

“Touchstones”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Happy December 28th! What a wonder it is to be alive today, 3 days after Christmas, 2 days after Boxing Day, 5 days after the last night of Chanukah, one week after the winter solstice, 3 days before we celebrate New Year's Eve, and a week before we at First Unitarian, ritually begin the New Year with our annual fire communion. Yes, while some people may still have their Christmas trees up – some people, I know, will have them up until late April – today is a distinct non-occasion. It is a day of nothing in the middle of everything, a time that has been described rather poetically as the “armpit of the year.”

And yet, these are the words running through my head: “Star of wonder, star of light, star with royal beauty bright. Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us through this perfect night.” We sang it on Christmas eve, though it's more accurately a song for Epiphany, celebrated on January 6th, which is the day in the Christian calendar when the three kings of the song are said to have arrived in Bethlehem, following that remarkable star.

I've been thinking about this ever since a phone conversation with my family in Halifax a few weeks ago, when they said they'd just gotten back from a lecture at the university on astronomical theories of the Christmas star. I did a little reading myself, and it turns out that these theories are more than just biblical literalists grasping at straws. Some contemporary projections suggest that, in the summer of the year 2 BC, the planets Jupiter and Venus appeared so close in the early morning sky that they would have appeared to those travelling westward as a single, brilliant star, hanging over the region of Bethlehem.

The question I've been asking myself is not, “was Jesus really born then and there?”, or “did three kings really arrive, bringing gold, frankincense, and myrrh?” No, what I've been asking myself is this: If that star were to appear over Toronto tonight, would we be able to see it? The answer is almost certainly “no,” or at least not in its full glory. Which leads to another question: When we drown out all the darkness, how will we find our guiding star? How many miracles are we missing out on, because we're blinded by the light?

Paul Bogard works with the United States National Parks Service “Night Sky Team,” and has spent years chronicling the loss of darkness in our lives, and has been developing the concept of darkness as a “natural resource,” which we are quickly running out of. He works with the Bortle darkness scale, which ranks night skies on a level from 1-9, with one being a night sky without artificial light, and 9 being an inner city sky. Most of us, he says, spend our nights in a level five if we're lucky, most likely a 6 or 7. Indeed, most of us will go our whole lives without ever seeing a natural night sky. He observes that, although telescope sales continue to climb, and there are even night sky apps for your phone, the stars themselves are becoming harder and harder to see.

An astronomer's joke goes that, in Florence, 400 years ago, everyone could see the stars, but only Galileo had a telescope. Now, everyone has a telescope, but nobody can see the stars. A story – probably exaggerated – goes that in 1994 when there was an earthquake in Los Angeles and all the power was out, the police received several anxious phone calls about “strange lights on the sky,” which of course turned out to be stars.

Bogard admits that it may seem strange to give numbers to the night sky, but the idea is that it's hard to protect darkness if we don't know how to measure it. It's hard to love what you don't know, and even harder to love what you are afraid of. I know some things about fear of the dark. As a child, I would get terrified if I was alone in the dark, especially if I had to go upstairs or, heaven forbid, to the basement. I'm much less jumpy now, though I still have moments when leaving this building for the night when I walk a little faster down the long hallway after turning out the lights. If you haven't experienced it, few things are more spooky than being alone at night in a dark church. Night is when all of our scary stories take place: I've never heard a ghost story that began: “It was a clear summer's day, with not a cloud in the sky...”

Our language reflects this aversion to darkness in a variety of ways. Following the current conversation about race relations in the United States, via social media posts from my American Unitarian friends, I've seen some thought-provoking reflections on how the way we talk about light and dark can play into institutionalized racism. As Jacqui James says, we must acknowledge that “light can be blinding, bleaching, enervating. Conversely, we must acknowledge that in darkness there is power and beauty...darkness brings relief from scorching heat, from blinding sun, from exhausting labour.”

The history of artificial light is a fascinating one. Clark Strand recently wrote an op-ed for the New York Times, in which he describes Christmas in 1924 in a small town in upstate New York, where people rebelled against the arrival of electric light in their community. It was, in Strand's words, “an advertisement for the new and the beautiful – a verdict against the old, the ordinary and the poor.” Locals gathered on Christmas Eve on the village green to protest this unwelcome intrusion.

It seems apparent now that their protests were not effective in the long run. Indeed, Strand points out that religious and social critics who lament the hectic pace of life in an era of internet, 24-hour shopping and ubiquitous mobile electronics are arriving much too late in the game: a slow-paced life attuned to natural rhythms was a lost cause as soon as we got hooked on artificial light. And this process has certainly not slowed down. This month saw the installation of the world's largest billboard in that Mecca of Light, Times Square New York City: a dazzling digital display measuring 1/2 an acre, currently rented by Google for the price of \$2.5 million a week.

Yes, concern for preserving darkness may be a little belated, but that doesn't mean it isn't important, maybe even more important than we realize. The ecological effects go beyond humans, and even beyond humans and sea turtles. As Clark Strand observes, “In our modern world, petroleum may drive our engines, but our consciousness is driven by light. Darkness is the only power that ever put the human agenda on hold...In centuries past, the night was the natural corrective to that most persistent of all illusions: that human progress is the reason for the world.”

Indeed, we seem to associate light with science and progress, and darkness with religion and superstition, epitomized by the idea of “the enlightenment,” the era in Western history which gave birth to our contemporary understanding of science. Not coincidentally, this was also the time our religious forbears began to reject long-held ideas about literal interpretations of scripture. But what else have we

rejected?

Historian Roger Ekirch did extensive research on the history of how people experienced the night in pre-industrial times, and discovered that it was typical for people to have “two sleeps” in a typical night, going to bed not long after the sun and sleeping for several hours, then waking for a period in the middle of the night. They might only sleep for about 8 hours in total, but spend up to 14 hours in darkness. The period of wakefulness in between was seen as a time to reflect, converse, or as a time for prayer, and religious traditions as diverse as Buddhism and Hasidic Judaism have nighttime spiritual practices designed to take advantage of this special time of “unproductive” darkness. Our current ideal of sleeping in one, uninterrupted 8 hour block may be efficient, but not necessarily healthy, or holy. As the French expression goes: “La nuit porte conseil,” - the night gives good advice.

So where do we go from here? How do we learn to love the darkness? It would probably be a mistake to just pine for an earlier, simpler time when darkness was a friend. And I'm not about to prescribe “lifestyle changes” to members of the congregation. We all have our own habits and pressures, from work schedules to family responsibilities. And I also have no moral authority to tell people to embrace the night; after all, the only times I ever spent 14 hours in bed were during university, recovering from all-night paper-writing marathons.

Perhaps we can begin by simply acknowledging what we have lost. We've all heard the term “light pollution,” but it seems totally abstract without a sense of just what it is polluting. Air pollution damages the mix of oxygen and other gases we need to thrive, and light pollution is a violation of the darkness which we are native to, which humbles us and makes us whole. After all, plants flourish in sunlight, but seeds sprout in the darkness.

A.J. Jacobs published a book a few years ago, entitled, “The Year of Living Biblically,” where he details his attempts to live out all of the contradictory advice given out in the Bible. It's creative and entertaining, though I'm not sure how Unitarian it is. Perhaps a Unitarian equivalent could be “The Year of Living Rhythmically,” in which we try to live into the inevitable rhythms of night and day, of light and dark. I'm not about to take that on as a pledge, but perhaps it's something to try, even occasionally, as a spiritual practice.

As UU's, we value the interdependent web of all existence. In that web, nothing is wasted, and at the same time, nothing is free. Perhaps we shouldn't be so afraid of the dark, but maybe we should be a little more afraid of losing it. As Joni Mitchell said, “Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you got, 'til it's gone.”

Now, after the winter solstice, light is returning. But darkness remains, and will come again. Maybe, going forward, we can learn to embrace it. Blessed be.