

Sermons at St Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Carroll Anne Sheppard; Licensed Preacher, Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

One week from today, the path of a full solar eclipse will sweep in a long arc across the middle of North America, from Portland, Oregon to southern South Carolina. Our moon will move directly in front of the sun, during daylight hours, and as the Earth turns, the eclipse will be visible across the arc of its turning. Because – almost unique among planets – our sun and moon appear to be the same size to us, given their relative distances and actual sizes, the moon's shape will cover the sun's light. For those in the eclipse's path, the sun will be blackened. (Warning – if you want to watch any part of the eclipse, you **MUST** have real eclipse glasses. Do not buy anything other than scientifically approved glasses from a reputable source!)

Many ancient peoples, who did not understand the cause of this space phenomenon, nevertheless had heard tales from their grandparents and ancestors about what had occurred during a full solar eclipse. In Europe, and among the lighter-eyed people of the northern hemisphere, a strange thing was reported. The dark center of the moon's shadow and the flaring corona of the sun's burning edges, looked like a gigantic eye. It was called the "eye of the Sun" or the Eye of God by many. The Egyptians called it the Eye of Ra, and later it was added to the name of the Sun God, Amen-Ra.

Now here's an interesting thing. It turns out that in some locations, the cycles of the sun and moon regularly repeat every 54 years or so. By about 200 BC skilled Babylonian astronomers had figured this out. Probably they had tracked the rough path before that date. These 54 year cycles gave them lots of time to warn people that the Eye of God would be watching them and judging them, if they did not meet whatever the rulers' or priests' demands were.

My own guess is that they were not alone in invoking external "proof" that their declared right way was the one that God's Eye demanded. But our spiritual progenitors, the Jews, did not depend upon astronomers and astrologers to give them their guidance.

They relied upon their God as their guide and protector, and God's prophets as his messengers. But most people in the ancient world thought of the gods, especially the chief god, as someone to be feared and endlessly placated. The predicted or unpredicted arrival of the Eye of God during a full solar eclipse was further proof of God's power and fearsomeness – people cowered in terror.

Jesus, however, preached about a very different God, his Father. This Creator so loved the world that Jesus came among us, to free us from that frightening, vengeful God of antiquity. In Jesus' theology, God's Eye should be understood as watchful and loving, a parent's eye upon beloved children.

So it does not surprise me that we find Jesus, in our gospel today, continuing his message of love and instructions not to fear. This gospel story from Matthew is certainly odd in a number of ways. Jesus sends his disciples out into a storm that is brewing on the Sea of Galilee and tells them he will meet them on the opposite shore. When they are exhausted and desperate in wind and wild waves toward daybreak, he comes to them, across the water, scaring them out of their minds.

For reasons known only to Peter—he decides to test Jesus, and shouts: “Hey, if that's you, tell me to come to you.” Is Peter angling for the year's Darwin award? (In case you are not familiar with them, they are “awarded” each year to the person who does something dumb enough to get themselves killed, and thereby take their genes out of the breeding pool.)

Anyway, Jesus does call Peter out onto the water, as we know. And as long as he keeps focusing on Jesus, Peter stays on the surface. But he remembers where he is and notices the wind and starts to sink. Jesus does not laugh at him, or shake his head, or do any of the things that we might do. Jesus just reaches down and pulls him up into the boat. The disciples, who were scared before are now flabbergasted.

Dr. David Lose, the former head of Lutheran Theological Seminary, points out that the extraordinary reassurances offered by Jesus should be the high points of this story. First, he tells the disciples not to fear, and then he reaches down to save Peter from drowning and pulls him to safety. Jesus is constantly telling us not to fear. We do not need to fear God, and we do not need to fear life.

A few days ago, a group of white supremacists rallied violently in Charlottesville, Virginia, and people were hurt in the scuffles that followed. North Korea is on a collision-course game of chicken with the world. Our non-stop news makes us aware of one thing after another that we cannot do anything about in the short-term. In a world that is more and more full of fear, we need Jesus' reassurance, don't we? There are so many things to be afraid of. But how many times does Jesus say: "Do not be afraid, it is I." And he reassures us: "I am with you always." His very name, Emmanuel, means "God with us."

So I am sure that you will hear and read these days of people who will say that this eclipse is proof of God's desire for disaster to strike, for us to shrivel with fear of God's wrath. You will be asked to join those who tremble and cannot sleep. You may be tempted to join the 24/7 anxiety club and obsessively watch and listen to news and tweet your anxiety, frustration and anger to others. As Christians, our job is different. We are not people responsible for being afraid. We are people responsible for loving and caring, for reaching out our hand, as Jesus did, to those who are sinking under the weight of their fears and burdens. We are Jesus' sisters and brothers, and we know that even if the moon's shadow should darken the sun for a few long minutes, God's love will triumph, the eclipse will pass, and we will say to those around us: Do not be afraid. He is with us.

So what is our job in the days ahead? Father Frank Crumbaugh, Rector of Holy Innocents' Church in Beach Haven, pointed out something easy to miss in this gospel story. After the storms and waves are quiet, after Peter has been saved, and Jesus is in the boat, like the disciples, our job is to row steadily, faithfully, to shore. We are the church that carries the good news to the far end of the sea.

We do this in ordinary ways, every day, as we comfort the sick and helpless, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and clothe those who have no clothes. We row our little boats across the water, knowing that we carry precious cargo – Jesus and the Good News of love that will not bend to space, time or human action.

Do not be afraid! He is with us!

Amen.