

A Hanukkah Lesson in a Baptist Church

Psalm 23; John 10; 11-18

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It was the first night of Hanukkah, so the story goes. Outside a fierce snowstorm raged. Inside the rabbi was preparing to light the first candle of the menorah. With his students gathered and watching, the rabbi lit the candle. It burned strongly for a moment or two, and then suddenly it began to flicker and leap wildly. And then the flame disappeared.

According to the story, the candle didn't blow out, and there was no smoke. It just disappeared. As the evening passed, the puzzled rabbi watched the menorah and waited.

Just before midnight, the door of the rabbi's home burst open and in walked a dear friend from a distant village. The friend's clothes were ripped and filthy. His face was swollen and bleeding. Yet his eyes sparkled with joy.

The friend explained that while traveling to spend Hanukkah with his beloved rabbi, he was attacked and beaten by robbers. They tortured him thinking that he might be a wealthy merchant. He explained that he simply wanted to spend Hanukkah with the rabbi. The joy of being with the rabbi was so great, he said, that he was willing to risk travel in the savage storm.

The chief robber was so taken by his story and his genuine love for the rabbi that he released him. His horse and carriage were returned, but the snowstorm was so vicious that the terrified horse would not budge. He crouched down on the horse's neck and spurred him on, but the horse would not move. At that moment, the story says, a small light flickered in front of his horse, and the horse eagerly stepped toward it. The light advanced, and the horse followed. The light led them safely to the rabbi's house.

After a joyous welcome, they all turned and looked at the menorah. The candle was burning again. (Taken from www.chabad.org)

Many Hanukkah stories include bad guys and the victory of good over evil. That's what happened back in the year 165 B.C. A Greek king desecrated the temple in Jerusalem by erecting an altar to the god Zeus. Average Jewish men fought, shed their blood, and even laid down their lives to regain control of their temple. These were men who loved their temple and loved their God. They weren't about to run for the hills just because there was trouble. After the temple was cleansed, they lit the temple's menorah to symbolize the return of God to the temple. However, they found only enough oil for one day. Miraculously the one-day supply of oil lasted eight days. They believed God kept the light burning long enough for more oil to be prepared. To this day Jews still tell whimsical stories at Hanukkah to commemorate the miracle of the temple and the miracle of the menorah.

In the day of Jesus, Jews were already observing Hanukkah except they called it the Feast of Dedication. The Hebrew word Hanukkah means dedication and refers to the liberation, cleansing, and rededication of the temple. It was a festive occasion then just as it is now. They would light the menorah eight nights in a row to symbolize the power of light over dark, good over evil, a celebration of God's liberating activity among their people.

According to our text in John 10, it was time for Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, when Jesus gave the teachings about the Good Shepherd, which makes me wonder if his timing was deliberate. Did Jesus deliberately connect this teaching to the Feast of Dedication, and if so why? What was he trying to say? Perhaps this was Jesus' way of making a clear statement about who he was and what his work was. He wasn't just any ole shepherd; he was the *Good* Shepherd and represented the power of light over dark, good over evil, the liberating and cleansing work of God for the world.

Now, we're obviously a Baptist church and do not observe Hanukkah, but I do see some lessons here even for a Baptist church.

First of all it is helpful to know something about the shepherding profession at the time of Jesus. Most of us, I suspect, have a favorable opinion of their profession. We remember stories of young David in the Old Testament taking care of sheep. Psalm twenty-three says that the Lord is our shepherd. Jesus, of course, claimed to be the good shepherd. But notice that Jesus never claimed to be simply a shepherd. At the time of Jesus, shepherds had a reputation for thievery and corruption. The rabbis maintained a list of professions known for robbing and cheating. Shepherds

were on the list. Since they had little or no supervision and were mostly on the move allowing their flocks to graze, the opportunity to steal from the flock was ever present. For that reason, people were forbidden to buy wool, milk, or a kid from a shepherd. The assumption was that if a shepherd was selling it, it must be stolen. They were assumed guilty until proven innocent. Shepherds had such a reputation for dishonesty that they were not allowed to fill a judicial office or be admitted in court as a witness. Outside the Bible few kind sayings exist about shepherds. Everybody knew that shepherds were dishonest and disloyal.

So I find it interesting that Jesus chose this notoriously corrupt profession to make a statement about himself. "I am the good shepherd," he said. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Maybe Jesus chose this notorious profession because the contrast between the bad and good shepherds was so dramatic. While those listening to Jesus that day knew the shepherding profession's reputation for dishonesty and corruption, they also knew the few examples of good shepherds, that handful that was honest, hard working, and cared about the sheep. They knew how important it was to the owner of the sheep to find a good shepherd, one who was brave and could be trusted. They had heard the occasional story of a good shepherd defending his flock from attacks by wild animals. The hired hands wouldn't do that. They would run for the hills when an attack occurred, but not a good shepherd. A good shepherd would defend the sheep, sometimes shedding his blood or even laying down his life in the effort.

Do you see the connection to Hanukkah? Yes, I think Jesus deliberately choose this occasion. It was Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, a time to remember those noble men who shed their blood and laid down their lives for the liberation of their people. It was time to celebrate the miraculous activity of God among the people, the power of light over dark, good over evil. Jesus used this festive occasion to say that he, like a good shepherd, would choose to lay down his life for the world. It wouldn't be taken from him. He would choose to give himself in a cleansing and liberating act. Like those average Jewish men who laid down their lives to regain the temple, like those brave and trustworthy good shepherds, Jesus was saying that he would lay down his life for those under his charge. He would and he did. In that act a candle was lit that will never be extinguished.

Here's a modern day Hanukkah story from a Jewish medical doctor, Dr. Blair Grubb. A doctor from France contacted Dr. Grubb after reading

some articles he published on disorders of the autonomic nervous system. He said that his granddaughter's symptoms matched those described in the articles. Dr. Grubb agreed to collaborate with the child's doctors in France, and she made a seemingly miraculous recovery.

A few years after that, Dr. Grubb was invited to speak at a scientific meeting in France. He sent word to the child's grandfather, and they agreed to meet. On the appointed day the girl's grandfather picked up Dr. Grubb and drove him to his home. He explained along the way that his wife had metastatic breast cancer and was not well, but she insisted on meeting him.

After dinner the woman told Dr. Grubb that she wanted to give him a gift. She explained that when she was a little girl, the authorities came to her village to round up all the Jews. Her best friend, Jeanette, and her family were forced at gunpoint into a truck. Looters ransacked their house and took everything of value, except the objects of their Jewish faith. They were just scattered in the street. She saw an item lying in the dirt, and picked it up to save for Jeanette. Of course, Jeanette never returned. Over time she learned of the horrors of Holocaust, and she couldn't bear to look at the item she had salvaged. It stayed hidden through many years, but on that night she presented it to Dr. Grubb, the man who saved her granddaughter. He slowly unwrapped it. Inside was a menorah, made of solid brass. Dr. Grubb says that he began to cry. All he could say was "merci." As he left, she said to him, "It should once again see light."

Dr. Grubb says that she died about a month later. He took the menorah home and pledged to use it at Hanukkah. In his words, "We will not let its lights go out again." (Ibid.)

It's a Hanukkah lesson in a Baptist church. For us, it is reminder of the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World, who laid down his life for his sheep. That light now shines through you and me and many others. Let us make sure that light never goes out.

Closing Prayer

Good Shepherd, Light of the World, do shine through us that we may be agents of your liberating and cleansing work. Amen.