

“Wonderstruck!”
A Sermon Commemorating the 2017 Total Solar Eclipse
Psalm 19:1-6
A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
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Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle once stated, “Wonder is the basis of worship.” And this week, we Mid-Missourians are all filled with wonder, the wonder of creation, the wonder of our mysterious and marvelous universe, the wonder of a solar eclipse—and the wonder of our good fortune of being in the 67-mile-wide path of totality.

This has happened before, of course, but not for a century has the totality crossed the whole of North America, from coast to coast. We are wonderstruck!

And yet, a total solar eclipse is also a disruption of normal activities—and that leads the human imagination to attempt to fathom the meaning of it all.

E. C. Krupp, the director of the famous Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles, explains that

If you do a worldwide survey of eclipse lore, the theme that constantly appears, with few exceptions, is it’s always a disruption of the established order. People depend on the sun’s movement . . . [It’s] regular, dependable, you can’t tamper with it. And then, all of a sudden, Shakespearean tragedy arrives, and time is out of joint. The sun and moon do something that they shouldn’t be doing.¹

This sense of wonder led ancient cultures to offer imaginative explanations of eclipses—both solar and lunar. Some said it is a time when demons or animals eat the sun or the moon. The Vikings saw a pair of sky wolves chasing the sun or the moon. When one of the wolves caught either of the shining orbs, an eclipse would result. In Vietnam, it was thought that a frog eats the moon or the sun. People of the Kwakiutl tribe on the western coast of Canada believed that the mouth of heaven itself consumes the sun or the moon during an eclipse. And interestingly, the earliest word for eclipse in Chinese, *shih*, means “to eat.”

In order to stop these demons or animals from eating the sun, these ancient cultures would make noise in order to scare them away. People banged on pots and pans or played drums to chase away whatever was swallowing the sun or the moon.

If you happen to be at the Griffith Observatory during a lunar eclipse, you can watch Director Krupp, clad in a wizard outfit, leading the visitors on a march in front of the observatory while banging pots and pans to chase away whatever’s eating the moon.

“We’re always successful,” Krupp said.

With all these delightful, imaginative interpretations of this natural phenomenon, it always comes back to one thing: wonder—awe—radical amazement. And so it was that feelings of wonder and awe inspired the Psalmist to write the poetic words of our scripture lesson for today: “The heavens declare the glory of God.”

Biblical scholars agree that Psalm 19 is one of the most beautifully crafted poems in the Psalter, right alongside such gems as The Twenty-Third Psalm. Psalm 19 focuses on the gracious power of divine instruction to totally transform our lives. Not surprisingly, the second half of the psalm—which we will examine next week—speaks of divine instruction found in the Torah, the Scriptures. But it is noteworthy that the psalm opens with the testimony of the heavens, which is available to all people. The cosmos itself bears witness to the glory of God’s creative and sustaining activity. By contemplating the heavens, we can discern both gracious activities: God the Creator and God the Sustainer. By using our imaginations when we ponder the heavens, the Psalmist tells us, we can discern powerful metaphors for understanding God and God’s activity.

I propose tomorrow, as we witness a total solar eclipse, that we unleash our sense of wonder, give our imagination free reign, and let it birth a metaphorical story about the beautiful hope that can set our individual lives and our world on paths toward peace and harmony.

For a vivid illustration of this, let us consider the delightful story of hope told by the Batammaliba people in Togo and Benin, Africa. In their eclipse narrative, the sun and the moon are fighting, each trying to dominate the other. Through their eclipse ritual, the people encourage the sun and moon to stop fighting. They see an eclipse as a time for coming together and resolving old feuds and angers. It’s a beautiful belief that is held even to this day.

Perhaps we could learn a thing or two from the imagination of the psalmist and this African tribe and view tomorrow’s eclipse as a time of prayer for peace and reconciliation.

Think about the process of the eclipse. “There is a slow build-up to the main event. It takes about an hour for the moon to gradually cover the sun. The bright disc shrinks to a sliver and twilight falls, giving the illusion that the sun is disappearing. This frightened the ancients, who feared that that source of all life was about to be extinguished.”²

If we view this aspect of tomorrow’s eclipse in metaphorical terms, then we too can feel this sense of dread. In recent days, the dark shadow of Neo-Nazism, Fascism, and white supremacy has begun to slither across the landscape, threatening to extinguish the moral light of our nation as it did in Germany and much of Europe less than a lifetime ago. Simultaneously, we have witnessed threats volleyed back and forth between the US and North Korea, and it makes us frightful that life on this planet could be literally extinguished.

Fears of this apocalyptic magnitude do, indeed, make us feel like the sun is disappearing, leaving us in total darkness.

And yet, the wonder of the eclipse can also offer us a metaphor of hope. After all, an eclipse is not about just about darkness; it is also about the resurgence of light. To capture the dramatic impact of the approaching darkness and the resurgence of light, let's go back in time to the total solar eclipse of 1878. Mabel Loomis Todd, the wife of an astronomer, witnessed that total eclipse and described it vividly in her book *Total Eclipses of the Sun*.

Then, with frightful velocity, the actual shadow of the Moon is ... seen approaching, a tangible darkness advancing almost like a wall, swift as imagination, silent as doom. The immensity of nature never comes quite so near as then, and strong must be the nerves not to quiver as this blue-black shadow rushes upon the spectator with incredible speed. A vast, palpable presence seems [to be] overwhelming the world. The blue sky changes to gray or dull purple, speedily becoming more dusky, and a death-like trance seizes upon everything earthly. Birds, with terrified cries, fly bewildered for a moment, and then silently seek their night quarters. Bats emerge stealthily. Sensitive flowers, the scarlet pimpernel, the African mimosa, close their delicate petals, and a sense of hushed expectancy deepens with the darkness. An assembled crowd is awed into absolute silence ... the very air seems to hold its breath for sympathy; ... a lull suddenly awakens into a strange wind, blowing with unnatural effect.

Then out upon the darkness, gruesome but sublime, flashes the glory of the incomparable corona, a silvery, soft, unearthly light, with radiant streamers, stretching ... millions of uncomprehended miles into space, while the rosy, flaming protuberances skirt the black rim of the Moon in ethereal splendor. It becomes curiously cold, dew ... forms, and the chill is perhaps mental as well as physical.

Suddenly, instantaneous as a lightning flash, an arrow of actual sunlight strikes the landscape, and Earth comes to life again, while corona and protuberances melt into the returning brilliance, and ... the receding lunar shadow is glimpsed as it flies away with the tremendous speed of its approach.³

What a wondrous image Mable Loomis Todd offers us! The gruesome but sublime darkness is overcome with flashes of ethereal splendor that melt into brilliance!

One person described the corona effect of an eclipse as "looking into the valley of death with the lights of heaven far away calling for me to enter." Another exclaimed, "Is that the eye of God?"⁴

Tomorrow, let us imaginatively see our yearnings and prayers for peace in our lives, our country, and in the larger world metaphorically mirrored in the wondrous heavenly testimony of the eclipse. Perceiving the eclipse as a spiritual metaphor, we see that goodness

and love will always return, even after a terrifying descent into darkness. “The heavens declare the glory of God.”

And in Christ, we always have the light, even when it seems to be hidden. For after all, in an eclipse, the sun really goes nowhere—it never leaves us—it is always there, just covered up for a short while. So, too, we can trust that God is with us in the moral darkness, even when we can’t feel this presence or see it. God is here. With us. Always. Even in the darkness.

For, “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

¹ <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/11/131101-solar-eclipse-myth-legend-space-science/>

² Frank Close, *Los Angeles Times*, 8/9/17.

³ Mabel Loomis Todd, *Total Eclipses of the Sun*, 1894

⁴ Close.