

Christmas Eve Meditation  
Saturday, December 24, 2016  
The Rev. Dr. Blythe Denham Kieffer  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Springfield, Illinois

The title of the meditation: Celestial Perspectives

*Text: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...on them light has shined.  
Isaiah 9:2*

Let us pray. Loving God, surrounded by candlelight in this lovely sanctuary we remember the brightly shining stars that shone the Holy night of our dear Savior's birth. As we ponder the wonder and mystery of a God who would join us in our humanity, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In her book "An Altar in the World" Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal Priest, author and theologian, reflects on her childhood and how her father taught her the practice of paying attention and the importance of reverence. She remembers with vivid imagery a warm night in August during her eighth year when she lay on a small wooden deck that opened off her parents' bedroom with her father and sister. It was the first time she saw a shower of falling stars!

That night she learned these falling stars are called the *Tears of St. Lawrence* and return every August. She also learned that her father could be trusted when he told her there was something she needed to see. The celestial perspective changed the way she viewed the world and herself. On the one hand she felt enormous and like she was a part of the sky and creation. On the other hand, she felt insignificant and small. What was a seven year-old girl under the weight of the falling stars? Watching them, she also perceived that the planet she was lying on looked like a star from somewhere else in the universe. It too might fall any moment, taking her along with it.

A precious memory, this celestial perspective planted the seed of reverence within Barbara, nurturing her spirituality and influencing the development of her adult faith. Paying attention to the stars was among many rituals cultivated by her father to instill reverence.

Psychologist Lisa Miller reminds us of the importance of nurturing spirituality and reverence within our children in her New York Times Bestseller, "The Spiritual Child." Spirituality is defined as a personal relationship to a higher power such as God, nature, spirit, or the universe that is loving and guiding. Spirituality goes beyond religious creeds and can be present within persons of different faiths as well as persons with no religious affiliation. Nurturing spirituality within our children prepares them for the important inner work required during their teen years in developing identity, emotional resilience, character and healthy relationships.

Now more than ever, in a culture where materialism, competition, empty fame and cynicism are dominant values, our children need us to support their quest for a spiritually grounded life at every age—and we need to discover or strengthen our own, according to Miller.

Celestial perspectives instill reverence within us because paying attention to the stars reminds us of our place in God's creation. There is a Holy Omniscience about stars whose size and distance are beyond our comprehension. Stars are not only seemingly infinite in their dimensions; they are seemingly infinite in their time scales. Celestial perspectives connect us with the generations which have come before us who viewed the same constellations we see today.

Senator John Glenn Jr., the first American to orbit the Earth, circling it three times in 1962 died this month. An ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church, Glenn set an example of someone whose faith began before he became an astronaut, and whose faith was reinforced after traveling in space. "To look out at this kind of creation and not believe in God is to me impossible."

The field of Stars is woven throughout biblical faith. In Genesis God created the heavens and the earth and set the stars in their place.

When Abraham asked God how he could be great without children God brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then the Lord said to him, "So shall your descendants be!" Westminster children made "The Field of Stars" ornament during this year's Advent Celebration as a reminder that they are one of those stars in the field. Our participation in the Children of Abraham Interfaith Fellowship this Fall has been a meaningful way to nurture spirituality and reverence within our children as they honor and respect the Muslim, Jewish and African American stars alongside them in that field.

The prophet Isaiah promised the Israelites a great light in the darkness of their exile and the light shined upon the shepherds the night of Christ's birth in Bethlehem.

The beloved carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was written by the Reverend Phillips Brooks for the Sunday school children at his Philadelphia parish, Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, following a pilgrimage to Bethlehem in 1865. Brooks traveled on horseback between Jerusalem and Bethlehem on Christmas Eve through the field where they say the shepherds saw the star before attending a five hour service in Constantine's ancient basilica built over the traditional site of the Nativity. This powerful celestial experience connected Brooks to that first Christmas night by way of the stars and inspired him to write about the silent stars and the everlasting light of Christ.

As we continue to bask in the light of this sanctuary and listen to lessons about the star that led the Magi to the Christ child, let us reflect on one more celestial perspective...something close to the heart of Westminster founded as an abolitionist congregation in 1835 with members active in the Underground Railroad. "Follow the Drinking Gourd" was a song, a spiritual created by enslaved African Americans as a guide to freedom.

*When the sun come back,  
When the firs' quail call,  
Then the time is come  
Foller the drinkin' gou'd.*

*When the sun come back* referred to springtime, the best season to begin the journey northward. *The drinking gourd* was the Big Dipper, a constellation that points the way to the North Star and the road to freedom and dignity.

Interesting the US Navy is bringing back navigation by the stars following a decade of depending on electronical navigation systems. Navigation by the stars dates back a millennia.

On this Holy night as we contemplate the mystery and wonder of Emmanuel, God With Us, may we look to the heavens often and celebrate our place in the field of stars which remind us of who we are and to whom we belong, may we treat the stars alongside us with respect and dignity, and may we nurture the spiritual lives of our children and ourselves. Amen.