

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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April 30, 2017

Exodus 10.21-29; 1 Peter 2.9-10; Matthew 1.20-21

The God of Story

Prayer: Holy God, in this day and age when it is often difficult to find you, we praise you for loving us and moving close to us with the power of your Word. Clear our minds and hearts of the distractions crowded within us, so that your Word may fall upon fertile soil and reveal your power and glory to us. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Laurie and I are going to Kentucky in August. We're going to the quilt museum in Paducah, then, a few days later, we're going to the Gethsemane monastery. However, the two-and-a-half-minute event that lies between those two stops is actually what motivates us to go to Kentucky.

On Monday, August 21 there will be a total eclipse of the sun, and Kentucky is the closest place for us to go to see it. I've been waiting for this day for decades, ever since I read Annie Dillard's description of the eclipse she witnessed 1979. The passage I've always remembered says:

The second before the sun went out we saw a wall of dark shadow come speeding at us. We no sooner saw it than it was upon us, like thunder. It roared up the valley. It slammed our hill and knocked us out. It was the monstrous swift shadow cone of the moon. I've since read that this wave of shadow moves 1,800 miles an hour. Language can give no sense of this sort of speed – 1,800 miles an hour. It was 195 miles wide. No end was in sight – you saw only the edge. It rolled at you across the land at 1,800 miles an hour, hauling darkness like plague behind it....We saw the wall of shadow coming, and screamed before it hit (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*, p. 25)

That's what I want to experience in Kentucky for 2 minutes 20 seconds, at 1:22 in the afternoon on Monday, August 21, 2017. (If you want to go see it you have better get hotel reservations soon because they're going fast.)

The sun going dark has always been a thought that evokes terror in the hearts of people. Every culture, living in any age, understands that if the sun goes dark, life will end.

These days, our friends the scientists, are able to tell us with pinpoint accuracy exactly when and where there will be a total eclipse of the sun. We know that there will be two more total eclipses in the United States in the 21st century – April 8, 2024 and Akron will be in the path, and August 12, 2045. I even looked this week at a list of eclipses that reaches out into the 30th century. They can accurately tell us, to the minute, when an eclipse will happen 9,000 years from now.

So, for us, an eclipse is not shrouded in mystery and fear. When it rushes past us, we know that in a couple of minutes it'll be over. But can you imagine the fear it must have created in people who had no idea that the eclipse is coming, and no understanding of what an eclipse is? Eclipses must have scared people half to death.

Our plague this morning is the ninth one. It's the plague of darkness.

On the one hand, to us, living in our lighted age, it almost seems quaint compared to some of the other plagues. But, on the other hand, it must have been terrifying to the Egyptians.

We don't know the natural explanation for this plague, it wasn't an eclipse, but there had to be one. It was most likely a horrific sandstorm that blew across the area where the Egyptians lived, but had

its edge near the Hebrew's encampment, because the text tells us that the Israelites remained in the light.

But the cause of the darkness doesn't really matter. It's the power of it that we want to contemplate. The darkness that came rushing upon the Egyptians was so deep that our text tells us that it was a "darkness that can be felt." (10.21)

Such an event is frightening to the Egyptians because their chief god is Ra, the sun itself. Now, here in these plagues, where the power of the Lord God is on display, Ra is revealed as significantly weaker than God Almighty, even in the land that Ra is supposed to rule. In Egypt, the Lord is able to block the sun – truly the Israelite's God is powerful.

This is a sign given to Pharaoh. It's a sign given to the Egyptian leaders and people. And it's also a sign given to the Hebrew people who are about to follow this God out of Egypt and into a wilderness.

"Is this God really powerful enough to lead us out of Egypt?" is a natural question.

"Well, remember what this God did in Egypt when he defeated Ra and darkness laid upon the land for three days." That's the answer.

Have you ever noticed how the Exodus plague story is an anti-creation story? The beginning of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus are contrasts to one another.

In Genesis, the power of the Lord God's word constructs everything. In Exodus, the power of the Lord God's word deconstructs everything. This isn't an accident. We're supposed to lay these two narratives side by side and witness the creative and destructive power of the Lord.

Both of these stories are told and retold throughout the history of the Jewish people, side by side to one another, to drive home the point of who this God is that they are worshipping and following.

And these two narratives are finally recorded when the Hebrews are slaves again, this time in Babylon, and they're worried about extinction. These stories are codified for future generations to know who these Jewish people are and who the God is that they worship – just in case they disappear from the face of the earth. Because, while in Babylon they weren't certain that they would survive as a people. They weren't certain that they'd ever return to their own land. Because they were afraid.

But low and behold, they did. They survived and they returned home.

And since that time, their stories have become our stories, and their God has become our God. So that we too, today, worship the God of power and might who is able to construct all that there is, and deconstruct it. We worship the same God who brought the plagues onto Egypt and who led the people out of slavery, out of the house of bondage, with a mighty outstretched arm. That is the God whom we worship today.

You know, sometimes it's difficult to take God seriously. I mean, when we look at our own little life, or, if we look at the small slice of history in which we're living, it's nearly impossible to discern the presence of God. We can understand it when the Psalmist complains that God seems not to notice the wicked and punish them, or, the righteous and reward them. For many of us, much of the time, God feels absent. It feels as if life just ticks on, unobserved by any power greater than ourselves.

I can understand why so many people in our culture deny the existence of God. They look at their own lives and ask, "Where is this God you talk about?" And they look at the atrocities found throughout the world, and they shrug and shake their head, as they mutter, "There cannot be a God with all of this evil lurking about." I can understand that.

After all, we live in an extraordinarily individualistic age. Life is defined by how it impacts me, and my own emotions – and all of the rest is distraction. So, it makes perfect sense to me, that people today are losing God in record numbers. Sometimes, I feel the same way.

But the reason we have Scripture, isn't so we can find all of the answers to life's problems. It's not a reference book filled with solutions in which we simply need to look up the answers. No. Scripture is a narrative. It's a collection of stories, not rules.

We have Scripture so that we may look past ourselves to look at a much larger slice of human history. Especially the slice of history of God's work with his covenantal people. Which means that Scripture allows us to look at the slice of history where God explicitly is in relationship with a couple groups of people – the Jews, then later also the Christians.

Scripture tells us stories that are reflections on life, that reveal how God has been active among God's own people. Scripture reveals the God who walks and talks with his people throughout history. And we Christians would say that this is especially true with Jesus Christ. So, this tiny Scriptural sliver of history says to us: "This is the God whom you are following."

Scripture takes us out of our own small existence and places us into the context of God's covenantal work throughout history and throughout the world. It removes us from our myopic position of self and relocates us into a context of covenant with God and God's people.

My goodness this why we baptize babies. It's a symbol for us, so that we may actually see that Elliot Dawson, and Ryan Dent, and later Madison Schnyders, are part of the historical tradition, the biblical line, that is in direct contact with the Lord God of heaven and earth.

And most of the people who deny the existence and power of God do not grasp the significance of this slice of history and our place within it. They're stuck in their own little world. They're staring at the dirt at their feet, and unable to look up to see the stars. They're gazing at their own navels, and never look up to discover the God who surrounds them.

Consequently, they remove themselves from the very place where they have the best chance to encounter the God whom they cannot find. We should be a place filled with people who say, "I don't believe in God, therefore, I'm going to sit for thirty years in a place where I will encounter his story and his people. Maybe then I'll believe." I wish that would happen.

We're not playing games here. We're not coming to discover the ten things you can do to keep your marriage healthy; or, the eight truths that will keep your children on the right path. We're not coming to be entertained by a more than mediocre band that plays music far too loud.

We come here, Sunday after Sunday, to enter into the narrative itself. We come to hear the Lord's story and to have our own lives placed into the Lord's story. We come to discover again how our life is part of God's life. This is not a game. Nor is it entertainment. This is existential meanderings at its finest.

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