

Sunday Next before Advent (MP-1) (2019)

Where were you on the afternoon of Aug. 21, 2017?

I suspect you were doing what everyone else was doing that day: looking up . . . watching as the sky grew darker and darker . . . as the ball of the sun was reduced to a thin circle of light.

I know where I was for the ‘Great American Eclipse’. It was right here on the church yard.

An hour or so before it occurred, a few of us from St. Luke’s gathered in the pavilion.

It was not long after that we invited a family from Carterville parked over the road to come and join us. They did.

As the sky began to go dark, the pigeons that feed around the church sensed something strange was afoot and began to fly in circles.

The air became cool, and then that for which we waited happened. It was eerie and maybe even a little bit frightening.

If a predicted eclipse can have such an effect on people, how much more the ‘eclipse’ spoken of in this morning’s Old Testament reading. Here Jeremiah writes:

**“I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light.” ///**

Of course, what the prophet saw was not an actual solar eclipse, but a looming national calamity.

The armies of Babylon were on the move. The people of Judah were going to be carried into exile. Jerusalem itself was going to be laid level to the ground.

It was *as if* Genesis 1 was being played in reverse: the earth, instead of *taking* form, was becoming *without* form. God’s good order seemed to be in retreat.

It was a time of darkness and despair.

What Jeremiah saw actually came to pass in 587 B.C.

What was so sad was that God had sent season of grace after season of grace.

Opportunities had been extended whereby this coming great national calamity might be averted, but to no avail.

Jeremiah himself had faithfully delivered God's Word.

If God's people would turn back to God, He would turn back to them. If they would forsake their sin and seek His face, He would come and save them and heal their land. But, they would not. Why?

Well, because like many today, they loved their sin too much. They wanted to do it their way.

Finally, as it still happens, those opportunities ended. A day of reckoning was at hand. It was a sad moment. In another place, Jeremiah says:

**“The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved”**  
(Jeremiah 8:20).

Darkness and more darkness.

Where is God in all this?

Had He in fact washed His hands of His Chosen People and the situation in which they found themselves?

Was there no balm in Gilead? No healing ointment with which to anoint the nation's wounds?

Was there no hope? No light? ///

Well, in fact there was. Like that little ring of light that could be seen in the sky on the day of the Great American Eclipse, so there was then.

Look hard at verse 27 of today's reading and you will see it. Here God says:

**“The whole land shall be desolate; yet will I not make a full end.”**

“Yet will I not make a full end.”

Though darkness seemed to hid His face, God in fact remained on the job. His people and His promises had not been forgotten.

Yes, the people were going to go into captivity for their sins. Yes, the pagans were going to have it their way, for a season. Yes, Jerusalem was going to be destroyed.

Yet, God was not finished. “I will not make a full end,” He says.

At an appointed time, a remnant would return . . . a Saviour out of the line of David would arise . . . the sun would once again give her light.

Jeremiah was a prophet of gloom, but not exclusively. He was also a prophet of hope. In another place, he writes:

**“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.”**

We know who that King was and is: Jesus.

What was true with ancient Judah is true with us.

Even in the darkest times . . . in our own personal lives no less than in the lives of churches and nations . . . God remains on the job. He does not take afternoon naps.

There is no darkness so dark that God is not. There is no night so black that God does not continue to work behind the curtain.

Perhaps you have gone through some period in your life when you felt as if He were not.

Perhaps hope appeared non-existent. You were at your wits end.

Perhaps you are going through such a time now.

How do you respond?

Before proposing an answer, let me return to the Great American Eclipse of 2017.

I mentioned that a family from Cartersville joined us on the churchyard that day.

As it turned out, they were active in their home church and the wife was a church musician.

Thirty minutes or so before the eclipse, I took them into the church and gave them a tour. She played our grand piano.

Before we went back out, we sang a hymn . . . one not in our Hymnal but one I suspect some of you will know. It begins with the words: **“My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness”**.

But the line that stood out that day comes at the beginning of the second stanza, which says:

**“When darkness seems to hid His face, I rest on His unchanging grace.”**

When we went back out and the sky went dark, these words – I rest in His unchanging grace – kept ringing in my ear. I suspect in theirs as well.

What do *you* do when the sky goes dark?

Well there are a number of things people do in times of crisis.

Some grow anxious and fearful and circle like those pigeons. They respond, but in ways that don’t get them very far.

Others become depressed. Hopelessness and despair take over. They withdraw into themselves. They sit down and do nothing.

Still others strike out at others like a wounded animal. They blame other people. They even shake their fist at God.

But, I want to suggest a better way. That better way is:

- Look up. Your Heavenly Father cares for the birds of the air. Scripture tells us as much. That being so, He certainly cares for you.
- If you have been wayward like Judah in Jeremiah's day, acknowledge it and turn back to God. Cast aside your cherished 'idols'.
- Remember God's past acts of faithfulness: those recorded in Scripture – yes – but also those in your own life.
- Finally, no matter how dark the moment, rest on His unchanging grace. ///

Follow this path, and in due time, light will appear, and it will be the light of God. Night will be turned into day.

If you are looking for something for which to be thankful this Thanksgiving, let it be this:

God cares.

There is no night so dark that God is not.

There is no night so black that God does not remain at work behind the scenes. ///

Yes, let us be thankful for this and all His many blessings.

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OLD TESTAMENT READING -- Jeremiah 4:24 ff

I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly.

<sup>25</sup> I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled.

<sup>26</sup> I beheld, and, lo, the fruitful place was a wilderness, and all the cities thereof were broken down at the presence of the Lord, and by his fierce anger.

<sup>27</sup> For thus hath the Lord said, The whole land shall be desolate; yet will I not make a full end.

<sup>28</sup> For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black; because I have spoken it, I have purposed it, and will not repent, neither will I turn back from it.

<sup>29</sup> The whole city shall flee for the noise of the horsemen and bowmen; they shall go into thickets, and climb up upon the rocks: every city shall be forsaken, and not a man dwell therein.

<sup>30</sup> And when thou art spoiled, what wilt thou do? Though thou clothest thyself with crimson, though thou deckest thee with ornaments of gold, though thou rentest thy face with painting, in vain shalt thou make thyself fair; thy lovers will despise thee, they will seek thy life.

<sup>31</sup> For I have heard a voice as of a woman in travail, and the anguish as of her that bringeth forth her first child, the voice of the daughter of Zion, that bewaileth herself, that spreadeth her hands, saying, Woe is me now! for my soul is wearied because of murderers.