

“Look out below!”

Message for May 24, 2009

I love looking at the sky at night here in Prescott. From my back door, I can see so many stars it just amazes me. I'd never seen the Milky Way before I moved to Prescott – living in Phoenix pretty much means you only see the very brightest planets and stars because there are so many city lights - and the first time I saw it, I felt a sense of gratitude for the being who created such splendor. It was like the sky was wearing a diamond necklace!

Star-gazing is a fairly new interest for me; early in our relationship, Don and I took a trip to Tucson to Kitt Peak – I don't know if they still have this program, but we were able to buy time with an astronomer for an evening (there were maybe twelve other people). They gave us tiny red night lights so we could find our way around the grounds, high-powered binoculars to borrow, and a tour of the sky at that time of year. You'd be amazed at what you can see on a good night with the right lenses! Really seeing the stars for the first time was pretty wonderful, but when they took us to the telescope rooms and I was able to see with my own eyes the tiniest image of Saturn – rings and all – I was moved to tears. I got to peek into the universe itself! That roomful of people was quiet, like in a church – I could feel the others share my emotion of awe and a sort of respect as each of us stepped up to the stool that gave us the view of a lifetime.

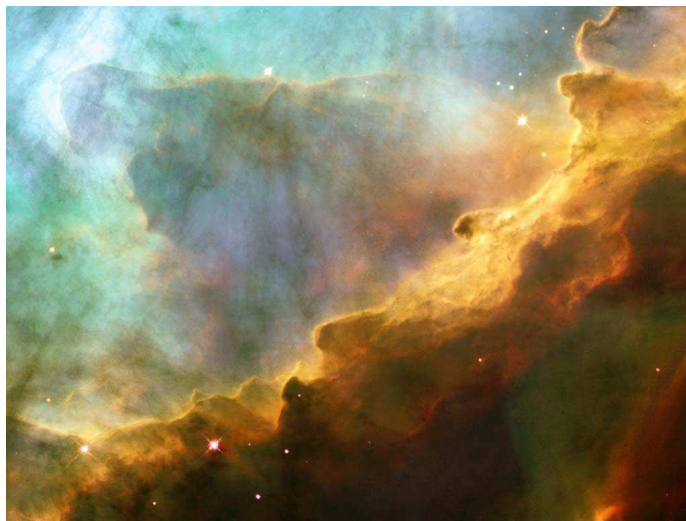
After experiencing such wonder, I find it hard to believe that people don't recognize a greater power that you and I call God. However the cosmos got there, I know in my heart it was pulled together by something or someone bigger than me.

It seems that humankind since the very beginning looked up to the sky with respect or wonder, hoping to get the answers they were looking for. Ancient cultures from the Egyptians to the Norsemen believed that the sun, the moon and the stars all had mystical powers – after all, when giant black clouds loomed on the horizon and rain poured from the sky, a saturated earth brought forth fruit, vegetables and grain, especially after a long stretch of sunny days. And at night, the moon lit up the landscape so well, some nights they didn't need coarse oil lamps to see by when traveling – a full moon provided plenty of light to see the road ahead.

Then, there were the stars and the patterns they created – but only during certain times of the night and of the year. Creative minds saw creatures or traced the images of gods, connecting the dots with their fingers, and noted the season when these shapes occurred. From simple star-gazing, legends evolved explaining why people behaved a certain way or how come some crops only grew during these times. Celestial bodies of the cosmos meant so much to ancient cultures, images of them graced clothing, jewelry and even burial vessels – humans lived on the earth, but the sky seemed to capture their imagination. Surrounded in mystery, shrouded in misty whispers of clouds and condensation, the sun, the moon and stars held the secrets of life – they were magical.

So it is natural that our friends, the disciples, after being told they would receive the Spirit, and that sometime in the future, the kingdom of God would be restored (which was a good thing, because at this time, it probably felt pretty chaotic), found themselves looking up just as Jesus left them for the last time. I expect in their minds, he was going to the good place – the mystical place – the place we call “heaven.”

Heaven. On my laptop is a photo taken from the Hubble telescope that looks like what I call heaven. I printed a copy of it for you to see – this is real, right out of the cosmos, right in the birthing room of baby stars. Doesn't this look like heaven to you?



Ever since I was a little girl, heaven was “up there” and hell was “down there.” No matter what you did in life, this lovely image of heaven was where you wanted to end up – I can remember many sultry summer days as a little girl, surrounded by friends, earnestly analyzing what could get you into heaven and what you get you into that other place (we weren’t allowed to say the word “hell” because it was considered cursing).

In heaven, you could have all the ice cream you wanted. In heaven, no one had pain – everyone had healthy, beautiful, THIN bodies. In heaven, you didn’t even bleed, because you’d get your white robe all stained and that wouldn’t do – angels (who lived in and took care of heaven) wouldn’t like to see other angels in dirty, ill-kept robes, would they? In heaven, you got to see all the people who died before you – relatives, movie stars, old presidents (I really wanted to be able to meet Abraham Lincoln!) – all of these people would be standing at the gate when you got there, waiting to welcome you. You would probably even see pets who died! (We only had guppies when I was little, so there wasn’t much interest in this part of heaven for me at the time).

Heaven was the perfect place that God created for all the **good** people, and in our girlish daydreams, we couldn’t wait to get there to check it out.

Well, because our scripture for today tells us that the disciples watched Jesus get lifted up in a cloud and go off to heaven, I wondered how the whole idea came to be. Remember, someone interpreted and wrote down the word, “heaven” hundreds of years ago – but did the disciples have a comparable word? What was *their* concept of heaven?

A quick search in Google for “concepts of heaven” presented me with 22 pages in Wikipedia that all had to do with someone’s name for heaven, including “Paradise,” “Happy Hunting Ground,” “Bosom of Abraham,” and my mother’s personal favorite, “Valhalla,” among others. But sticking with the meaning of the word heaven provided me with what I was looking for...the word’s roots come from Old English “heofon” which, around 1000 BC meant, “sky” or “firmament.”

The Egyptians of the time considered heaven “a physical place far above the Earth in a "dark area" of space where there were no stars, basically beyond the Universe. Departed souls would undergo a literal journey to reach Heaven, along the way to which there could exist hazards and other entities attempting to deny the reaching of Heaven.

For the Jews, the belief in Heaven and afterlife was tied to their concept of “sheol”, which is considered a sort of waiting area for the dead. Pharisees, a sect of the Jewish faith, believed in the idea of Resurrection; Sadducees did not. Now I understand why they were always at each other’s throats!

Taking these ideas into consideration, it is possible the disciples had some sense of heaven much like we do...according to Biblical scholar N. T. Wright, *“in tracing the concept of Heaven back to its Jewish roots, we see Earth and Heaven as overlapping or interlocking. Heaven is known as God's space, his dimension, and is not a place that can be reached by human technology. This belief states that Heaven is where God lives and reigns whilst being active and working alongside people on Earth. One day when God restores all things, Heaven and Earth will be forever combined into the 'New Heavens' and 'New Earth'.”* Maybe you can have as much ice cream as you want!

So, in our passage we hear that two men in white robes said to the disciples as Jesus faded from view, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

According to this passage, Jesus floated up to the sky on a cloud, and the two men say that’s how he’ll return. Wow. This piece of information could send us into another whole discussion, but I’ll leave it for another time and zero in on something that keeps popping into my head...

I wonder what was going on in their minds at that very moment? We know that Jesus had been to visit them several times before, but this must have felt like the final chance to ask questions of the Rabbi – maybe they felt anxious and nervous about the future. They’d been in hiding, trying to get over their grief about his death and wondering what to do now. He’d just given them some basic instructions to wait

for the Spirit to fill them up with wisdom of God but it's possible they were hoping to receive courage as well.

Maybe they felt a little annoyed - Jesus got to go to heaven – but he left them with a long list of things that needed doing, in the name of God. The world of their day had to hear about Jesus and the love of God – the hope of heaven and eternal life for everyone. But, there wasn't a manual to tell them how to go about this, and it was dangerous to be connected to Jesus at this time...I imagine the vision of a place called Heaven looked pretty good to them on this day. They were being left behind, and the best they could do was follow the Rabbi's instructions: wait for the Spirit, and trust that it would all make sense soon. Well, that was easy for Jesus to say – he had all the answers!

And maybe, just maybe, they felt a little doubt. After all, their lives had been completely turned inside out with the whole experience of being taken from familiar work and families to follow Jesus. They'd seen and done more in a few years' time than anyone could comprehend – even by today's standards. And now Jesus was leaving, for real. What if it was all a big misunderstanding? What if they'd given it all up for nothing?

There can be no question that the disciples were human, and it's very possible that as they witnessed the ascension of their friend into heaven, he took with him their mixed bag of feelings about the whole thing. I bet it was even painful for Jesus to leave them in such a state – and he too had to trust God was guiding everyone through this time of separation into new territory and reality of living their faith.

Considering our modern day challenges trying to get God's word and a Christ-like lifestyle out to the world reminds me that we are no different now than the disciples were then - we share many of their feelings of anxiety, confusion, annoyance and even doubt. Heaven, in our minds, is still "up there" – attainable, but a long way off. Even though we believe God is in our hearts, and even though we think we're getting the message out, we're "down here" with our feeble actions, our ambiguous feelings and our inconsistencies with regard to what, exactly, is "faith" – remember, there were 22 pages about the

concept of heaven in Wikipedia! We, too, are disciples – and Jesus isn't here.

As we recognize Jesus' Ascension to his rightful place with God, and look ahead to Pentecost, like the disciples we have big questions to face: How can we ever hope to sort out all the ways people demonstrate their belief in God and Jesus - how do we know we're doing it right? How do we know that what we believe and do as Christians of the United Church of Christ represents God in the world? Is that the point? Is there a "true" church for God? Does it matter? What does God want us to do at First Congregational in Prescott, Arizona?

I don't have the answer, friends, but I have a feeling that like the disciples, the best we can do follow the Rabbi's instructions and wait for the Spirit to take over and lead us into the next phase of our faith life. We need to trust God and keep that image of heaven right in front of us.

Heaven above - and below - is waiting.

God is right there – Jesus is next to him – and they have lots and lots of ice cream.

Amen.

