

Light and Dark

Rev. John Allen

I spent this past week in Arizona. A little town that is actually called Carefree.

For the past four years I have been a part of a group in the United Church of Christ called the “Next Generation Leaders Institute” which takes a small cohort of younger clergy from across the country for advanced leadership training and development.

This was my last year gathering in Arizona with my cohort, and I am definitely carrying a bit of sadness right now that our time together has come to a close. We have been with each other through a lot.

In the past four years our cohort of 12 has had 10 children between us, and lost one.

We had 4 marriages, a broken engagement, and a divorce.

Most of us have changed jobs at least once. One of us was fired from their church when they came out of the closet.

We have been through a lot with each other. We sometimes jokingly refer to this time in Arizona as “Clergy Camp” because it can take on that sort of intensity of connection of summer camp. Its hard to find another way to describe why it is that this small group of people has become so important to one another.

I was working on this sermon while I was out there, and I was also trying to put together some words for one of our worship services that we led together while we were there.

I decided to take a walk under the dark desert sky, to collect my thoughts a bit.

The sky out there is extraordinary.

The desert air doesn't add much haze, and the city lights are far enough away that the words of this Isaiah passage really came to life.

I could almost hear God whisper in my ear as I looked up:

Who created the stars?

Who brings them out one by one?

calling them all by name so that not even one is missing?

We can see a few stars here. But have you ever seen a full night sky?

Been somewhere where the heavens seem to glitter?

Its awe-inspiring.

But for some reason this week, I was struck by something else that amazed me.

The dark.

The dark, dark, sky.

Because there are no more stars in Arizona than Milton. The difference is not the light. The difference is the darkness.

It is the dark sky that holds the light of those stars so that we can behold them.

And that finally helped me understand what has been so precious about my time as part of NGLI. We have been able to offer each other a dark night sky. A sky so dark that even the most timid and tender points of our light can be beheld. And we can find a new way by these tiny points of light.

That is what makes camp special, or those other relationships in our our lives that just seem to shimmer. They are the places where trust clears the haze, and where enough of life's other concerns can be set aside, so that the sky is clear, and dark, and the little points of our light that maybe have lost to our life's light pollution suddenly reappear.

Think of everything in your life as a star.

There are the bright stars that anyone can see. The things you share with people you just met, your job, the names of your kids, maybe some your most acceptable passions and dreams.

But as you move further and further into the more intimate relationships of your life, the sky gets darker and more stars come out. The dreams that you only dare whisper to a chosen few. The fears that embarrass you. The hurts you hide from most of the world.

And then there is God.

And I hear these words of scripture in a new way:

Who created the stars?

Who brings them out one by one?

calling them all by name so that not even one is missing?

God, the darkest sky that holds even the most hidden and holy lights of our heart.

It is appropriate that we have smaller circles that know us more deeply, there are part of us that are too precious for small talk.

But I think that most of our lives are overly light-polluted.

I fear sometimes that we hold back too much of ourselves from too many. That we hide some of the most beautiful and brilliant lights of our hearts burying them in the brightness of small talk and polite conversation.

I worry that we have lost the daring to say our dreams out loud. Lost the courage to confess our fears and frailty. Lost the ability to behold the timid and tender light of others.

My colleagues and I have been that kind of night sky for each other.
Where some of those others stars can come out.

And I didn't want to tell you about it just so you could hear about
what a great time I had at camp.

I want to tell you about it because one of my more timid dreams that I
want to let shine for you is my belief that this church is that kind of
night sky too. And it could become even more so.

I want to challenge us, maybe as sort of a New Years Resolution for
our family of faith, to tell our stories even more openly, to love each
other even more deeply, to hope together a little more boldly, to let
the sky here grow dark enough that those timid and tender points of
light come out to dazzle us.

Because God created each one of those lights. And God calls them
out. By name. One, after another, after another, so that not even one
is missing.

One of the members of my cohort is a pastor from Vermont named Daniel Cooperrider. He is what I sometimes imagine Henry David Thoreau would have been like. He is an avid outdoorsman, soft spoken. Brilliantly smart. Enraptured by the beauty of nature.

He asked me what text I was going to be preaching to you all, and I told him. We were actually standing out under the stars.

When I told him, he did as the text itself suggests.

He looked up to the heavens and considered.

Then he told me.

You know where the text says, “lift up your eyes on high and consider...” Do you know the etymology of the word ‘consider’ Do you know where that word comes from?

I had to admit that I did not.

Of course — he did.

Latin.

Con - meaning with.

Sidero - meaning, stars.

Consider. To think with the stars. To let our minds lift to the place where they dance and sing.

Con-sider. With the stars. The ones God calls out one by one. Until none are missing.

Con-sider. With the stars. With you and me, and both the bright and faint lights of our souls.

In the loving, but striking embrace of God's dark sky.