

FACE TO FACE WITH GOD'S GLORY

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Exodus 33:17-23

Tomorrow, here in Lebanon, we will experience a total eclipse of the sun. At 11:59 a.m., the moon will begin moving in front of the sun. An hour and a half later, at 1:28 p.m., the sun will be completely blocked. During the eclipse the skies will go dark, the moon will bleed, the earth will tremble, the spirits of the dead will come to life, and the weaker among us will go mad. (Or not.)

For those of you with an interest in astronomy, this is a once-in-a-lifetime event. Solar eclipses aren't necessarily rare, they just usually happen in other places, often out over the oceans. The last time a full solar eclipse fell on US soil was 1991 when an eclipse touched Hawaii. The last eclipse to touch the lower-48 was in 1979 when an eclipse darkened Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana.

Tomorrow's eclipse will traverse the continental US starting in Oregon and moving across to South Carolina. The path of totality will touch 14 states. The entire event will last a little over 5 hours. Everyone in the lower-48 will be able to view at least a partial eclipse (weather permitting).

The last eclipse to sweep across the entire country was 99 years ago—1918—when the path touched Alaska and then moved from Washington state all the way across to Florida.

Tomorrow's eclipse will be unusual in that the US will be the only country under the total eclipse. The eclipse will start in the Pacific Ocean and end in the Atlantic. This is the first time in the history of our republic that we have had singular claim to an eclipse. You would have to go back to 1257 to find an eclipse exclusive to the lands that are currently part of the US.

In Tennessee, the shadow cast by the moon will sweep across the ground at approximately 1500 mph. The shadow's path will be about 70 miles wide. Lebanon will be in that shadow. Nashville is the largest US city in the path of this eclipse.

If you wish to observe the longest duration of totality—the longest that the sun will be blocked—then you will want to be near Carbondale, Illinois, where the total eclipse will last 2 minutes and 41.6 seconds.

In my *From The Pastor* email this week, I included a couple of interesting links to eclipse-related items on the internet. One is a video of a flyover of the US which shows the shadow moving across the country. Another link is to an interactive map which offers precise eclipse information for any location. For example, here at the

church (304 West Main), the total eclipse will begin at 1:28:02 and last for 2 minutes 34.6 seconds. The width of the path (the shadow) at Lebanon will be 71.3 miles. The center of the path is just north of us near Gallatin. They will experience totality for 4 seconds longer than we will. Downtown Nashville is further from the center and they will experience a totality that is 40 seconds less than Lebanon.

The next US eclipse will be in seven years in 2024. That eclipse will sweep north from Texas to Maine barely grazing the northwest corner of Tennessee.

One of the things that makes an eclipse so tantalizing is that with the moon running interference we can look directly at the sun's corona—the ring of fire that surrounds the sun. Without the moon, our retinas would fry like bacon in a griddle and we would be blinded. The sun is simply too powerful for us to look at directly. Over in Bartlett, Tennessee, the American Paper Optics company has manufactured 45 million dark glasses for people to use during the eclipse. Still, even with these glasses, one should not look at the sun for more than 3 minutes.

In our reading today from the book of Exodus, we learn that God is like the sun in that God is also something that we should not look at directly. As God tells Moses, *No one shall see me and live.*

As you will recall, the Hebrew people had been slaves in Egypt for 300 years. God, with assistance from Moses, enabled their escape to freedom. The people traveled through the wilderness towards the land that God promised them. Along the way, they camped at the base of Mount Sinai. Moses ascended the mountain to speak to God and God gave him the Law. Moses was up on the mountain so long that the people got anxious. They felt that Moses and God had abandoned them. They demanded that Aaron fashion for them a new god as a replacement. So, Aaron created the calf made of gold. In response, the people had a party. A wild party. To say that this was just a party is to say that the Indy 500 is just a trip to Walmart; it is to say that a nuclear bomb is just a firecracker; it is to say that the space shuttle is just a commuter jet. It was that wild of a party. It was a nuclear powered Mardi Gras.

As the party is in full swing, Moses descends Mount Sinai with the two tablets from God. When he sees the calf and witnesses the debauchery of the people, he becomes so angry that he smashes the tablets on the ground.

Moses apologizes to God and God tells Moses that while the people would eventually enter the promised land, that God would not be traveling with them any longer. God would send an angel to accompany the people from this point on. The angel would serve as God's emissary.

Moses did not like this and he argues with God. He reminds God of God's promise and covenant. And God relents. Then, in a display of historic chutzpa,

Moses continues pushing God for more. Moses has already gotten God to change plans, and now Moses asks for something additional. Moses asks God, *Show me your glory, I pray*. In Hebrew, this word *glory* means “fullness, completeness.” Moses is not just asking to see God, Moses is asking to see God fully—not a partial God, not a shadow of God, not a hidden God, not an eclipsed God, but the unadulterated divinity. After all the negotiating and arguing and relenting, God says to this request, no. *No one can see God's glory and live*. But God does make a deal with Moses. God says to Moses that God will go ahead of Moses and proclaim the name *the Lord* to all the world. God will be gracious and merciful. In other words, God says, *I will do the very thing that you have asked* and promises not to be hidden, but to be conspicuous to the people and to the world. The world will know God's name. God will be gracious and merciful. God promises to be God in a manner that will be obvious to all. God will go ahead of Moses and the people, and demonstrate to the world God's goodness and grace and mercy. But no one, not even Moses, will look upon God's face and live. If Moses wants to see God then God tells Moses, this is what we will do. You, Moses, need to stand on a rock and my glory will pass by that place. God tells Moses, I will set you down in a cleft of the rock and I will cover you with my hand as I pass by. As I am leaving, I will remove my hand and you shall see my back. Or, if you want to be more literal, God's backside. And they do this.

Despite Moses pleading and cajoling he will not be allowed to see God's face or God's glory. We humans are simply not built for that. We cannot stare at the sun, we cannot breathe underwater, we cannot flap our arms and fly like a bird, we cannot look at God's face. What we can see is God's shadow—the evidence of where God has been—and that is enough. When we look around our world and we see goodness and graciousness and mercy and beauty, we know that is God. That is God's reflection. And when we look around and see darkness, we know that God is not in that place. Moses asked to see God's face and God tells Moses that instead he will see God's goodness and grace and mercy of the Lord. Moses only gets to see God's back because God is always in front of us. We can never get in front of God. God leads, God directs, God guides us through this life. Only our pride makes us think that we can get ahead of God. We can't.

Tomorrow, as you are carefully observing the eclipse. As the moon begins to obscure the sun, I hope that you will take a moment and offer a prayer—a prayer to God, a prayer that the sun will return, that we all won't go mad. We won't because we know that this eclipse is part of the regular order of things—something rare, something wonderful and beautiful. We know that given the mechanics of the solar system that God has set in motion that the light will return. The darkness will only last a minute or two, that God is there, and we will see God's reflection.

The story that follows this one is that Moses went back up the mountain and God gave him a copy of the Law. Moses came back down the mountain and gave the tablets to the people. But what Moses didn't realize is that because he had been

with God, his face shined. He had a radiance about him. Moses became a living embodiment of the reflection of God's glory. I pray that we can be too, that we embrace God's goodness, that we embrace God's presence, and in so doing we become a reflection of God's presence.

The light will turn off for a few moments tomorrow and then it will return and it will be the glory of God. Amen.