

How many candles?

By [Joanna Harader](#)

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Sunday morning at the beginning of worship, I lit our peace lamp and then I lit four white candles: for Paris, Beirut, Aleppo, and Baghdad.

I almost skipped the candle lighting altogether because I couldn't figure out how many candles to light. Beirut and Paris, of course. Those were horrific terrorist attacks among people who don't experience such things on a regular basis; places where people expect to go about their daily lives without encountering a suicide bomber or masked gunman. I definitely wanted to light candles for the 41 killed in Beirut, the 129 in Paris.

What about Aleppo and Baghdad? They had terrorist attacks last week, too. But, sadly, I barely paid attention. The words *bombing* and *attack* and *violence* and *dead* are so often heard in connection with these cities that those reports can feel more like a recurring news script than a real-life event. Still, the fact that those attacks were expected doesn't make them any less tragic. It doesn't make the 13 killed in Aleppo and the 26 killed in Baghdad any less dead. So Aleppo and Baghdad got candles too.

It was hard to stop with the candle lighting.

I wanted to light a candle for the Palestinian family whose house was destroyed by the Israeli military because one of the men in the family was accused of killing an Israeli soldier.

And I wanted to light a candle for the dead Israeli soldier.

I wanted to light a candle for people in the cities of the United States killed by guns—those involved with gangs, those caught in the crossfire, those shot by police, those who are police.

I wanted to light a candle for the death-dealing racism of our culture.

I wanted to light a candle for the transgender people who are attacked physically and emotionally every day.

I wanted to light a candle for the [459 civilians killed by U.S. airstrikes](#) as part of our War on Terror—especially for the 100 children.

I wanted to light candles for the tragedies we all knew would come in the wake of the Paris attacks—for the Muslims threatened and yelled at and physically assaulted; for Syrians killed as the [French warplanes “pound” ISIS](#); for the refugees who are shut out and put down because of our misplaced fear.

I wanted to light candles for all of them. And I knew I couldn't. We don't have enough candles in our church cupboard. We don't have enough time in our worship service.

It's an odd thing, really, to light a candle in the face of death. It's a small act. It's almost a nothing act. Almost. But not quite. Lighting a candle is *something*. Which, however inadequate, is at least better than nothing.

And for me, for many of us, lighting a candle is prayer. And prayer opens our hearts and our minds to God, which means that our hearts and our minds are more open to each other. Which is something, too.

This morning my devotional reading was Matthew 1; a chapter I know well and am likely to breeze through. But this time I was caught by the angel's words to Joseph: “You are to name [Mary's son] Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

He will save his people from their sins.

We are all God's people. And our sins are killing us—physically and spiritually.

In the midst of so much death—in the midst of such sorrow, such tragedy, such brokenness—it is hard to know how many candles to light. It is hard to know what prayers to pray. It is hard to know what steps to take. It is hard to believe in the promise of salvation.

But here is what grace means for me right now: One candle is enough . . . or four . . . or 60. Any prayer will do—art, music, words, groans, silence. Even one step will get us to a new place, eventually.

And the promise is real even when we can't believe it.

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