

"SOLAR ECLIPSE"

Matthew 15:10-20

August 20, 2017

¹⁰⁻¹¹ He then called the crowd together and said, "Listen, and take this to heart. It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life, but what you vomit up."

¹² Later his disciples came and told him, "Did you know how upset the Pharisees were when they heard what you said?"

¹³⁻¹⁴ Jesus shrugged it off. "Every tree that wasn't planted by my Father in heaven will be pulled up by its roots. Forget them. They are blind men leading blind men. When a blind man leads a blind man, they both end up in the ditch."

¹⁵ Peter said, "I don't get it. Put it in plain language."

¹⁶⁻²⁰ Jesus replied, "You, too? Are you being willfully stupid? Don't you know that anything that is swallowed works its way through the intestines and is finally defecated? But what comes out of the mouth gets its start in the heart. It's from the heart that we vomit up evil arguments, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, lies, and cussing. That's what pollutes. Eating or not eating certain foods, washing or not washing your hands—that's neither here nor there."

Tomorrow, we have the big sky event. It happens all across America and here in our area, it should be at its black-out best at

around 11:47 am. Thanks to Sandy Papsdorf, Chris and I have our safety glasses ready to go.

According to NASA, this particular solar eclipse will cut right through the heart of the United States, and in our area, we will experience the nearly total eclipse of the sun for about $2 \frac{1}{2}$ minutes. The shadow the eclipse casts will be 67 miles wide, and the shadow will travel at upwards of 1700 mph, or twice as fast as a supersonic jet.

I learned from 9News and Space Educator Eddie Goldstein that if we wanted to experience a full blackout effect, we would have to go into the "Path of Totality," our closest spot being Casper, Wyoming. Is anyone here going to Wyoming or Nebraska to see the eclipse? Hotels have been sold out in the US across the Path of Totality for over two months. It's a big deal.

I was surprised to learn that these solar blackouts actually occur around the globe about every 18 months, every time the moon and earth are in perfect alignment with the Sun. Most of the time, the phenomenon is not visible in the United States. The last one crossing the continental US was 99 years ago, although one was visible in the Pacific NW in February of 1979.

I was curious what the ancient people thought of these anomalies in their skies. There is actually quite a bit of data about this, thanks to the Chinese and the Babylonians for example, both of whom recorded these events as they happened. The Chinese believed that the eclipse was a celestial dragon that was actually trying to eat the sun. It is still a tradition in China to bang drums and pots and make loud noise during a solar eclipse to frighten that dragon away. Even more recently, in the nineteenth century, the Chinese navy fired its cannons during a lunar eclipse to scare the dragon that was eating the Moon.

In my research for this sermon, I ran across a fragment of a cool poem written by a Greek poet and soldier, Archilochus, who lived from 680-640 BCE. See if you agree that he is writing about a solar eclipse and his deity's role in creating it:

*Nothing there is beyond hope,
nothing that can be sworn impossible,
nothing wonderful, since Zeus,
father of the Olympians,
made night from mid-day,
hiding the light of the shining Sun,*

and sore fear came upon men.

Neat, huh? In the 5th century BCE, the Greek historian Herodotus heralded a solar eclipse as being the catalyst for peace between two warring peoples. He wrote:

... day was all of sudden changed into night. This event had been foretold by Thales, the Milesian, who forewarned the Ionians of it, fixing for it the very year in which it took place. The Medes and the Lydians when they observed the change, ceased fighting, and were alike anxious to have terms of peace agreed on.

Wouldn't it be great if tomorrow's eclipse could have the same effect? Maybe it could bring peace on the troubled hearts and minds of Americans. Maybe the eclipse could calm the leaders of nations threatening war with us? Oh, if it only could be so.

In our Bible, there are many references to the solar eclipse. From the pre-Jesus era, the prophets linked the sky show to the heavenly expression of God's will. Principally Ezekiel, Joel, and Isaiah called forth the solar and lunar eclipses to demonstrate God's strength

and ultimate will against nations that would seek to enslave or eradicate Israel. Isaiah the First, in his oracle against the Babylonians, wrote of a terrible storm that would come against them:

See, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light.

In contrast to the Babylonians and the Chinese, the ancient ancestors of our faith did not attribute solar eclipses to dragons or dogs, predators that populated the sky. Rather, the people of God saw God's direct hand in celestial events. In New Testament times, Christians often believed—and hoped-- that an eclipse was the precursor to the second coming of Christ.

Matthew and Mark both wrote a story of Christ telling the disciples that the signs of his second coming and the end of the age would, in part, be signaled by something that sounded suspiciously like a solar eclipse: Matthew has Jesus saying this:

Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven shall be shaken.

The art of predicting the Second Coming with signs from the skies perhaps started with these verses, picking up steam as formal Christianity took hold. We have all heard some of the predictions of the "End Times;" they start right after Jesus died and they continue right up to the present. I found some pretty interesting ones to share with you. In the year 500, several of the church Fathers, including Irenaeus and Hippolytus, predicted the Apocalypse for that year. They arrived at their calculation based on the biblical measurements of Noah's Ark.

As the turn of the millennium approached year 1000, many clerics and prognosticators predicted the end of the world. It's a convenient time, don't you think? We had our own millennium scare at the year 2000. As the calendar turned to January 1, our computers got all messed up, but that was about all that happened. Maybe God doesn't keep time per the Gregorian calendar?

Christopher Columbus wrote a Book of Prophecies. He claimed that the world was born in 5383 BCE and that it would exist for

exactly 7000 years, therefor predicting the end of the world in 1656. Martin Luther promised the end of the world by the year 1600.

Here's a funny one:

In Leeds, England in 1806 a hen began laying eggs on which the phrase "Christ is coming" was written. Eventually it was discovered to be a hoax. The owner, Mary Bateman, had written on the eggs in a corrosive ink so as to etch the eggs, and reinserted the eggs back into the hen's oviduct.

Then there was this clever fellow, Charles Taze Russell, in 1874:

He predicted the return of Jesus to occur in 1874, but when proven wrong, he reinterpreted his original prediction to explain that Jesus had indeed returned-- in invisible form.

In 1910, Camille Flammarion predicted that Haley's Comet "would impregnate the atmosphere and possibly snuff out all life on the planet," but not the planet itself. "Comet pills" were sold to the public to protect them against toxic gases.

Hon-Ming Chen, leader of the Taiwanese cult God's Salvation Church, or Chen Tao - "The True Way" - claimed that God would come to Earth in a flying saucer at 10:00 am on March 31, 1998. Moreover,

when God appeared, would have the same physical appearance as Chen. Chen chose to base his cult in Garland, Texas, because he thought it sounded like "God's Land." On March 25, God was to appear on Channel 18 on every TV set in the US. He didn't realize the Playboy Channel was Channel 18 on many cable systems across the US.

I have this book here, *The Mystery of 2012*. It's written by a bunch of important sounding people, including several Ph.D.s. Its thesis was that the end of the Mayan calendar at 2012 spells the end for the living creatures of the world, as the Earth's magnetic poles were going to reverse then and snuff out all life forms. Ta Da!

If you want to have some fun sometime, read the history of end-of-the-world predictions. I was laughing out loud by the time I got to the end of the list.

The end, THE DEFINITIVE END, by the way, is next month, according to David Meade, author of the book, *Planet X-The 2017 Arrival*. He says that Nibiru, the so-called Planet X, will crash into Earth on September 23rd. His assertion is based on a complex biblical formula centering around the number 33. Fascinating. If you were going to pay your monthly bills on the 15th day of September, you might want to hold off until after the 23rd, just to be sure your money isn't wasted when the world disappears that day!

Anyway, I digress. We were talking about the eclipse, and then somehow, we were talking about cheeseburgers in paradise. You really shouldn't allow me any more vacations!

In today's scripture passage Jesus again takes on the Pharisees. The Pharisees presume to know what God expects of the faithful, and they get so focused on their pronouncements and their rules of religious practice that they lose their way to the very God they profess to know and love. Jesus is telling both the religious leaders and the common folk to look beyond the form of religious law and into the substance of their relationship with God.

In solar eclipse imagery, Jesus says that they have allowed their moon to block the path between the earth and the sun. They have placed their emphasis on religious law rather than on compassion and justice. The light of God's love and God's wish for humanity is obscured by those who would block it out for their own purposes.

"We are people of the light," he might say. "God's light. Don't let anything or any rule or any convention come between you and the light."

You might be asking me about now, "Yes, but Matthew and Mark both have Jesus saying the end of the world was near. Why then, would Jesus be talking about living in the future, in the light of God?"

I'm so glad you asked me this question!

Two responses: First, realize that Matthew and Mark were both urgent evangelists; it was their mission and purpose to bring people to the Way of Jesus. Scare tactics are one way of bringing people to your cause. If the Man himself said the world was about to come to an end, and you believe him, then you better take action right away and come with us, so that you will be saved from damnation.

Second, realize that the first answer is the best one, for otherwise, Jesus is made out to be a fool, since the world did not end and Jesus has not yet returned—that is, unless he is that invisible guy claimed by Charles Russell way back in 1874.

The ancient people had none of the science or mathematics that we take for granted today. They were without these tools, relying instead for their problem-solving on story-telling, fable, myth, and celestial dragons and dogs. We have to let them off the hook a bit.

On the other hand, Harold Camping was a charlatan. Do you remember this guy? Perhaps you remember his billboards? He used ministry donations to put up signs all over the United States in the 1990s predicting the end of the world. I remember seeing one of

these on Santa Fe Blvd, just south of the Alameda Avenue railroad tracks. He stole millions of dollars from people. He changed the end date five or six times after each one of his predictions failed. He still would be defrauding his followers today if death had not claimed him.

Lee Jang Rim embezzled 4.4 million dollars from followers. He predicted that the world would end in 1992. He used all the money he collected to buy bonds that matured on dates *after* the world was supposed to end!

These poor gullible people gave up their homes. They gave up their jobs, their families and their friends, too. They were misguided, deluded in the hope that they would be whisked away to a paradise while the rest of the world perished.

Why do some folks need these fantasies? Why not live your life in God's light as full as you can, not worrying about tomorrow, not worrying about the world's fate? Jesus told us there are worries enough today—live as do the lilies of the field, glorifying God with your life and adding beauty to the world with each rising of the sun. Live today. And stop worrying about who is in the Heaven Club and who is out.

Jesus said to the Pharisees: "Forget your pie-in-the sky predictions. Forget your holiness and reject your privilege, for there are people starving right under your noses and they are the true children of God." And for that heresy, they killed him. And in killing him, they thought they would again put blinders on the people. They thought that in time, Jesus and his crazy, dangerous rantings would be forgotten.

But they were mistaken, because the truth lives on. They were mistaken, because the light shines on. They were wrong, just as the rampaging white supremacists in Charlottesville were wrong, because the message of Jesus can't be beaten out, burned out, scared out, or shouted out of existence. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it best: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

When darkness threatens the light tomorrow at noon, take heart. The light will push away that darkness. When hate threatens to take away love in places like Charlottesville, take heart. For love will push away that hate. As it did in Boston, when "tens of thousands" of people, including our UCC General Minister and President, Rev. John Dorhauer, marched in solidarity yesterday.

As it can in other places, anywhere that fear threatens to keep our voices silent and our feet glued to our safe places. Take heart, good and faithful people. For the message, mission, and miracle that Jesus was and is for us today shall not perish—not today, not next week, not next month either, as long as we speak his truth and seek his Way.

We are Christians; we are the people of the light. The darkness needs to know us, to hear us, and to feel our love push it out, now, until the end of the world.

May It Be So.