Diwali, which comes from the Sanskrit word *deepavali*, or “rows of lighted lamps,” is one of India’s biggest and most important holidays. The five-day Festival of Lights follows the Hindu lunar calendar, so the date changes from year to year. In 2021, Diwali takes place from November 2 to November 6, with November 4 being the main festival day.

Houses, shops, and public places are decorated with small oil lamps called diyas. People create designs on the floor (called *rangoli*) using brightly colored powders or sand. They visit relatives and enjoy scrumptious family feasts together. At night fireworks explode overhead. On the main festival day, puja (worship) is offered to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, prosperity, auspiciousness, and good fortune. Devotees seek her grace and blessings.

While several Indian religious traditions celebrate Diwali, the festival is especially important to Hindus. Every region in India has its own distinctive traditions and narratives associated with Diwali. In northern India, for example, the festival is traditionally linked to a story in the Hindu epic *Ramayana* that recounts the day when Rama, Sita, and Hanuman returned to the city of Ayodhya after 14 years of exile. On that auspicious day lights were spread out across the city to help them find their way back and to welcome them.

According to the story, Sita, the wife of Rama, was abducted by Ravana, the wicked king of Lanka. Rama was broken-hearted when he could not find Sita. A band of monkeys offered to help him find Sita. Hanuman, the leader of the monkeys, flew to Lanka (he possessed this extraordinary ability because his father, Vayu, was the god of the wind) and found Sita in a grove. He told her not to fear, Rama would soon come and save her. Ravana’s soldiers, however, captured Hanuman and set his tail on fire. But Hanuman escaped, hopping from house-top to house-top, setting all of Lanka on fire! He then flew back to Rama, telling him with much excitement that he had found Sita. Rama, his younger brother
A Festival of Light and Love (cont’d)

Lakshman, and the monkey army immediately left for Lanka to engage in battle with Ravana and his fighters. Rama, ultimately, was victorious. He freed Sita, and they, along with Hanuman, returned to Ayodhya. Imagine how light and bouncy they felt seeing the streets lined with firelit lamps, the windows of the houses brightly glowing, after many long years of being away. Welcome back!

Regardless of regional traditions, the stories associated with Diwali all point to the moral triumph of light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance, and goodness over evil. These are perennial human hopes and reassurances that can be found in cultural traditions around the world. In the New Testament, for instance, Jesus is heralded as the light breaking the darkness, much as the dawn of a new day breaks the night at sunrise. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a sermon entitled “Loving Your Enemies,” told his congregation, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Diwali is a celebration of light and love in all of its manifestations. The love of devotees for their particular forms of God, the love of parents for children and children for parents. The love of neighbors close by and strangers passing through. The love of the familiar and of the new and different. The embrace of dichotomies (like friends and enemies) that the practice of love makes possible.

On Thursday evening, I encourage you to light your own lamp and celebrate the moral victory of light over darkness through the practice of love in all of its particular forms.

May you and those you love be illuminated with health, joy, and happiness

Happy Diwali 2021

The Chaplain’s Corner is a newsletter published by the Spiritual Life Center (SLC) at the University of Lynchburg. We share campus concerns and updates, spiritual life events and activities, and words for the journey. If you have a joy or concern you’d like to share, reply to this message, email the SLC office - spirituallife@lynchburg.edu, or call 434.544.8348. We only share with your permission. Current and previous issues are on the SLC page of the University website - www.lynchburg.edu/spiritual-life.