

Solar Eclipse

This past week there was a lot of excitement about the solar eclipse. It was the first one in nearly a hundred years whose path of totality crossed the entire United States. In the weeks before there were frequent conversations about dark-tinted glasses – whether people had them, where they could be found, who was sold out, what kind of welder’s glass would work, and so on. I never got around to purchasing a pair. I was reluctant to buy something I’d use for two hours and then throw in a drawer for the next twenty years.

When the day dawned and the eclipse finally approached, however, its strange light drew me outside. I wandered up to the St. Ambrose campus, figuring I might be able to borrow eclipse glasses there. Sure enough, groups of students were staring up at the sky. Someone was kind enough to loan me a pair and I watched the crescent sun mostly covered by the moon. I had seen that during a previous eclipse, but still there was something thrilling about seeing it again.

That day the news was full of eclipse stories. What struck me the most was hearing about people normally on opposite sides of the political spectrum who came together as one. They found unity over this spectacular celestial event. It took an act of nature to bring people together in common purpose.

It’s disheartening to realize that this unity is so unusual that it made the news. We are losing a common narrative in this country, one that binds us together in something greater than ourselves. News sources are so fragmented and niche-driven that many of us hear only a perspective with which we agree. Facebook filters provide feeds we like, and if someone goes off on a rant they’re quickly unfriended. Charges of fake news undermine integrity, and truth has become relative. This loss of a common narrative, a common story, threatens us more than anything else.

The stories we tell about ourselves are what bind us together. This morning we heard the beginning of the story that bound the people of Israel together, making them a nation instead of wandering tribes. In classic storytelling fashion it starts widely before narrowing down to the particular. The Joseph cycle has ended; a new Egyptian king has arisen who did not appreciate Joseph’s contributions. Instead of welcoming the people of Israel, the king oppresses them. He was afraid the people would leave and there would be no one to do the dirty work. Ironically, today we hear talk of sealing our borders so that people can’t come *in* – even though they are still the people who do the work that no one else wants.

The big picture of Egyptian oppression slowly narrows to eliminating male children, and then focuses on one baby that survives. At the end of this section, that baby is dramatically identified: he is Moses. His Hebrew name, Mosheh, is similar to the word for draw out, masheh. Moses has been drawn out of the water. Eventually he will lead the Israelites through the water of the Red Sea into freedom.

Our Gospel reading this morning has a different kind of naming. Jesus has finished another round of healing, and fed four thousand men (besides women and children). He had another argument with the Pharisees and Sadducees. Now he wants to see if his disciples have been paying attention. First he asks how others have identified him, and gets a variety of responses.

“But who do *you* say that I am?” he asks. Peter, ever one to speak first, blurts out, “You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Peter is immediately rewarded for that identification. Matthew’s telling of what comes next goes well beyond Mark and Luke. It almost seems as if Peter himself will be the foundation of the church to come. That’s how the Roman Catholic Church understands it. I’m more inclined to believe that Jesus was talking about Peter’s confession of faith as being the rock on which the church will be built. In any case, identifying Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God is foundational for the story of the church.

When I preached on this passage three years ago, our parish had just completed the Spiritual Life Survey. Our results were pretty typical for an Episcopal church – not necessarily a good thing – and provided the basis for the subsequent New Life program. In my sermon that Sunday I challenged everyone to connect our cathedral story with the larger story of Jesus and the people of Israel. That’s a good idea for any time, really; for faith to be alive, our personal stories have to be connected to the Jesus story in some way.

One way that occurs, of course, is through baptism. This morning, Harold Jaden Walter’s story of life in Christ will be beginning as he is baptized. Even though he’s just a year old, he is already aware of the world and surrounded by a loving family. Once he is baptized here, his story will intersect with the story of the cathedral. The cathedral’s story intersects with ours, and with the stories of those who have gone before us, right back to Jesus himself.

Our stories, and the cathedral’s story, can only remain connected to the Jesus story if we are attentive and make a continuing effort to do so. That implies both work and change. St. Paul tells us, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Staying the same is not renewal. The Jesus story has a trajectory and an endpoint, eternal life in the presence of God. One of the deadliest temptations of the spiritual life is complacency – the temptation to be comfortable and remain so. Unless we continue to move along the path toward God, our story and the Jesus story will diverge.

I am grateful that at Trinity Cathedral it does not take a solar eclipse to bring us all together. We know that we are not of one mind on many issues, including those that are consuming our country. Yet we agree to disagree. We have found our common narrative in Jesus Christ. I pray that Harold’s baptism this morning will remind us of our own story and strengthen the ties which bind us. Together, we can be a witness to the world of how to live together in unity.

[Pentecost 12: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-20.]

