

## Keeping the Lights On

Sermon 120 | Greystone Baptist Church | November 14, 2021

Leviticus 24:1-9

Across cultures and for most of recorded human history, the flame of a fire has been a reminder of hope and resilience. Whether it comes from a single wick piercing the darkness or a community of lights illuminating a large expanse, the promise of light that persists and points a way forward brings us hope, gives us joy, and calms our weary souls.

We light a candle when the power goes out, so we can see the space around us.  
We light a candle to offer a scent that brings us calm and helps us relax.  
We light a candle when we pray; an action to accompany our thoughts and words, a light to help us focus our attention on that for which or for whom we are praying.  
We light a candle in church to symbolize the presence of God in our midst.

Some of the most raw, tender, and sacred moments of life are illumined by the blaze of a candle.

And when there is a major event – the end of a war, the death of a significant leader, a major historical event out of which people want to come together, to remember the past and to create a brighter future, they light an eternal flame. One that cannot be extinguished by rain or wind, one that will be ever blazing... an ever present reminder of where we've come from and the kind of future we'd like to build.

There are some modern examples of eternal flames. There are flames in California, Connecticut, and Florida honoring veterans and fallen servicemen and women. There are flames in Massachusetts, Alabama, Virginia, and Ohio honoring the memory of former President John F. Kennedy. There are flames in Hawaii, Pennsylvania, and New York remembering those who lost their lives on September 11<sup>th</sup>. There's a flame in Georgia honoring the life and legacy of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., and there are flames in Tennessee honoring members of the Cherokee Nation who lost their lives due to American colonialism.

There is another eternal flame that burns in the Hall of Remembrance at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. It is encircled by the names of concentration camps. On the wall behind the flame, a large stone slab hangs with these words from Deuteronomy etched upon it:

*Only guard yourself and guard your soul carefully, lest you forget the things your eyes saw, and lest these things depart your heart all the days of your life. And you shall make them known to your children, and to your children's children.*

The light of this eternal flame pierces through the names of the death camps that surround it and illumines the words of the Hebrew Bible. The light pierces through the darkness and inspires hope as it summons people worldwide to confront hatred with love and despair

with hope. This flame shines as an eternal reminder, that we may never forget where hatred and silent complicity will lead.

Though we may remember these more contemporary examples of eternal flames, the idea has been around for quite some time.

When the Israelites set up their Tabernacle, they were living in the wilderness, the perpetual liminal space between Egypt and the Promised Land. As they wandered and waited for the future to arrive, God spoke to Moses, often with words to be shared with the people. One of the things God told Moses in such a way, was about keeping the light on in the Tabernacle. In Moses' day keeping the light on required a little more effort than simply flipping a switch. Keeping a light on in the Tabernacle meant establishing and maintaining an eternal flame, one that was kept up with oil and maintained throughout the day and night.

This task was too much for Moses or Aaron to manage alone and too important to let fall by the wayside. So the Lord told Moses to invite all the people to participate. Keeping the Tabernacle flame burning continually was an *all hands on deck* endeavor. It would require that all of the people bring a portion of the oil from their pressed olives, a portion that they probably could have used for cooking or keeping the lights on at home. But in order to keep the Tabernacle lamp burning, everyone had to give a little.

Why was it so important to keep the lamp burning?

I suppose the honest truth is, we don't know for sure.

Some say that the Tabernacle eternal flame burned to remind the people that their God, Yahweh, was the same God who separated light from darkness at the beginning of creation.

Others say the unextinguished flame was a symbol of God's presence in the darkest night. After all theirs was the God who led the people with a pillar of fire as they fled captivity in Egypt.

And still others say that the shared responsibility of keeping the lamp burning in the Tabernacle was an essential reminder of the relational nature of the covenant between God and God's people. This was a relationship of mutual love and mutual responsibility.

We may have never stepped foot into an ancient Jewish Tabernacle before, much less, one in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan. But we have learned a little something about the importance of keeping the lights on, so to speak.

There have been seasons, for this church and for some of us in our personal lives, that feel like darkness, like wilderness, like a no-man's land that sneaks up on us out of nowhere, always when we least expect it. In these seasons we feel lost and uncertain about what the future holds. We begin to wonder if the lights in the sanctuary – which is the closest thing

we have to a Tabernacle – even need to be lit at all, much less if we want to continue to give our oil, our resources, our hard earned dollars to make sure they never go dark.

Wouldn't it be better for us to give to another non-profit?  
Wouldn't it be smarter to put that money away for college tuition or room and board?  
Isn't there a more effective way to use these gifts?

We can think of a million different things to do with the fruits of our labor...  
Why is it so important to keep the lights on in a place like this?

These questions have been asked for many generations, perhaps we are hearing them now more than ever. The pandemic certainly accelerated them as many of us couldn't even worship in the buildings our tithes were going to light. In many ways the big and beautiful displays of faith: the large group gatherings, the extraordinary musical presentations, the all-hands-on-deck mission experiences were no longer happening (at least in the same ways they once did).

Why did we need to keep the lights on?

Well, in the smaller moments, the kind that would often go unnoticed, little things happened.

A grieving widow came to sit in the pew she used to share with her husband.  
An engaged couple came and said their vows in the presence of just a few friends and family.

A woman prayed about a difficult family relationship.

A singer offered a solo melody that wouldn't be heard for a few more days as worshippers joined from their homes.

A prayer was voiced from the columbarium.

A recovery group welcomed new members during a critical time.

A boy scout installed a project and earned the title, Eagle.

Preschool children attended chapel.

A property manager gave a video tour so that the whole church could see and feel and remember the walls that held their tears, their laughter, their prayers for all those ordinary years...

The light never went out, even when we weren't here to see it all together.

The light never went out, and it stood to remind those who came alone to see it, those who came in the midst of their own darkest nights...

The light never went out, and it reminded each one that our God is the God of creation, the one who speaks and light shines into the darkness.

The light never went out, and it reminded each one that our God is still leading the way in our lives and in our church.

The light never went out, and it reminded each one that it takes us all, bringing our oil, bringing our resources, bringing our gifts to the table so that there's always enough to keep the light shining.

Despite our tendency to notice and celebrate the bigger things – especially during the season of stewardship when we are dreaming new dreams and working together to see if we can make these shared dreams become reality – the smaller things, the ones that often go unnoticed... the simplest things like keeping the lights on, an eternal flame in our Tabernacle... can make the biggest difference of all.