

Sheep Happens

I'd ask for a show of hands, but I already know the answer.

How remarkable – awesome even, was the eclipse? It was surreal, almost otherworldly – divine in its beauty.

Did it stir any emotions? Unease, perhaps. Anxiety. Even a level of fear reminiscent of Y2K. It was peculiar, to say the least. Novel experiences often provoke such reactions.

What did you feel?

Can I share what I felt?

Pure, childlike wonder. Four full minutes of genuine, childlike wonder. The kind that etches an unadulterated smile on one's face.

A brand of wonder that invokes the majesty of God.

It was truly remarkable, and how fortunate we were to be in its path.

Yeah. I experienced a childlike wonder. Along with this, the eclipse brought to mind scripture, of all things, the tale of Moses.

Here we have the epic of the Exodus – the narrative of the Israelites' flight from Egypt. It's a familiar story: baby in a basket, "let my people go," 40 days and 40 nights, pillar of fire – and ultimately, the Promised Land.

Now, what I'm about to share isn't for everyone. It might unsettle a few, but you're familiar with my stance on that.

Here's an intriguing detail you might have overlooked while reading all 40 chapters of Exodus – Moses actually saw God. Well, a part of God.

Allow me to elaborate.

Moses and God (YH*H) engage in a dialogue – right around chapter 33. I say dialogue – eh. It was more Moses expressing frustration with God. You see, Moses desired a sign that the Israelites were truly God's chosen people. Beyond that, he simply longed to behold God's glory – to see God. As you'll recall, that's a big no-no. Whenever Moses 'saw' God, it was in the veiled – think Moses on Mount Siani receiving the 10 Commandments - *not* like you and I interact.

Interestingly, God goes along with the request.

This is how God affirms Moses' request – God says "I will make my goodness (or glory) pass in front of you." It is a strange turn of phrase.

Now, if you're Moses and God's goodness passes in front of you – what are you looking at?! Well, there are a few ways to interpret this – for one, you could argue that God simply walked in front of Moses, yet that overlooks the colloquial meaning of the phrase.

Folks, you can interpret this verse as God playfully 'moon'ing Moses. Really! Moses saw God's backside – and backside doesn't mean head or back – but, well... butt. Just a lighthearted detail.

For those who don't appreciate that – there are certainly other ways to interpret this text from Exodus 33 – but I've always believed that if you can't poke a little fun at yourself or your faith, you're taking yourself, and frankly, God too seriously – God's humor is evident throughout scripture, and this is just one example.

If none of that resonated with you, you'll be glad to know that a serious message can be conveyed through humor.

So, let's transition from one kind of 'moon' to another.

Moses' interaction with God is comparable to looking through a glass dimly. Despite all his faithfulness, Moses only glimpsed God in part. And isn't that a recurring theme in Scripture – both Old and New Testaments – people yearned for God, they longed to see God – WE long to see God. Furthermore, they sought assurance of God's presence – and what better way to manifest that presence than through sight.

It strikes me that the eclipse holds far more theological significance than we might realize.

Here's the simple truth, even if it is a bit cheesy.

While observing the eclipse, what did we all wear, or what were we supposed to wear? Special glasses, right. With those glasses, we could see things not as clearly as with our own eyes, but we were provided with a different perspective to witness the eclipse in all of its splendor.

Moses, seeing God's backside, is akin to staring at the eclipse without proper eyewear. You can squint, you can try to catch a glimpse from the corner of your eye, but it remains incomplete, and indeed, harmful if not approached correctly.

In essence, the eclipse, much like Moses, had me pondering, what are our 'glasses' as Christians, and how do they shape our interactions with the world based on what we have seen and experienced?

The truth is, up until Jesus – up until the birth of Christ – God was only partially experienced. Certainly, we witnessed God's majesty in the parting of the Red Sea and the pillar of fire. We acknowledge that it was God who brought the universe into being, however you conceive of that happening, and we recognize that God acted in the Old Testament through figures like the judges and kings such as David, but once again, our understanding and experience of God were incomplete.

Jesus is the one who enables us to perceive God more fully. It is both through scripture, the Word, and Jesus' ministry on earth that he not only allows but indeed invites us to perceive the world differently, to see it as God sees it.

Here's the thing: just as the totality of the eclipse lasted only *But!* It was an exceptionally special period during which God intervened in the world in a manner whose reverberations are felt even today and throughout eternity.

And this ripple effect, this consequence, is that because we have seen and experienced God through Jesus and through scripture, we are endowed with a new life, a new wisdom with which to perceive the world – a heart for loving and a body for serving.

The question for us is: how do we perceive God today? What special lenses do we use to perceive the world as it truly is? Is the world a place where everything is perfect? No! Was it perfect in Moses' time? Absolutely not. But even though this world is as flawed as it is, we are called to the most challenging task of all – not succumbing to the negativity and evil in the world, and to everything that distracts us from God's goodness and love.

As you can tell from both our bulletin and road sign, it is Good Shepherd Sunday.

Every Sunday, we are reminded of God's love and unending desire to be in relation with each of us. Good Shepherd Sunday is somewhat unique because the imagery is so well-known.

We all know the parable of the lost sheep. It goes that there is a shepherd who's watching 100 sheep. Everything is going well, and then, as the title of my sermon suggests - sheep happens; things get messy!

And they did.

One of the sheep goes astray and gets lost.

Conventional wisdom would say that the shepherd would stay with the majority, but God reveals a different truth. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, cares just as much for the one as He does the 99.

How's that for a lens? Do you think that's how God sees us? Does it seem like that's how the world works? Is that the way God *wants* the world to work?

Scripture would like a word.

The most powerful message for me on this Good Shepherd Sunday is that the parable of the lost sheep isn't about someone far off and unrelated to us; it is about us - you, I, we. We are the lost sheep, the one that has gone astray, the one for whom God has sought. And to know that the Good Shepherd, Jesus, lays down his life for his sheep... Well, you don't need an Easter sermon this morning to understand. With news like this, every Sunday is Easter.

Every Sunday, we enter the sanctuary and experience God in different ways. But my prayer for you all is that the words of my mouth and the meditations of your hearts give you a lens through which to see the world. It doesn't have to be my exact lens - we're all different, that's okay. But the one constant, truly the only thing that matters, is that we are called to see others as Jesus and God see us, and we have been given lenses through which to see the world - we've been given scripture. Jesus came in the flesh and rose from the dead.

This wasn't some stunt; it wasn't some campaign promise quickly forgotten. It was the only thing that mattered - God, so loving the world, that God sent his only son to die for us.

Folks, that's the good news today; that's the good news every day; and that is the message we joyfully proclaim until the Lord comes.

Amen.