

A MERRY AND MEANINGFUL CHRISTMAS

OVERVIEW

Today, on this last Sunday of the decade, we had the great honor of hearing from Rabbi Ezray, who leads Congregation Beth Jacob where we gather every Sunday for worship. Pastor Hurmon kicked us off with a video message that highlighted the unique relationship that NBCC has with CBJ, and the unique relationship that Christianity has with Judaism. Because Christianity was born out of Judaism, our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus deepens when we understand the context of Jesus' life and ministry.

Rabbi Ezray hopes that we had a merry **and** meaningful Christmas, with an observance that deepened our faith. Today on this 7th day of Hanukkah, Rabbi Ezray told us about this holiday of profound meaning which marks when the Temple of Jerusalem was rededicated. In brief follow-up remarks, Pastor Tilden reminded us that Hanukkah had a profound impact on Jesus Christ's Jewish identity, and on his life and ministry.

Hanukkah is based on the historical account from 1 Maccabees, one of the books that is in the Catholic canon but not in the Jewish or Protestant canon. It recounts when King Antiochus IV in 1st Century B.C. prohibited Jewish worship and desecrated the Jewish Temple with an idol of Zeus. The Maccabees revolted and reclaimed the Temple, with the re-dedication of the Temple made possible by a miracle of a small amount of sanctified oil burning for eight days to complete the consecration. The Hanukkah story contains eight key messages.

KEY POINTS

- 1) It's about the fight for religious freedom. Rabbi Ezray is more worried than ever about growing anti-semitism in the US and hostility to all expressions of faith. We need to be courageous in standing up for the ability to practice our faith and to advocate for the freedom of belief for everyone.
- 2) It's about the few standing up to the many. A ragtag group of determined and motivated believers can make a huge difference. [Zechariah 4:6](#) says that we win "not by might or power, but by the Spirit."
- 3) It's about igniting a small flame that will grow. Forget about guaranteed outcomes, leap with faith & trust in God's role in the world. Remember that meaning comes from action and trust in God, not waiting until a certain outcome is assured, and so not acting at all.
- 4) It's about choices of faith. When engaged in inter-faith dialogue with Muslim leaders, Rabbi Ezray said their number 1 question is: "How do you keep your kids Jewish in a secular world?". Our choices reflect our values, and we need to be unafraid of being countercultural and different from the rest of the world.
- 5) It's about never giving up on anyone. The Maccabees could not have been victorious without a unique coalition of partners. In a national climate of division, people of faith should take the lead in being willing to build relationships with everyone, and in so doing, demonstrating that we are all created in God's image.
- 6) It's about miracles. God transcends nature, and with God all things are possible. Furthermore, miracles reflect God's priorities - to feed those in need, to heal, to provide for the poor. We can be people of miracles if we honor God by serving others and making a difference in the lives of those around us.
- 7) It's about bringing light to darkness, with acts of kindness, service, solidarity, and inspiration. Hanukkah is the "Festival of Lights", and it celebrates the Presence of God as light in the darkness.
- 8) It's about food, such as delicious latkes and sufganiyots, and the fellowship nourished by food.

DISCUSSION

- 1) **HEAR** - Discern your heart. Did you have a meaningful Christmas?
- 2) **UNDERSTAND** - Write down three examples of where you can bring light to darkness in your life and the lives of others. How did learning more about Hanukkah bless your relationship with God? Was it significant to know that Jesus celebrated Hanukkah ([John 10:22](#), the Festival of Dedication), and that the imagery of Hanukkah is reflected in Jesus' words, "I am the light of the world" ([John 8:12](#)).
- 3) **DO** - As we embark on this new decade, make resolutions for your choices of faith, acts of inclusion and courage, and creation of small incremental miracles in your life. Join us next Sunday for the start of our new series, Handle with Care!