

## **Lift Up Your Eyes**

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on May 24, 2020  
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?  
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?  
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;  
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in;  
who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.*

*Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,  
when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.*

*To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One.  
Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these?  
He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name;  
because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.*

*Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel,  
“My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”?  
Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.  
He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.  
Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;  
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.  
(Isaiah 40:21-31, NRSV)*

There’s nothing like going outside on a clear night and looking up at the sky. As a young boy, I would look up and wonder if somewhere out there another little boy was looking up at his own night sky, and wondering if over the vast distances of space there was something – or someone – out there.

Just as then, still today, on many a clear night, I walk outside and look up, and lose myself for a moment under the stars. Sometimes I do it just because I feel inspired, but at other times, it’s because I somehow seek solace in them ... in those times when I feel a little lost ... or am a little overwhelmed ... or struggle with a tough decision with no easy answers.

The ancients believed the stars to be gods or angels above the canopy of Heaven – and I think we can all understand why. Let in for a moment the sheer majesty of hundreds and hundreds of

stars visible to the naked eye ... and since Galileo, with telescopes, thousands and thousands ... millions and millions, *billions and billions* of stars, stretching back to the beginning of time.

Do you ever look at the stars? Do you ever wonder? Do you remember the last time you walked outside, lifted up your eyes, and sought refuge in the night sky?

I'm not sure what it is about looking up at the stars that helps, but I know that it does. I'm no believer that they hold anyone's fate in their hands, but often in those moments alone I feel something happening. My sense of lost-ness gives way to a sense that the way will open. I catch a glimpse of something bigger than my narrow self-concern and worry ... and my small, inward-looking world turns outward and expands into the heavens.

This morning our sermon text brings us the voice of a prophet who would call his people to a new, expansive perspective. His words are directed to a people in captivity hundreds of miles from home. About 50 years earlier, Jerusalem had been devastated by the Babylonians, and the bulk of the people taken into exile. It was – before the Holocaust of the last century – the greatest disaster in Jewish history. An entire nation was wiped off the map and its people taken away captive to a foreign land. The conquerors' aim was to destroy not just a government, not just a state, but a way of life. And to all appearances, they succeeded.

It is into this pain that the prophet speaks a new word. To a people beaten down, a message of comfort and assurance comes. To a people who had given up, the prophet declares the might of One “who sits above the circle of the earth ... who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing” [40:22-23, NRSV].

And then, to make his point the strongest, to clinch the argument, he tells them to look up at the night sky, to lift up their eyes on high and see, and to learn the lesson of the stars.

To be separated from that sense of home, that sense of peace with the order of things, is to live in a kind of exile. But one need not be carted off to Babylon first. Many live in exile in the midst of their own families, their own communities ... and these days, even their own living rooms.

These times of being apart from one another ... of having our lives and our way of life disrupted ... have been hard for all of us. For many of us, or at least for me, the feeling is one of grief – of having lost something – and not being sure when or if we can ever get it back. In its own way, this is what *exile* feels like. And that kind of grief, that condition of exile, is nothing short of *wearying*.

The Session met last Sunday and we had a conversation about what signs we would look for before making a decision to re-open our doors for public worship. We are not there yet. The guidance we are receiving from our denominational leadership – informed by the best science – is that it's not quite time, though that day may not be too far off.

But the part that we're now trying to take in is the knowledge that *when* we re-open, we won't be able to return right away to the way things were before. The danger posed by COVID-19, especially to those over the age of 60 or with underlying health conditions, will require that we still wear face masks out in public, that we maintain social distancing, and take similar precautions – and that applies to worship in the Sanctuary as anywhere else. How long these precautions will need to be observed will likely remain unknown for some time. This is mostly what I have in mind when I think about weariness.

But the word of the prophet now comes to us, just as it did to those exiles long ago. The word to those who feel lost, disoriented, is "Lift up your eyes and see." At first, this may sound as trite as "Don't worry, be happy," but actually doing this can yield a surprising insight, for you know when you do that, when you lift up your eyes to the night sky, you might notice that stars are not all that is there to see. There also is empty space. There also is darkness.

The most beautiful night sky I have ever seen was on a night I was alone about 24 years ago. I was on a personal retreat at a small Episcopal center high atop the Cumberland Plateau in Sewanee, Tennessee. I was facing a critical decision in my early ministry – one that, in hindsight, was one of the most fateful decisions of my life.

When the late night came, I ventured out, and the view – high above the tiny lights of Chattanooga in the distance – was spectacular. Stars I never knew existed were visible ... constellations told the great mythic tales of long ago. I momentarily lost mind of my anxieties in the majesty and beauty above me.

But you know that I could only see what I saw *because of the darkness*. All the literal lights of human creation were non-existent up there – no streetlights, no outside lamps. It was totally dark. On this night, you could hardly see more than three feet in front of you. On this night without a bright Moon, even seeing well enough to get back to the retreat center would be a challenge. But without those lights, the great glory of creation, the very majesty of Being, freely offered itself to my imagination.

But the significance of the darkness for what I was experiencing was even greater than *that*, for this outer darkness mirrored my own inner reality ... I was only there in the first place because my own "lights" – the lights of my own understanding, my own confidence, my sense of direction and orientation – were out.

And now, on this dark night, for the first time in my life, I was grateful that I did *not* know something.

The mystics of our Christian tradition write of a darkness that is necessary for the soul to pass through that it may finally ascend into the ultimate mystery of the Divine. They teach us that in the course of our journey there are times when we are called, in the midst of uncertainty and doubt, in a place of exile, to stop ... to cease trying to fill the silence with chatter, or the darkness with the lights of our own making. It is no easy call and many would shrink from it, but

for those who will accept journeying through this forbidding space in trust – what the scripture calls “waiting for the Lord” – we are promised that we are not alone, that there is more at work than we can now see, and that beauty, strength, and renewal lie on the other side.

That’s the gospel, my friends. That’s what faith is finally about, just like that word spoken long ago by a prophet to his weary people, as he declared the faithfulness of One who

*“... gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.  
Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;  
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”* [40:29-31, NRSV]

To the Glory of God. Amen.