

“The Two Great Lights”

Genesis 1:14-19, John 20:19-23

Genesis 1:14-16 . . . ¹⁴And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶God made the two great lights — the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night — and the stars.

The sun as the Bible tells us in Genesis is larger than the moon. “God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night.” We know the sun is 400 times larger than the moon. So, how is it possible for the moon, so much smaller, to cover the sun to our eyes in an eclipse? Because the sun is also 400 times further from us than the moon – a relationship of distance exactly parallel to that of size.

The sun is 400 times larger but also 400 times further away.

In the mystic Jewish tradition of Kabbalah, the number 400 has special meaning as does the number 40. The 40 days of the flood, the 40 days Moses spent on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the 400 years God’s people were slaves in Egypt.

God comes to Abram in a dream in Genesis 15:12-15 . . . ¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. ¹³Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; ¹⁴but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.

In a recent sermon, Rabbi Benjamin Bloch shared this wisdom . . . The relationship between the sun and the moon and the years predicted for the Egyptian exile share the number 400 so that we be attentive to a powerful divine message. An eclipse, the Talmud teaches us, is a heavenly sign. An eclipse of the moon, the rabbis tell us, is a bad omen for the Jewish people; and eclipse of the sun is a bad sign for the non-Jewish world. I dare to suggest that an eclipse across the continental United States of America may well serve as a warning to the darkening of the American spirit – for the very same reason the children of Israel ended up in Egypt of old to shortly begin the era of their slavery.

The children of Jacob were guilty of a serious crime. It was the sin of hatred between brothers. It was the crime of the sale of Joseph which led to our first exile. That is what first darkened the pages of our national history as Jews. And that is what, post Charlottesville, darkens the story of American democracy. The cover of this week's Time magazine carries the ominous headline "Hatred Across America". More than a century after the Civil War, Americans are at war with each other – and after a little more than half a century past the Holocaust the barbaric cries of Nazi anti-Semitism and "let's replace the Jews" are also incredibly again heard in our land.

If an eclipse does in fact have divine meaning, this must be a wake-up call.

In an eclipse, the sun continues to shine even if we are temporarily blinded to the rays of its goodness. God has not deserted us, nor will he ever do so. Eclipses are not curses; they are but warnings.

If we but heed their message, we may turn the eclipses of 2017 and 2024 into the blessings for which they were divinely intended.

One rabbi's interpretation of tomorrow's eclipse.

Some New Testament Christians believe there was a solar eclipse on the day Jesus was crucified. Mark 15:32-33 . . . ³²Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

³³When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

Finally, there are those who want us to believe that tomorrow is our last day based on their interpretation of Revelation 6:12-17 . . . ¹²When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

Your favorite restaurant might not be there tomorrow.

But . . . then there is the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus begins his ministry on a note of grace. He enters the synagogue of Nazareth, unrolls the scroll of Isaiah and starts reading those famous words about the Spirit of the Lord being upon him, to preach good news to all the downtrodden and oppressed. He closes the scroll and boldly announces: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Luke sums up the whole episode by saying: "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth" (Luke 4:18-22).

There's that word "grace" again! Only this time it's the "gracious words that came from his mouth."

Now, here's something interesting: Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, but there's something there he doesn't read. (You'd never know this unless you go to Isaiah and look it up.) He ends the passage abruptly, in the middle of a verse.

The last words of Scripture that Jesus reads there in the Nazareth synagogue — from Isaiah 61:1-2 — are "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor".

But here's what he leaves out: The proclamation of Isaiah 61:2 is "the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God."

Jesus doesn't say a thing, here, about vengeance — even though those words are staring back up at him from the scroll in his hands. He skips over them because he doesn't do vengeance. He's all about grace!

The good news is that you already have this grace! You have it because of Jesus. And you haven't had to do a thing to deserve it. By his cross and resurrection, Jesus has already done it all. You just have to accept the gift.

It's true for all of us in the Christian community, from the oldest senior citizens to the infants with baptismal water still glistening on their foreheads. When the sign of the cross was traced across our own foreheads in baptismal water, we were marked as belonging to God. We were marked as favorite sons and daughters. With any newly baptized children, we hope and pray they'll grow to understand enough about that favor, that grace, to accept it as their own.

Yet, how difficult that can be! It's difficult because we'd usually rather not admit we need such a gift, thank you very much. We'd rather see ourselves as people who are basically good, who've earned God's special favor by living exemplary lives.

In that respect, we're like a certain character in Jesus' famous parable of the prodigal son. You know how that story goes. A man has two sons. One stays home tilling the fields; the other cashes out his inheritance, flees to a far country and makes a mess of his life. He blows through every shekel in no time, and comes crawling back to dad, hoping for a little kindness for old times' sake.

Instead, the father throws a party — an expression of favor — such as that village has never seen. The older brother, who has lived a far more exemplary life, is jealous of the gala reception. Who wouldn't be? But — as dear old dad patiently explains — he's overjoyed because the son he thought he'd lost has now been found. The prodigal son is a parable of grace in action.

This sort of thing goes against every moral inclination hard-wired within us. Apart from the Christian gospel, common sense dictates that people ought to get what they deserve. “You do the crime; you do the time.” The Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr calls this sort of thinking the “economy of merit.” Those who have merit can expect to get good things in life. Those who don't can expect punishment. It's only fair, right?

Yet, if we're serious about following Jesus Christ, we have to make a fundamental shift in our outlook. We have to switch from the economy of merit to the economy of grace.

This doesn't come naturally to us. Making that switch is hard. It's especially hard for those of us who — skilled as we've become at beating ourselves up inside — tend to be our own harshest critics. Those of us who fit that description don't need a rabbi to tell us we're bad people.

We're already convinced that we are, and we remind ourselves of it a hundred times a day. If we're so busy judging ourselves all the time, it can be impossible to extend grace to others.

There's an unforgettable scene from the 1986 film, *The Mission*, that illustrates this point. It's a movie about the Spanish colonial empire in South America. Robert De Niro plays Mendoza, a brutal slave trader who captured, sold and murdered more native people than he could count.

Mendoza's life changes when he murders his own brother in a fit of rage. The hard-bitten conquistador is overcome with remorse. He scarcely thought twice about killing a native in the past, but now he has come to realize every human life has value, and that he's guilty of spilling far too much blood.

A Jesuit priest gives him a penance to atone for his sin. Mendoza must accompany an expedition of missionaries deep into the rain forest. There they plan to teach the natives about Jesus.

On the trek into the forest, Mendoza binds up his armor in a net. He ties a rope around the heavy burden and drags it along, to remind himself of the violent life he left behind. The sack of armor slows the expedition, but the priests tolerate it. They know how important it is for this man to do his penance.

Close to their destination, the missionaries climb to the top of a waterfall. At the top, they warmly embrace the native friends they've come to know on an earlier journey. But then the natives spy Mendoza, still scrambling up the rocks beside the waterfall, dragging his armor behind him.

They know this man, and they fear him. One of the natives grabs a knife and runs over to Mendoza, holding the blade against his neck, threatening to kill him in revenge. Mendoza looks up at his assailant. He prepares himself for death.

But then, something surprising happens. The native does slash his knife through the air, but what he cuts is not the conquistador's throat. He cuts the rope holding the bag of armor. The entire company watches Mendoza's burden fall away, tumbling end over end down the waterfall, smashing onto the rocks below.

Mendoza cries like a baby, fresh from the womb of God. A priest says, "Welcome home, brother." It's then that his real instruction in the way of Jesus begins.

It's all a gift. You can't be a follower of Jesus Christ if you don't set aside that judgmental, rules-based thinking, and claim the joyful truth that you are saved by God's grace. So, don't worry about tomorrow! Tomorrow is a reminder that God is our Creator and Jesus is our Savior.

May the peace of God . . .

#738 – God Created Heaven and Earth