|  |
| --- |
| **Monton Unitarian Church**  **15th November 2020**  **Diwali – Let there be light!** |
| **Welcome – Come, come to this place, by Daniel Budd**  Come, come to this place, whoever you are: Wanderer, worshipper, lover of learning, All seekers after what is true, All who seek a community of compassion & diversity.  Come, come to this place, whoever you are: Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times And you’re too busy and you don’t have the time.  Come, come to this place, whoever you are: Lovers of wisdom, lovers of humanity, lovers of beauty,  Come to this place where a Love we do not make Surrounds us and lifts us and nurtures us.  Come, come to this place, whoever you are: Ours is not a community of despair, but of hope, Not a place of judging, but of thanksgiving, Not a place of certainty, but of searching.  Come, come to this place, whoever you are.  This weekend sees the celebration of the Hindu festival of Diwali, whose name means ‘row of lights’ – the festival of good overcoming evil, of knowledge overcoming ignorance, light overcoming darkness – the festival of light.  Gordon B McKeeman wrote: "Let there be light! Let it shine in dark places, in moments of pain, in times of grief, in the darkness of hatred, violence, oppression, where there is discouragement and despair. Wherever darkness is to be put to flight, Let there be light!"  Elizabeth M Strong said: Reverently I offer this symbol of our hope and high intent. Reverently I bequeath this flame to you. This is the light that is lit for everyone who comes into the world. Bear this light to others, one by one. Let the flame go from life to life till all is lit with its warmth.  Tell that the light means wisdom Tell that the light means kindness Tell that the light means understanding Tell that the light means tolerance Tell that the light means sacrifice Tell that the light is a vision of a fairer world.  Tell that this is the light that is lit for everyone who comes into the world.  In a world where there is still much darkness, let us celebrate light. |
| **Prayer – by Maureen Killoran**  And let us begin by sharing in the fellowship of prayer.    Here in this space and time, we are gathered, called by our sense of urgency, or duty, or the longing for community, called to be together on this day...Here, in this space and time, we are gathered...called to hold ourselves accountable to our values...to remind ourselves of those hopes and dreams and possibilities for which sometimes in the rough-and-tumble world it can be hard to hold on to belief. Here, in this space and time, we are gathered, called to do our part in weaving a web of human community.  Here, in this space and time, some of us have come in pain.  To those who are dealing with issues of health, we pray, we wish, for courage and healing. May we pause, and hold gently all the concerns, named and unnamed, that are gathered in this room, this day.  And in the complexities of community, it is right that in this space and time some have come with joy bubbling in their heart...May we rejoice together, remembering the wisdom that says joys are multiplied when shared...May we remember gratitude for warmth...thankfulness for sunshine...appreciation for the simple tastes of whatever food our lives and bodies let us choose.  Here, in this space and time, we are called to weave the web of human community. May we pause, and in our silence, may we lift up at least one blessing, one joy, no matter how small, that has touched our life this week. May our shared silence be a blessing on our hearts, on this community, and may this blessing extend outward to grace the wider world.  Amen. |
| **Diwali discovered**  Diwali is the Indian festival of lights, usually lasting five days and celebrated during the Hindu Lunisolar month Kartika (between mid-October and mid-November). In the lead-up to Diwali, celebrants will prepare by cleaning, renovating, and decorating their homes and workplaces with *diya* (oil lamps or candles) and *rangoli* (art patterns made using coloured rice or sand, or flower petals.)  One of the most popular festivals of Hinduism, Diwali symbolizes the spiritual victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance. The festival is widely associated with Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity, and in some regions, it is a celebration of the day Lord Rama returned to his kingdom Ayodhya after defeating the demon-king Ravana. There are lots of versions of this story, and some of the longer ones can be extremely involved and complicated – so this is a short, simple version for you.  Once upon a time there was a great warrior, Prince Rama, who had a beautiful wife named Sita.  There was also a terrible demon king, Ravana. He had twenty arms and ten heads, and was feared throughout the land. He wanted to make Sita his wife, and one day he kidnapped her and took her away in his chariot. Clever Sita left a trail of her jewellery for Rama to follow.  Rama followed the trail of glittering jewellery until he met the monkey king, Hanuman, who became his friend and agreed to help find Sita. Messages were sent to all the monkeys in the world, and through them to all the bears, who set out to find Sita.  After a very long search, Hanuman found Sita imprisoned on an island. Rama's army of monkeys and bears couldn't swim to the island, so they began to build a bridge. Soon all the animals of the world, large and small, came to help. When the bridge was built, they rushed across it and fought a mighty battle.  When Rama killed the evil Ravana with a magic arrow, the whole world rejoiced. Rama and Sita began their long journey back to their land, and everybody lit oil lamps to guide them on their way and welcome them back.  Ever since, people light lamps at Diwali to remember that light triumphs over dark and good triumphs over evil. |
| **Prayer**  Spirit of Life and Love, we admit to you that all is not right — in our hearts and in our world. We look to the darkness and not to the light. We look for what is broken, and not at what is being mended. We look to criticize and not to praise. We look at ourselves and not to you. Turn us around so that we look at the possibility, at hope, at promise, at grace, at healing, at love.  Amen. |
| **Music** |
| **Story – The Shattering of the Vessels, by Amy Petrie Shaw**  A Free Retelling of the Shevirat haKeilim (from the Kabbalah)  At the beginning of time, before anything else at all existed, Love was all there was, and it filled up everything in the whole universe.  But Love got bored and lonely. There was no one to be in love with. So one day Love decided to make a world.  First it took a deep breath. Deep. Deeper! A little deeper. Love got all squished up taking the deepest breath ever, and was sooooo squished that it squeezed out darkness. The darkness was all around: thick and shiny and black. It was beautiful but now Love couldn’t see anything! Love waved its arms and legs around, but the darkness was everywhere.  “I have to do something about this,” said Love. It thought for a minute, and tried to think of the most wonderful beautiful warm thoughts ever. Love thought harder and harder and all of a sudden Love called out “I want light!”  And pop!  All of the warm and wonderful and beautiful thoughts exploded outward in ten different directions and shaped themselves into ten big glowing glass balls. Each ball was filled with a spinning lump of pure light and warmth. Some of the spare good thoughts that couldn’t quite fit in the glass became dust and water vapor and seeds and molecules that could form animals.  And Love said, “This is amazing. I better make something for the light to shine on.” So it waved its arms and kicked its legs and all of the dust and water vapor and molecules that had been scattered around when the glass balls formed began to form into another huge ball, this one of dirt and water and plants and animals. Love called this the Earth.  The ten balls of light started toward the Earth, and if they had made it here in one piece, the entire planet would have been exactly the way Love wanted it. But the glass balls were too fragile to contain such strong, powerful wonderful good thoughts. They broke open and shattered, and all the good thoughts shattered and flew out like sparks and were scattered like sand, like seeds, like stars. Those sparks fell everywhere on the Earth in tiny bits instead of big clumps like Love intended.  “Oh NO!” said Love. “I’m too big. I’ll never be able to find all of those tiny sparks. I have to make one more thing.”  So Love waved its arm and kicked its feet one last time, and people appeared on the Earth. They didn’t know it, but they were created with one job: to find these sparks, these tiny pieces of wonderful goodness, and to bring them together again in big clumps.  “When enough clumps are there, I will recreate the big glass containers to hold them, and this time I will set them down a little more carefully,” Love said.  So all of us, from the time we are born, have a job, and that job is to help find love and more good and warm and wonderful things. If we do that we are fixing the world. |
| Prayer – The Imprint of Love, by Laura Horton-Ludwig Spirit of life and love, light within and without, mystery from which we have all emerged, within which we live and die: be with us now as we allow ourselves to drop into the silence and stillness at the centre of our being.  As people of faith, we seek to live in a spirit of love, a spirit of community, justice, and peace. And yet, in so many corners of the world both far and near, we see divisiveness and hate.  If we look deep within ourselves, perhaps we will even find those shadow energies there too. We struggle to respond to the outer world and our inner dramas in ways that manifest love.  At times we may fear that love will not be strong enough. At times we may question whether love really is at the root of all things, in this world with so much struggle and suffering and discord. We may struggle to hold on to our faith in love, knowing that if all things come from the one source we proclaim, that source must somehow hold hate as well as love, violence as well as peace, evil as well as good.  This is the mystery within which we live and die. These are the questions that haunt our days and nights. And yet we are not without hope. Our struggles and our questions testify to our longing for peace, for love. Our very longings are born out of that mystery we dare to address as “Spirit of life and love.”  In the stillness and silence of our own heart we read the imprint of love created not by our own will, but planted there for us to discover. By what or whom, we cannot know, and yet it is there: A clue, a talisman, a beacon, a light within.  May it keep hope alive even as we dwell in mystery. May it guide us all as we seek to act wisely and well. May it help us to be vessels of compassion for one another and for our world.  Amen. |
| **Reflection – Let there be light!**  All the way through primary school, at this time of year, my kids would start coming home with little home-made Diwali pots, that we had to find tealight candles to go in – little clay mouldings, covered with glue and glitter and sequins, that they would be very proud of and then forget about ten minutes after they’d brought them home. I still have a couple of them on my bookshelves….  I’m not sure how much they ever took in about what Diwali was all about, though – many times it seems schools ‘celebrate’ religious festivals primarily in order to be able to do some craft work around it – or am I being a cynic?!  Hinduism does have some truly fantastic festivals, though. The Festival of Holi is the spring festival, the festival of colours – you may well have seen images of this, as people in the streets throw multi coloured paint powder everywhere! Diwali is the autumn festival, as the nights become dark, against which the Diwali lights can make some stunning displays.  There’s a number of practices and themes that run through Diwali. Some of them relate more to the goddess Lakshmi – she is the goddess of prosperity, among other things, so there is the practice of encouraging everyone to wake up early, during what is called the Brahmamuhurta, the hours before sunrise, to encourage health, ethical discipline, efficiency at work, and spiritual advancement. I’m not sure I’d be very efficient at 4am but I admire the principle! In North India, this is the day that Hindu merchants open their new account books and pray for success and prosperity during the coming year.  But while they encourage work in the hope of prosperity, they are also extremely charitable – the festival includes Govardhan Puja, the fourth day of Diwali where huge efforts are made to make sure that everyone living in poverty is fed.  But it’s the lights that most non-Hindus associate with Diwali, whether the tiny Diwali lamps our kids make at school, or images of the Golden Temple at Amritsar covered in oil lamps from top to bottom. And for the Hindus, it’s what these lights represent that is most important.  Knowledge over ignorance. I’ve long said for myself that I can deal with pretty much anything so long as I know what’s going on. Whether that’s a building problem, a work problem or a medical problem – tell me what’s going on and I’ll figure my way to dealing with it, but keep me in the dark, don’t tell me what the problem is or what’s happening and I’ll be a wreck. And humankind in general has always sought to discover more, understand more, explain more. That’s not to say that we aren’t still capable of perpetuating some pretty mind-boggling ignorance in our behaviours, and yet we are shedding light on all sorts of things that were previously regarded as fearful mysteries.  Good over evil. With co-operation from the animals, Rama defeats the demon Ravana and rescues his beloved. How many films, books, stories affirm the principle that the ‘good guys’ win, despite all the challenges and threats they have to face along the way? Most of them. Of course, there’s a bit of a problem with this one – who defines who’s good and who’s bad? Answer is, we each define it for ourselves, and then can get into tangles when someone’s coming from the other angle – a classic example of that right now is playing out in America, the Democrats are celebrating ‘beating’ Donald Trump – who is seen by them as the bad guy – while Trump’s supporters are still in the middle of the battle against their version of the ‘bad guys’ – otherwise known as the Democrats! There is no external, incontrovertible, accepted-by-all authority on what ‘good’ and ‘bad’ is – though I’m sure you are probably sitting here now saying, oh but …..!  Every religious teaching is said to have at its centre the maxim of the golden rule – do unto others as you would have done unto you – and yet so many world religions have been used as justification for some horrific behaviour against groups of people branded as ‘bad’ because of the other group’s interpretation of that religion’s laws. Christianity allegedly teaches us to love our neighbours as ourselves – and yet ‘Christianity’ is used to vilely discriminate and justify persecution against the LGBTQ+ community. Islam teaches us to love all people and to live lives of peace – and yet is used to justify jihadists in their war against anyone who does not follow their brand of Islam.  Diwali is often heralded by Hindus as a unifying event – one website that I read said, “it can soften even the hardest of hearts. It is a time when people mingle about in joy and embrace one another. Those with keen inner spiritual ears will clearly hear the voice of the sages, "O children of God unite, and love all." The vibrations produced by the greetings of love, which fill the atmosphere, are powerful. When the heart has considerably hardened, only a continuous celebration of Diwali can rekindle the urgent need of turning away from the ruinous path of hatred.”  And light amongst the darkness. The lights of Diwali also signify a time of inner illumination. Hindus believe that the light of lights is the one that steadily shines in the temple of the heart. Sitting quietly and fixing the mind on this supreme light illuminates the soul. In each legend, myth, and story of Diwali lies the victory of good over evil, and with each Diwali and the lights that are lit is hoped that those who celebrate it will find new reason and hope, new knowledge and understanding, and through that come closer to divinity.  We need light. For many of us these last few years have felt very dark indeed, with fears about the climate, fears about the political situation of both our country and many others, fears about growing poverty, and now fears about the pandemic that is ravaging so many lives. And the lockdowns and shielding are restricting the ‘light’ that friendship and human contact and fellowship would normally be able to bring into people’s lives. As much as zoom chats and letters and phone calls are useful, there is nothing that totally replaces the comfort of the physical presence of another human being – and many of us are really missing that right now.  We need light to dispel some of the fear caused by ignorance, by ‘otherness’, by a refusal to acknowledge the common humanity of all people and the inter-dependence that links us all with our planet. Light to dispel some of the huge quantities of ‘fake’ information that are distorting our understanding of situations, and thereby thwarting our efforts to find lasting solutions.  We need light. The light of compassion, the light of goodness and healing and understanding. Some may say that it is the light of God – to others, it is the light that dwells deep inside the heart of each of us – for me it is the light of love, total, unconditional, non-judgemental love for each human being. And if we take a moment to rest, to let go our fear and anger and criticisms, to let our barriers and walls crumble, that light will glimmer, and strengthen, and begin to spread the love from us to others. And then hopefully the world will feel that little bit less dark, and lonely, and scary, because we will know that we are held in the light of love, and in the light brought by others. And we will know that we can do the same for others who need our light too.  Just as one candle can provide comfort and guidance in the darkest of nights, so our love, one tiny flicker at a time, can provide comfort and guidance in the darkest of worlds. |
| **Blessing, by James Morison**  Within each of our hearts there is a most glorious light. Go forth, and let its spark help you understand what troubles both you and others; Go forth, and let its light of reason be a guide in your decisions; Go forth, and bring its ray of hope to those in need of help in both body and spirit, that they may find healing; Go forth, and fan the flames of passion to help heal our world; Go forth, and spread the warm glow of love, pushing back the darkness of the world; Go forth, and share your glorious light with the world. |