

No More Night

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
June 23, 2019 (Originally preached on November 13, 2016)
Text: 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 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 then 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 a few summers ago 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 from the wrath of Rome. 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 evangelical 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.

No more night. Such is our dream, our longing, for a return to kindness and peace and the absence of fear overwhelming us every time we turn on the news. Bad news seems to proliferate overnight while good news becomes more and more difficult to find. Threats of real war and trade wars, of measles becoming a threat once more because a few people don't want to vaccinate their kids, violent changes in weather patterns because the reality of our decompensating climate has been too long ignored since acknowledging its reality means cutting into profits. The list of problems in what sometimes feels like an endless night goes on

and on. This is why more than ever we need this beautiful vision of God as the light which can't be extinguished as it is described in Revelation. No more night as explained in this text happens because God provides all the light needed. But we're not there yet. The ugliness threatens to proliferate once again as election season comes around again.

As the run-up to the 2020 elections begins, we fear that the darkness which has emerged in our beloved country in the last three years will only grow worse. We are weary of politicians knowing all too well as we do that promises made are not the same as promises kept. We are fearful of the multiplying apparent lapses in moral judgement that overlooks poor immigrant children locked in cages at the border. We worry that we may accidentally slide into war as rhetoric ramps up in the Middle East. We are just plain tired of needing to worry about what the government is doing and we long for the days when we could take the government for granted, that it would do its job quietly as a bulwark against chaos, even as we griped and complained about taxes and bureaucracy. In short, we want our lives back. How we achieve that goal will be the focal point of all the candidates for every office over the next 18 months. The assault on our hearts and minds will be relentless because the stakes for this upcoming election couldn't be higher. So, what do we do in this seemingly

endless night of ceaseless political rhetoric where the truth is harder to find than starlight in the city sky?

Well, I think we all realize how important it is to stay informed about what's going on and listen to more than one side of the story. This is not so easy to do since far too much media coverage is strongly biased one way or the other making accurate information difficult to come by. It takes work and effort, not to mention common sense and a whole lot of thinking, all of it so worth the energy it will take to stay on top of it all.

Another way to respond in these uncertain times sure to be ramped up in the election season is not to be afraid to be kind to others who may be even more fearful than you are by virtue of who they are – persons of color, folks from the LGBTQI community, persons of the Jewish faith or really anyone who has been a target of far too much of the rhetoric flying around fast and loose these days. 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. And don't be afraid to speak up if you see someone “different” being harassed by someone else. Often times, just naming the ugliness – like standing up for a cashier who is a person of color when someone is behaving badly toward him or her – can have a profound impact on the cashier, on the person and on you. I know from personal experience what a difference

being willing to speak up can make. Not in a dangerously confrontational way, certainly, but more as a witness to injustice willing to name what's happening. You'd be amazed at the power of naming.

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. Especially now. Amen.