

I will give thanks to you, O LORD, with my whole heart; \*  
before the gods I will sing your praise.<sup>1</sup>

In 2017, there was an event that took our breaths away and made us stop, look up, and pay attention: the eclipse. And we found ourselves smack dab in the Path of Totality. Three years ago this weekend, the world was buzzing with the word 'corona.' Not the novel virus, of course, but that other one: the dazzling crown of the sun. It filled our news feeds, made us stop whatever we were doing and pay attention. For just a few moments, we set aside our partisan politics, our immediate anxieties and differences of opinion. We gathered in fields and parking lots, sprawled out on picnic blankets or lawn chairs, put on solar goofy-looking sunglasses, and looked up. For just a few minutes, all of us (saint and sinner alike) were equally insignificant little organisms on the Earth, looking up in awe at the beauty of what God created.

That seems like forever ago, doesn't it?

Three years ago, people came from all over to be with us in the Path of Totality, the geographical swath of land where our perspective was perfectly aligned to witness the majesty of that eclipse. We were fortunate to be able to witness the beauty of the sun's corona in spite of the dark orb of the moon casting a long shadow across our landscape. It was beautiful, wasn't it?

Nearly 3 thousand years ago, a long shadow had been cast across the spiritual landscape of Isaiah's people. Jerusalem had been conquered by Babylonia and the Hebrew people were exiled. Finally, a return to some semblance of normal seemed like a possibility, and they were seeking guidance for how that would happen. Even as they longed for what was familiar, their leaders wisely looked for ways to move forward that wouldn't be a *complete* return to the way things used to be, as they had grown and changed during their time away.

So the OT writer encourages his readers to look back and remind themselves who they are before forging their way ahead. And he does so by reminding them (in vivid imagery) of the fruitfulness of God's creation. "The Lord will make [Zion's]

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 138:1

wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord.” God’s good news of comfort to the Hebrew people is that the barren, waste places will be infused with verdant new life (just as they always had been).

And so it will be with us. Our inner, barren places, our hearts hurting with a sense of exile, may also rest in the promise that God will transform our periods of disruption and chaos; God is present and guiding us past our longings for restoration (to what has been known and is familiar) to a place that is *more* ... that is *abundant* ... that is greater than we could anticipate. And we can trust that this is so, because *that* is our story: again and again throughout the history of God’s people, times of heartache and transition culminate in a homecoming that is beyond what could be hoped for.

Let us turn to the Gospel: the clock is ticking and the journey to Jerusalem is about to begin in earnest. Jesus has just fed thousands of people with a few loaves and fish. The Pharisees and Saducees then ask Jesus to show them a sign from heaven. (Apparently feeding a gazillion people with next to nothing doesn’t count.) Jesus basically says, “you’re only going to see what you’re looking for, and if you haven’t gotten it by now, you never will;” and then he walks away. After a while, they arrive in Caesarea Philippi, and Jesus asks the disciples a question: who do people say that I am.

Here we witness an eclipse of another sort that is happening. Allow me to provide a bit more context: the city where this takes place was given by Emperor Caesar Augustus to King Herod. It and the surrounding area were built up, and a luxurious temple was built and dedicated to the Greek god Pan (a fertility god of the wild, of shepherds and sheep). When Herod died, King Philip took over, and renamed the city Caesarea Philippi. This is where our Gospel lesson takes place – a city known for its wealth and corruption and power and politics as usual.

In the shadow of power politics, the question “who do *people* say that I am” is a relatively safe question, one of curiosity. And it allows room for the disciples to respond with hearsay, without having to make a firm stand, declare their own beliefs, or take any significant risks. A few rumors are tossed about, perhaps with the disciples waiting to see what Jesus’ reaction might be to each of the names that are offered.

But Jesus then pointedly calls the question, “But who do *you* say that I am?” And Peter, with revolutionary zeal, boldly proclaims, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!”

What had been hidden, or perhaps discussed in small circles in ways that seemed more rumor-like than Truth-telling, is now openly declared and proclaimed with whole-hearted devotion. In that moment, the Word made flesh, the incarnated Totality of God, stretches across the spiritual landscape of those who have known Jesus, heard his teachings, and witnessed his healing and grace.

Eclipses come in many forms. Be it a COVID furlough or the birth of a child, the death of a loved one or a kind note received in the mail, our attention can be arrested in ways that help us see God more clearly.

These eclipses help us see how tiny we are in relation to the vast expanse of God's creation. And they allow us the opportunity to stop and notice that we are not the center of the universe. Eclipses provide rare moments of clarity when we can see things we usually can't. All the commotion ... the bickering ... the petty worries (over which we have no control anyway) ... all of that stops and our attention is focused beyond ourselves. And we get to bear witness to God's totality in our lives, and Jesus as our Lord.

Isaiah has a word of hope for us: as we wait out this virus, as we long for what is familiar, let us look forward with imagination like the exiled Hebrew people did – trusting God's consistency to bring us through the storm to safety, carry us past the tensions of strife and power plays to a kingdom of justice and mercy, and trusting that God will comfort and heal all of our waste places. May our witness of this COVID eclipse be not one of darkness or fear, but one of transformative growth - within our community and within our own hearts.

CS Lewis is credited with saying, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else."<sup>2</sup>

May we remain rooted in God's narrative: a narrative of love and compassion and understanding. May we draw strength from the saints who have gone before us and who have faithfully run the race they had before them with endurance. May we stop and pay attention and behold the brilliance of the Son, active in our lives and in our imaginations, calling our attention to that which is bigger than we are, so that we may reflect the image of God's light and love in the world around us. May our anxieties, tensions, and differences of opinion be eclipsed by our bold proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

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<sup>2</sup> From *Is Theology Poetry* (available in *The Weight of Glory*.)