

TUMC Sermon – October 8, 2017 Thanksgiving

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Lament and Thanksgiving

Psalm 19

Philippians 4:6-9

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O God, my rock and my redeemer.



On August 21, 2017 a cosmic coincidence happened¹. It was a total solar eclipse with a specific path across North America. Everything aligned just right and the moon blocked our view of the sun, leaving only the thinnest strip of light visible.

I have friends who travelled to Arkansas along with thousands of others (who had booked hotels almost 2 years in advance), just to sit for about 2 minutes and 40 seconds in the path of totality. They report it as stunning; that it felt like time stood still. And they report it as very eerie. Everyone just sat motionless in this peculiar darkness.

Even those of us who had to struggle to find proper eye protection to get a peek at a sliver of eclipse in Toronto could feel something strange going on, couldn't we?

This is a photo of that total eclipse. It is also a reflection of how I've been feeling this week. It sometimes felt like a strange peculiar darkness, gloomy and eerie.

Yes, it is Thanksgiving. But in order not to be trite or shallow about it, let me follow a biblical pattern and begin with lament before turning to gratitude.

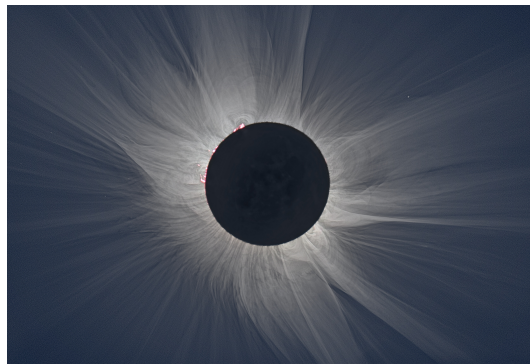
Here are a few shadows I collected just from this week's news:

¹ **What causes a solar eclipse?** The first fact to understand about solar eclipses is that they occur because of a remarkable cosmic coincidence: the Sun is just about the same apparent size in our sky as the Moon. While the Sun is actually about 400 times larger in diameter than the Moon, the Moon is also about 400 times closer than the Sun. Therefore, the Sun and the Moon appear to be about the same size in our sky. <https://www.greatamericaneclipse.com/basics/>

The senseless incomprehensible words-fail-me shooting at a concert in Las Vegas – one of a category (a category!) of avoidable tragedies called mass shootings. *Kyrie Eleison!* Lord have mercy!

Then there was the reminder of the heartbreaking reality of the so-called 1960's scoop, where Indigenous children were torn away from their parents, severed from the nurture of their culture and handed a broken future. *Kyrie Eleison!* Lord have mercy!

Church institutions struggling to break patterns of oppression towards LGBTQ+ people and falling into the same deep hurtful ruts that they were striving to avoid. *Kyrie Eleison!* Lord have mercy!



Do you see how there is a little piece of red showing around the edge? I learned that it's where there is a crater on the moon, making it so the sunlight isn't entirely blocked, even during a total eclipse, there is always a little piece showing through.² And a different lens on this photo also reveals the sun's corona seeping out from behind the shadow.

And so, in the midst of my disillusionment with the world this week, a piece of a psalm kept coming into my consciousness in the form of an old chorus: *Psalm 116: 7 – Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with thee.*

And so, urged by the Spirit, I turn to look for God's bounty, and to try and remember the powerful, burning sun. I turn to gratitude and thanksgiving and invite you to do so as well.

There are the faintest of signs that darkness isn't the whole story.

- People are taking stock of a culture of violence and toxic masculinity. And, God help us, may this be the time when steps are taken to make guns harder to get. *Kyrie Eleison!* Lord have mercy!

² Thanks to Tom Callahan for showing me the picture and giving me the explanation. ©

- The 60's scoop is being acknowledged and financial compensation is being offered as practical apology to the people who were victimized. *Kyrie Eleison!* Lord have mercy!
- Pain is helping people learn how to be true LGBTQ+ allies. *Kyrie Eleison!* Lord have mercy!
- Someone send me a cute video of a dog and a cat who gave birth together in the dog house and are co-feeding each other's babies.³ It's adorable!
- Baby steps, tiny craters reminding us of the glowing sun. *Kyrie Eleison!* Lord have mercy!

Our reading from the psalms says that the heavens are telling the glory of God! What exactly are they telling?

Well, they are telling that we live in cycles, day follows night follows day. We know this, but it's good to be reminded of it once in a while. Thanksgiving harvest is also this kind of yearly reminder of planting, harvest, and fallow time. These are the patterns of nature and possibly also of hope and despair as well.

Another thing the heavens are telling is that an eclipse is actually an optical illusion. The sun is 400 times bigger than the moon. It only looks like the moon is covering it because the moon is closer, making it seem the same size from our vantage point.

Just so, God, however you understand God to be -- whether God is a literal creator, a prime mover, a personified deity, a life force at the core of all living beings, mystery, power, energy – God is bigger than this moment and bigger than you and me.

As with almost every encounter with the power of God in nature, the heavens are telling us that we are small. And that smallness is a starting point for gratitude.

Our reading from Philippians continues the invitation to get perspective. It is part of a letter that the apostle Paul writes to a small gathering of new Christians in the midst of the Roman Empire. Like us, they were surrounded by the dark shadow of an empire that used oppression and domination and called it "peace."

Paul was encouraging this little group (who had their own internal conflicts, as any good church), to look past circumstances and refocus on the values of the God of Peace. Past the moon, to the sun, as it were.

³ <https://catracalivre.com.br/geral/mundo-animal/indicacao/gata-e-cadela-dao-cria-juntas-e-fazem-intercambio-de-amamentacao/>



The letter suggests that the way to move from societal anxiety to godly perspective, is to begin by letting go of worry and resorting to giving thanks. I want to make it clear that I am talking about societal anxiety and not clinical anxiety, that is a whole different experience. I also want to make it clear that this is also not a reprimand against a very natural tendency to worry, it is a strategy.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The letter also suggests turning our attention from ourselves to the values of the God of Peace – apparently Paul’s favourite moniker for God, God of Peace.⁴ *Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

I used to use this passage to help me justify censoring TV and video game content with my kids. A checklist of whether it was a worthwhile endeavor. But I think this is a better application of that text; an encouragement to move away from worry through thanksgiving towards peace.

Turning to thanksgiving is not primarily about “counting our blessings,” or being grateful for the stuff we have – not that there’s anything wrong with that. It’s more about turning towards what really matters in God’s realm.

The kind of gratitude the apostle Paul is talking about here is not only for people who have privilege and might confuse that privilege with God’s special favour. When I was growing up there was a popular book called “Praise the Lord Anyway” by Frances Hunter. It was all about how if you thanked God, no matter what, things would magically go in your favour. No, there are no guarantees that things will go in our favour. But there is a guarantee that our attitude will change and our perspective will change through thanksgiving.

⁴ Believer’s Commentary on Philippians, Menno Media.

Looking at nature often has this effect of putting us in our cosmic place. The psalmist moved from wonder at the heavens to considering the values in the kingdom of God.

The kind of thanksgiving being encouraged in our scripture passages today is closer to the approach that Christian and other mystics have learned. It is a practice, a rhythm of returning to the smallest, most basic aspect at the center of ourselves, formed in God's image. It is often called the true self, or the divine spark – to keep with the sun imagery. And from that true self, looking out on the world around us and from there moving into action. Any mystic worth their salt know that there's action after the prayers.

Always, when I've read the mystics, I feel like there is something that is just beyond my grasp. I'm still working on it. I was at a workshop last week with Betty Pries, who has a wonderful gift for putting things into words, so I'd like to offer that up to you and see if it helps you as it did me. Betty talks about our true selves as being that part deep within us that is the image of God in us, and what is not our true selves is any part of us that can be described. Because if it can be described it can be judged. When you hear true self, center, divine spark. That is what we are trying to envision, that piece of you that is God's image in you and nothing else.



Christian mystic Thomas Merton, says it this way:

"... At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. . . . It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely."⁵

I really want to believe this. And I know that it takes practice to experience it. Practice letting go of worry, turning to God, gratitude and returning to what is true and Divine. It's a spiritual practice.

"This story is told from the early centuries of the church where Christian monasticism was born in the Egyptian desert. An old woman, had lived her entire

⁵ Re-quoted from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Center for Action and Contemplation, <https://cac.org/thomas-merton-part-2-2017-10-06/>

life since childhood on the outskirts of a monastery, she had always wanted to ask something to a monk. But this was an enclosed monastery, the monks never coming outside the monastery precinct. Never.

Except one day. One day an old monk came out to walk into the desert. The old woman hobbled toward him to ask him her question of a lifetime: “What do you do in there?”

So the story goes, the old monk looked to the ground, then looked to the heavens and, with tears in his eyes, said, “We fall down and we get up again. We fall down and we get up again. We fall down and we get up again.”⁶

Psalm 116: 7 – Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with thee.

Let us Pray:

That I could live thankfully,
not fearfully
in this beautiful and messed up world,
I pray to the Lord. Amen.⁷

⁶ As told in *Imperfection: A Priests Journey through Meditation, Messing up and Ministry*, by Charles T. Dupree.

⁷ Carol Penner on Twitter