

No More Night

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 13, 2016
Texts: Revelation 22:1-5

Most of you know, I'm a city girl. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, PA. I like streetlights and tall buildings. I get anxious if I'm driving on a rural road and go too long without seeing another car. Dirt roads terrify me. When I went away to college in rural northwestern Pennsylvania, it took some getting used to. Kids from all over the area landed at my college but still, it didn't take long before my reputation as a diehard city girl was well-known among my friends, none of whom were city people. A couple of my friends decided the city girl needed a country experience and so it was one night when one of us had a car on campus for the weekend. It was late when we left campus, driving farther and farther out into the countryside. No streetlights. Soon no pavement. I am not exaggerating when I tell you I was terrified because we were on a dirt road in the pitch black in the middle of nowhere. After what felt to me like hours but I learned later was only about 15 minutes, we finally stopped. In the middle of a cornfield. Really.

Greg hopped out of the car. "Come on, come see this Ruthie," he said. I didn't budge. My best friend Michelle and my boyfriend Peter got out but I was too afraid to move. I just leaned my head out of the door frame into the inky blackness. That's

when I saw it. Or rather, them. Stars. Thousands and thousands and thousands of stars shining in the black night sky. I climbed out of the car and looked up, craning my neck to see everything, so much so that I got dizzy. “You’ve never seen anything like that, have you, city girl,” Greg laughed. “No, no, I haven’t,” I whispered. “What’s happened that all those stars are here? What’s going on?” I asked, with more than a little tremor in my voice. Greg was laughing by now but Peter grabbed my hand while Michelle said, “Greg, stop teasing her!” He stopped then, realizing I was truly overwhelmed by what I was seeing. Then he explained. “Those stars are always up there,” he said. “You just can’t see them in the city because all the ambient light obscures them.” I was dumbfounded. The stars were really incredible, so beautiful in a way I had never seen or even imagined. To think they had been there all along was just impossible for me to wrap my head around.

But, like most experiences that happen in one’s youth, this magical night slowly slipped back into the recesses of my mind, buried under all the events that have transpired in the 40+ years since. Oh, I’d have a brief moment of remembrance now and then when the rare occasion of star-gazing would cross my path. But, for the most part, that magical moment of a night sky filled with starlight wasn’t something I thought about. At least until this past summer when we spent some time with Amanda and Jenny at a

lake cottage they had rented in the Adirondacks. Again, no street lights and a long, twisty dirt road. And again, at night a miraculous sky filled with stars like I hadn't seen for decades. The long ago college adventure swept back into my heart almost knocking me off my feet. It was a powerful moment of cascading kaleidoscope memories of everything that had happened to me since that night so long ago. What struck me the most was the sudden profound awareness that I had changed, but the stars hadn't. At least, not to me. An astronomer could probably explain in some detail why they were different than the stars I had seen that first night, but that didn't matter to me. Seeing those brilliant stars in the inky black sky reminded me all over again of my place in God's Creation, tiny and insignificant in so many respects. And yet, still loved and cherished by God.

The text we read this morning from Revelation always reminds me of my long ago star filled night in a rural Pennsylvania farm field. "And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light." Standing there bathed in the light of more stars shining than I ever knew existed, I felt in that moment completely embraced by God in a way both infinite and immediate. I glimpsed for just a second the arc of time bending to embrace me as part of God's eternal plan. I knew in that moment that God's light can never be

extinguished from the universe and that in some way I was part of that light.

So, why does this passage from Revelation talk about there being no more night in God's heavenly city where the river of life flows through the middle of everything with flourishing trees on each side of the river bank? Why in this perfect city designed according to God's desires would the absence of darkness be part of that divine perfection? If the darkness is what makes the light visible, why do away with the darkness? The answer is actually right there in the same verse. "For the Lord God will be their light." In other words, the light in the heavenly city will be God's own self. It won't be sunlight or starlight, arced and reflected according to the laws of physics. In God's city, the heavenly city, God's radiant being will provide all the light needed or wanted.

Now we should stop for just a minute here to talk about the book of Revelation. It is a prime example of what is called apocalyptic literature meaning its subject matter is the "end times." Revelation has been a controversial book since it first surfaced almost two millennia ago and its inclusion in the canon of Scripture was a topic of heated debate in the 3rd century. Some of the scholars of that time were concerned that at some future point, readers might want to take Revelation literally and they believed its only value was as an allegory. The decision was ultimately made to include it in the Canon and people have been

arguing over what it means ever since. Scholars today agree there are essentially three ways to interpret or understand Revelation. First is to see it as a historical document recording events in the first century in a coded language to protect those writing and reading it. Second is to read it literally as a prophetic-predictive document containing clues about the future and God's impending judgment. This is how fundamentalist Christians read it. Third, and this is my preference, is to understand it as a symbolic document speaking to every time and place with its promises of God's transformative powers able to transcend every circumstance. In this view God's transformation of us and the world in which we live is always happening meaning we are always in a state of becoming new within God's eternal plans.

Revelation, it would seem then, is the perfect text to be pondering together in the wake of this past week's election. Shocking. Upsetting. Frightening. Overwhelming. Apocalyptic. These are some of the very real reactions to the election being expressed by many in the wake of the stunning and surprising election of Mr. Trump as our next President. But others are clearly elated, excited to think that Mr. Trump will keep all his promises, outrageous though some of them are. Wonderful people of good faith whom I like and respect felt Mr. Trump was worthy of their vote, felt his particular kind of total outsider approach to governing the most powerful nation in the world was

just what was needed and I understand and respect that choice. Time will tell of the wisdom of it.

In the meantime, as this new political reality takes shape in our country, we must acknowledge that many people are terrified about what this means for them. Real threats against real people were central to this campaign and now those people are genuinely frightened for their safety and well-being. All across the country teachers had to spend Wednesday calming the fears of students who came into their classrooms crying and afraid. Sadly, a spate of hate crimes against people of color and the LGBTQ community also have occurred in the days since the election, emboldened by the rhetoric of the winning candidate. These are well documented incidents, not just heresay and people are genuinely afraid of being attacked. The sad truth we are left with is that in spite of so many hopes and dreams, our country, dear friends, remains far from unified after this election. I'm sure this would have been the case no matter who had won since emotions on both sides had been stoked to a fever pitch. Thus, with the outcome so shockingly unexpected, the fear, anger and frustration it has brought with it can be no surprise. So where do we go from here. That is the question before us and it is one with no neat or easy answers.

But, let me be perhaps the first to tell you what I see as the good news of this election for both sides of our divided nation. And I do believe there is good news. First and foremost, even in

this most contested election, the institutions of the republic have held strong. Even when people disagreed with them. Even when people felt cheated by them. Still, the election results were honored and respected and will continue to be, I am confident. Protests are happening, yes, but even this is so important reminding us as it does that our First Amendment Freedom of Speech is alive and well and not going anywhere. Second, this election and its outcome have accomplished what nothing else has been able to do – shake the dysfunction in Washington to its very core. Will it mean movement toward solving real problems once again? Eventually, I hope so. Too soon to tell on that, but surely Washington will never be the same again and that’s not a bad thing. Third, this election has brutally uncovered all the seamy underbelly of racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, nativism and every other ugly “ism” that’s been simmering under the surface of life here for far too long. All the sins of our country, of ourselves, of everyone on both sides of this divide, have been stripped bare for all to see. And that matters because we cannot repent of sins we can’t see and won’t acknowledge. We cannot fix problems we don’t want to admit we have.

Finally, the last piece of good news about this election is that it has created the perfect opportunity for the word of God to break forth anew in our land. It has revealed the church’s purpose – to love God and to love the other as we love ourselves – as exactly

what this country needs right now if true healing in any way, shape or form is going to be possible. The church is all about reaching out to the other, about building bridges of hope and inclusion, about seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God. This election has indeed created a new reality and a new era in history, one in which the mission of God to care for the least of these offers the answers so many are seeking.

No more night. That's where we found ourselves at the end of that impossibly long election night. When the long night was over, the morning revealed a landscape altered forever leaving some feeling alone and lost in a wilderness of fear and confusion they never anticipated. No more night in Revelation happens because God provides all the light needed. But we're not there yet. Right now, in the aftermath of this election when so many are afraid a new kind of darkness in our country will swallow them up, we need to be the light for them. Whether or not you believe they have reason to be afraid is beside the point. Their feelings are their feelings and they deserve to be respected and honored. However you feel about their fearful reactions, we in the church need to be what keeps their dark night of the soul at bay while everything gets sorted out. How can we do that? The Safety Pin movement is one simple thing anyone can do. It just means wearing a safety pin somewhere visible on your clothing every day to show that you understand some people are afraid and you are a

safe person to talk to, to come to if they feel threatened. The safety pin says to the world that you know love is stronger than hate. We will essentially be safety-pinning ourselves together as a first step in the healing we need to find in our country.

Of course, there's more you can do too. Most important is to keep informed about what's going on and listen to more than one side of the story. Another thing this election has made clear is that journalism did not do its job as it should. Far too much media coverage was strongly biased one way or the other making accurate information difficult to come by. That has to stop and we have to stop it. Another way to respond in these uncertain times is not to be afraid to be vocal. By that I mean, if you see someone of color or a woman in a hijab, or anyone "different" from you in any way who seems anxious or uncertain, don't be afraid to smile or offer a kind word. Finally, and this is really the most important thing you can do – work hard at being the love and the light we all want to see in this our beloved country and in the world. Being the light God needs us to be at this moment in history will be challenging I'm sure. But it is undoubtedly the best way, the most effective way, to make our way out of the darkness we find ourselves in at this moment in history, whatever its source, and into God's radiance. No more night. God's promise but our responsibility always. But especially now. Amen.