

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Learning to Stargaze on Park Road
Psalm 8
Interfaith Thanksgiving Service
November 24, 2009
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I'm the adventuresome type. I'm talking about hiking, backpacking, skiing, camping. I'm talking about roughing it. I'm talking about a willingness to go days without a shower – no makeup and a baseball cap. I know that some folks call “roughing it” the Holiday Inn Express, but I really mean it – I love adventure and the more back to nature it is, the more exotic, then usually the more fun it is. I have but one requirement: a tent! That's it. It can be a tiny tent, but I have to be enclosed so as to not encounter any creepy, crawly, spidery, insect, rodentia, snakey vermin while I sleep. I really don't think that a tent is asking too much. So, this summer our family had many adventures as we enjoyed a three month sabbatical. Our summer ended by rafting the Colorado River into the Grand Canyon – 3 days and 2 nights on the river – then a long 9 ½ mile hike out. Plenty of people see the Grand Canyon from the rim and some see it from within, but few see it from the bottom. The two nights on the river were absolutely amazing. It could be one of, if not the, most adventuresome times of my life. The food was delicious – prime rib and grilled halibut. The rapids were class 8 out of a 10 rating. The water was freezing cold, but well worth it for the thrill of the ride. The guides were fun and full of Grand Canyon knowledge plus plenty of lore. And they made us laugh, which is truly one of God's best gifts. The camaraderie of the group of 20 people on our raft which included my sister, brother-in-law, and one niece was easy. The short day hikes included a side river for body surfing rapids in a natural thermal feature of warm, milky looking water. It was all unbelievable. But can you just guess where this is going? When it came time to go night-night – can you just guess? No tents.

Oh my. “It’s too hot for tents,” they said. “Just enjoy your stay on Fuzzy-Bunny Beach,” they said. Yeah, right. Fuzzy-Bunny Beach was the name they gave to scaredy-cats like me for one of camping places along the river that was actually called Rattlesnake Beach, but let’s not get bogged down in those nit-picky details.

So, once it is dark – at about 9:00 pm – it’s time to bed down. Russ, and our two boys, plus my sister, brother-in-law, and niece had eyed one area of the beach that looked as safe as possible. And then we lined up the sleeping bags – side by side, and I do mean side by side – with me vying for the middle. I try to live a life without stereotypical sexism, but Russ and my brother-in-law took one for the team and slept on the ends of our line of sleeping bags. Our family began and ended each day of our sabbatical travels with morning and evening prayers, and as we lay flat on our backs and looked up, Russ began to read words of the ancient Psalmist – *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! . . . When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them . . .* I’m going to tell you what: stargazing on the banks of the Colorado River is unlike any stargazing I’ve ever done, and that Psalm came to life right then and there. There were billions of stars out that night. The sky was on fire. It was absolutely breathtaking. And the shooting stars. Amazing. Intellectually, I knew there were that many stars in the night sky, but I had never really seen it – not like that. There, in the bottom of the Grand Canyon, the sky is so open and nothing blocks the view. There, it is so dark that the light of the stars explodes in that vast expanse of black sky.

The home where my family lives is not located on Park Road. But my church home is. And honestly, 3900 Park Road is where I spend most of my time and energy. It’s the same for my husband and for my sons. As I thought about this gathering tonight, I realized that I’ve got to

learn how to stargaze on Park Road. You see, we all have access to the same night sky here in Charlotte as we had this summer in the Grand Canyon, but here the sky is not so open and there is too much artificial light to see the stars. *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of us.* The Psalmist continues - *you have made [us] a little lower than God, and crowned [us] with glory and honor. You have given [us] dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under [our] feet. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!* (Psalm 8) I wonder what would happen if I learned how to stargaze on Park Road?

As we gathered around the planning table to make preparations for this service, many faiths were represented. When I mentioned my idea for a sermon – to say something about the stars in the night sky representing for me the Light of God – a million reminders that we are not alone in this world – I asked, “Do all the faith traditions around this table use the symbol of Light to say something about the Holy, the Divine, the Sacred . . . about God?” And everyone said yes. You’ve heard examples of that in the reading of sacred texts tonight. If one of the things we have in common is using the image of Light to help give words to that which we call the Sacred Other, the Beyond in our Midst, God, then may we all commit ourselves to some stargazing in Charlotte.

Since returning from the Grand Canyon, I’ve actually tried to stargaze, but there’s too much artificial light in the city. Our way of living keeps us from seeing the night sky illuminated. Perhaps it’s our drivenness or our love of all things that make us look successful. Perhaps it’s our fear of taking risks or our preoccupation with things. I think I’ve figured out a few reasons why we can’t see the stars in the night sky around here: Every single time you hear someone grumble more about Jake Delhomme’s passes being intercepted than about that fact that 6500 of our

neighbors don't have a place to call home – I think that blocks the few of the night sky. Can you believe the precious time and energy wasted arguing over whether it's Jake's fault or is the offensive line not blocking for him? Who really cares when tonight many, many Charlotte Mecklenburg School families will sleep in their car? I'll tell you what else keeps the stars from shining brightly around here. The fact that we live in a country where we are free – free to worship how we choose and yet our bags have to be checked at an Interfaith Thanksgiving Service because hatred and misunderstanding are still too alive and well. When I was asked to open my purse tonight as I entered this Temple I was glad to show that I have nothing but love and admiration for my Jewish brothers and sisters – many of whom I now simply call friend. I can't see the stars from Park Road when The Bank continues to take the headlines of the paper over the injustices that abound – not just in our city but in every city. Our schools are resegregating and perhaps there is nothing that blocks our view in this particular part of our land more than racism.

So I've tried to do some stargazing from Park Road and here are some of the lights I have seen. The Urban Ministry Center is undertaking a big task – housing for the chronically homeless. Moore Place. Take back just that much information to your houses of faith to investigate for yourself, but they are shedding some Light on God's children who have real needs, and we can help if we will. I'm pretty sure that a star shines a little brighter on North College Street as the Urban Ministry Center works to make Moore place a reality. I saw some light the day I sat in the lobby of Crisis Assistance Ministry with a retired former employee needing financial help to pay her rent. She was treated with such dignity and care and grace. And she was helped. She had never needed that kind of assistance in all of her 80+ years. She was worried about me sitting in that lobby by myself as she was escorted to meet with a counselor.

Her gratitude alone made a star twinkle brighter on Spratt Street that night. When Seigle Avenue Partners run their Freedom Schools in the summer for continued literacy learning, there are nine streets of Charlotte where stargazing is happening. And when our church on Park Road heard about the statistics that correlate the illiteracy rate with prison time, a member of our church said we're starting a tutoring program at the at risk school in our backyard. Well, I'll be. There is a night sky in Charlotte after all, and the stars do shine brightly – if we will learn to gaze. I'll tell you the truth – surely the stars shine brightly on Providence Road tonight – as we gather here in this Temple. Together. Finding enough in common that what separates us seems like it's not as big as what brings us together. Tonight we are learning to stargaze on Providence Road. And we need to learn how to stargaze on Tryon Street and Church Street. And we need to learn how to stargaze on Tuskaseegee Road and on South Boulevard. And we need to learn how to stargaze in Ballentyne and in Matthews. And we need to learn how to stargaze in the First Ward and on Graham Street. If everyone in this room would learn to search for the stars – the very Light of God that shines in our midst – our community would know a real sense of Thanksgiving. Blessing. Goodness. When you walk outside tonight – look up. Find one star and see it for what it is: *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them.* That very star will be a reminder of the One who created all things and called us into partnership – with God and with one another - for once we see the Light, we recognize that we have responsibilities.

“Psalm 8 had the distinction of being the first biblical text to reach the moon, when [in 1969] the Apollo 11 mission left a silicon disc containing messages from seventy-three nations, including the Vatican, which contributed the text of this Psalm [that I've used tonight]. Psalm 8 was clearly an appropriate choice for this cosmic journey, for it is both an eloquent proclamation

of the cosmic sovereignty of God and a remarkable affirmation of the exalted status and vocation of the human creature.” (New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol IV, J. Clinton McCann, Jr., page 711)

From the bottom of the Grand Canyon to the moon and right back here in Charlotte, let us learn to stargaze on whatever street we find ourselves – that we might, in turn, shed a little light. May it be so. Amen.