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Meditation on Perpetual Ordinance in a Reflexive Season

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Exodus 27:20-21 (NRSV)

You shall further command the Israelites to bring you pure oil of beaten olives for the light, so that a lamp may be set up to burn regularly. In the tent of meeting, outside the curtain that is before the covenant, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening to morning before the Lord. It shall be a perpetual ordinance to be observed throughout their generations by the Israelites.

The mandate Aaron and his descendants bore required them to vigilantly tend the lamp so that it became an eternal flame lighting the Holy of Holies. Generation upon generation, people devoted themselves to that fire. Such dedication to feeding, tending, and maintaining the fire that marks the sacred—both then and throughout traditions across history to today—becomes, itself a practice of perpetual ordinance. Fire needs fuel. It must be fed both adequate fuel and oxygen. A controlled fire, such as sacred flame and candlelight, must be tended to ensure it offers light and heat with minimal destruction. And such fire requires maintenance to ensure soot, ash, wax, and the like are regularly removed, wicks are replaced, and the light carefully protected from wind and water that might snuff it out. It requires a commitment to care for ongoing combustion—the element given to continual transformation—in order to point the faithful and the curious to something beyond themselves.

Perpetual ordinance creates deep patterns of commitment to practice. This devotion can nurture a lifetime of habit and ritual that connotes identity, solace, and purpose to the individuals who tend such sacred flames. And we herald them in stories of persons' dogged determination to maintain their prayer, worship, faithful communities, and even sacred fire in the face of brutality, war, impending doom, plague, and a host of other threats.

The year 2020 C.E. has brought us an extraordinary circumstance, however—one that flies in the face of perpetual ordinance. We have been asked and are now being compelled to distance ourselves from one another. Some of us are isolated in self-quarantines. Others are scrambling this week to figure out how to work online, from home, with children in need of attention and continued education, while others of us are alone. Still others are going to work facing interactions that each carry the uncertainty of potential transmissions. COVID19, coronavirus, is doing what it does moving from person to person around the planet and disrupting whole societies. For many of us the knee-jerk reaction is to insist on the comfort of meaningful, purposeful

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habit, ritual, and sacred practice. And everything we are told to do to be beneficial community to one another in this moment flies in the face of what we have considered the way to practice perpetual ordinances of lovingkindness, compassionate community, and faithful worship.

The sacred fires we have tended now require us to take them within and risk elemental transformation. We must be willing to find creative ways to feed, tend, and maintain Holy Light and communal life in the days, weeks, and months ahead. The ways we have been in sacred gathered practice and community may have been good, but they are not the only ways to be. And right now, in this Lenten 2020 season of COVID19, they are not the best.

In October 2018, the congregation of First Baptist Church in Needham, Massachusetts, adopted a ritual litany at the beginning and end of their gathered Sunday worship. It has been part of their worship service every Sunday since until March 15, 2020, when at the behest of government and medical officials they and sister congregations of all faiths and practices ceased for what will be an undetermined time to tend the flame of *gathered* worship for the safety and well-being of the faithful members.

But the flame of that community continues to burn. As reflected in the words of their litany (below), even when gathered worship must pause, the Candle of Life, the Fire of the Spirit, continues to burn bright and unimpeded. Its Light shines clear and free. May it be true for each of us. Thanks be to God.

Lighting the Candle of Life

All: ***We light the Candle of Life — a candle that represents community, spirit, and the fullness of all of life — birth and death and all of the transitions in between and beyond.***

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Benediction

One: Our blessing to one another is that we are here for one another, that we are with one another, that we celebrate and remember one another along the journey.

ALL: We extinguish the Candle of Life, but the Light continues to shine within us. As we pass the peace we carry the Light of the Candle of Life from this hour into this world and beyond, offering peace, hope and light wherever the journey leads.

Video of FBC Needham's Candle of Life

https://www.amazon.com/photos/shared/S5p-t4ObRraUcToBk3hOJw.sxki67QN5zwlVtv5MVgq3N