tomb but the darkness of the womb?)

On this longest night, the dark of winter, what if we embrace the darkness not of death, but of new life-the fertile soil that fallen leaves create to hold and nurture seeds until Spring? As we await the arrival of a holy child, the light of the world, what if we embrace the darkness of the womb?

Transition is not easy, no one promised that it would be easy, and we are in a great transition, in our world, our nation, our community, our faith, in our hearts. We will not return to "normal" again, and besides, normal wasn't working so well for so many of us anyway. There is pain and anguish, and opportunity for something new. There are no guarantees, and there is great possibility.

This Winter Solstice, I invite us to embrace the darkness, notice what is held in the darkness of the womb, waiting for the light, shining on the path to what is possible. And,

perhaps we may find a tiny bit of magic.

In this moment, I invite you into a guided meditation into the darkness, inspired by the words of Shari Woodbury and Cynthia Frado.

Settle in wherever you are. Relax your hands and arms, shoulders and neck. You may wish to close your eyes and shut out all the distraction of the light. Let us take a few deep, slow breaths as we begin...//

With your vision softened, notice what your other senses are telling you... you may feel a sense of pressure in your body...

Release any areas of tension that you notice... soften your neck ... your shoulders, your arms and legs...

Breathe in and out... //

You may notice sensations such as tingling in a muscle, or a ticklish feeling on the skin... whatever comes to your awareness is okay, just acknowledge it in the silence...

Turn your attention to the sounds around you... What do you notice? You may hear your own breathing, or growling stomach... .. perhaps cars passing on the street, rain falling and wind blowing outside...

Acknowledging these outside sounds, let's turn our focus inward now... thoughts may float through your consciousness, you can just let them float on by... feelings may bubble up from some deeper place with you – you don't have to name the feeling or put any words to it, just notice if there is anything there for you, with gentle acceptance... //

Now imagine your body and mind are filled with darkness and silence, like the deep, dark night in a wilderness or in a forest. //

Take comfort in that stillness, the restfulness of this space within you... just rest into this inner darkness, knowing that you are safe in this moment... you can simply Be... //

breathe in and out...//

In the darkness and stillness within, sense the healing powers of your body... the amazing ability of our soft animal body to create new cells and to restore balance... //

In the darkness and stillness within, sense the creative powers of our minds and hearts... from the mysterious inner regions comes all poetry, and music... from the inner dark emerges all sculpture, and dance... all the art and cultures of humanity...

In the darkness and the stillness within, sense the connection to all that is and the flame that fuels our passion for justice....

Sense consciousness itself, the great unsolved mystery of science, which resides in the deep unknown of ourselves...

breathe in and out...//

rest a while longer in the darkness, with humility and awe and gratitude for all the powers of the darkness within yourself...

As we rest in the darkness and stillness, I offer this prayer:

To the Weaver of Molecules, the Spinner of Stars, the Impulse that gives birth to the Universe, to Earth, to Us

In the deepest, darkest night of our wintered souls

We wrap ourselves in a blanket of sadness and grief, doubts and concerns, fears and questions,

and look out from wondering eyes toward the Light //

Each luminescent ray...will help us to see more clearly

the embers of love and hope and possibility that dwell within each of us. //

The womb of our becoming has been one of struggle and transformation.

In the deepest, darkest night of our wintered souls

We wait for the Source of All Being to create within us

the change that is necessary for rebirth. /

Spring will come again; may we will be ready for emergence and unfolding...into the
Light.

Reawakened.

Renewed.

Reborn.

Let's be in silence together.