

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

In the dark days of winter, let us celebrate the light



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Next week, the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah begins Sunday evening, and then two days later is Christmas Eve for Christians. Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the temple following the defeat of the Syrian occupation in the second century B.C. The menorah was to be lit again, but there was only enough oil for one day, and yet the flame continued for eight days. This miracle led to Hanukkah being called the Festival of Lights. Thus, during the holiday, an additional candle is lit each day in the menorah until all are burning on the eighth day.

Each year in Grand Rapids, the public lighting of an 18-foot menorah takes place each evening of Hanukkah from 5-5:30 p.m. at Calder Plaza. It is a joyful time of dancing, music, latkes, doughnuts and more. The public is invited. This continues each evening until the end of the holiday on Dec. 30.

Many Christians also mark the season by lighting an additional candle each of the four Sundays of Advent, which began Dec. 1. Light is an important part of these celebrations, in part because of the time of year, winter solstice, when daylight is the shortest in the Northern Hemisphere. It certainly fits in with other Christian themes, as when Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) In the Sermon on the Mount he said to his followers, "You are the light of the world."

Other religions recognize the importance of light in their holidays. In the Hindu, Sikh and other dharma traditions, the celebration of Diwali is considered a Festival of Lights. It represents the victory of light over darkness, good over evil and hope over despair.

While this time of the year is marked by shorter days and increased darkness, we are also aware of what seems to be an increasing darkness in our world and nation. Anti-Semitism and hate crimes are on the rise in our own country, while tensions and violence between ethnic and religious groups around the world are prevalent in each day's news.

Sometimes it is hard to see the light when harassment, abuse, bullying and demonizing the opponent seems to be the standard for the day. Morality is no longer the expectation as long as my side wins. We are drifting further apart into polarization and the so-called "echo chambers" which puts the blame on the "other." Instead of finding ways to work

together, everything is put in terms of "us and them."

There is some hope when we see the popularity of the recently released film, "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood," starring Tom Hanks. The "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" television program for children began in the 1960s and ran for more than 40 years, including syndication reruns following his death. Fred Rogers not only influenced generations of children, but the film tells how the person Fred Rogers had impact on adults as well.

There seems to be a need for the message that Fred Rogers brought to a generation of children, that kindness and cooperation is a better way to live. It seems like a simple thing, but it has captured a significant audience in this time of polarization and blaming.

Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister, reminded me of an article by the Presbyterian president of Princeton Theological Seminary, M. Craig Barnes. He wrote in the magazine Christian Century about the need to rediscover the virtue of gentleness:

"In these days of intense factionalism and demonizing partisanship, few of us are aspiring to gentleness. ... We think about the 'them' who are to blame for our problems. ... The harsh reality is that since the day Cain rose up against Abel, we have never been as careful with each other as we were created to be. The Bible's first story of life outside paradise is about violent conflict between brothers, and we haven't done much to improve on the plot."

Barnes cites Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, who "claimed that when God's creatures come together, a holy space is created between them. It is in this realm that they can always find the Creator still at work. If they leave their relationships, they also leave behind that holy space."

While it does seem that the news is quick to report the negative, could it be because it is not the usual? Most of life is not violent. As someone pointed out, you never read about an airline landing safely; it's the unusual that makes the news.

In these dark days, let us seek such glimmers of light, and come together from our various traditions to celebrate the light and seek the holy spaces in our relationships. Whatever your tradition, let this dark season of the year be the time to seek the light of goodwill to all, peace on earth, and respect and dignity for all persons.

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In 2016, lanterns are lit on the Chabad House of Western Michigan's grand menorah in Calder Plaza in Grand Rapids on the fifth night of Hanukkah. *MLive.com files*



The Advent candles are lit at All Saints Episcopal Church in Bay Head, New Jersey, during a service in 2013. *Advance Local files*