

Of Light and Life
Exodus 33: 12-23

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When my son Weldon was in first grade, he attended Tree Tops School, a private school that had been built at an old farm out in the country. The younger children's classes were in the original farm house, and the older children – middle schoolers – were in a big barn up the hill. A rope swing hung from a tree in the back yard, and there was a teepee beside it, big enough for 8-year-old boys to hide out in at recess. There was a creek to jump across, and the grassy field on the far side of the creek just begged children to run and play.

There were only about 100 students in the whole school, and there were never more than 10 students in any one class. It was a wonderful place to learn. The math and science classes featured lots of hands-on activities that just aren't possible in most schools where classes are large. It was also a wonderful place to teach. I taught English and German and Texas history there. One of my favorite memories from Tree Tops School is of the solar eclipse that happened while we were there.

Now, a full solar eclipse is a fascinating thing to experience. I can understand why ancient peoples thought that an eclipse meant the gods might be angry. It's not just that the sun up there in the sky is covered over. It's that the whole world around you goes suddenly dark in the middle of the day, as though night had come far too soon. But an eclipse is not merely fascinating. It's dangerous too. Oh, the darkness that is naturally so scary isn't dangerous, it's looking for the sun that can

hurt you. When you find yourself standing in the dark at noon, it is natural to search the heavens for the sun you just lost, the sun that was up there just a minute ago. The urge to look up is almost irresistible. But you know – because you have heard it all your life – that looking straight at the sun, even if it is covered by the shadow of the moon, can burn your eyes and cause blindness. So, what would you do if you were in charge of a school with 100 impulsive children on the day of a rare solar eclipse? How would you protect their eyes? How would you keep them from being scared? How would you use this event to help them learn something important?

Well, Miss Judy, the science teacher, figured it out. She safely used the eclipse to help the students learn about planetary motion and solar flares, in a way they would never forget. A few days before the eclipse, she gave each child a big box, like this one, and guided them in building their own solar projectors. The children pasted a piece of white paper inside their boxes to serve as a screen, and they poked two holes in the back of the box, up high, to form the lens of the projector. As the time for the eclipse neared, all the students went outside and put their heads inside the boxes, turning their backs to the sun, like this. With this contraption, they could safely watch the eclipse projected onto the white paper inside their box. Because the children were engaged in this guided inquiry, they avoided both the seeming danger of the darkness and the real danger of staring at the sun. Weldon is 43 years old now, and I bet he still remembers seeing that eclipse on the projection screen he built himself. But my memory is different. What I can't forget is the amazing sight of 100 children wandering around with boxes on their heads!

I think a solar eclipse is just the image to help us understand today's scripture.

You will recall from a couple of weeks ago that God and the people of Israel have entered into a covenant – a solemn, binding contract – on Mt. Sinai. God has promised to be their God and the people have promised to be God's special, chosen people, to worship only Yahweh and to obey all God's commandments. So, Moses goes back up Mt. Sinai and God gives him tablets of stone on which the new covenant has been engraved by God's own hand. In the chapter just before today's passage, Moses brings these precious tablets back down the mountain and finds that while he was away, the people of Israel have been up to no good. Moses has only been gone a month, yet in just that short time the people have gotten impatient. It had seemed to them that God was gone, and they were afraid of being without a God they could see, so they invented one. They melted down all their jewelry to create a golden calf to worship! When Moses sees this, he is mad, and God is even madder. I won't go into the gruesome details here. Suffice it to say that in the aftermath there are bloodshed and pestilence and those stone tablets get smashed to smithereens.

Now we enter today's story. Moses has gone to the sacred Tent of Meeting, far outside the Israelites' camp, to have a word with God. It is an interesting conversation – it almost sounds like a marital spat.

Moses says to God, "I didn't ask for this job. You called me, remember? You even said I was your favorite! And then you told me to bring these people out of slavery. Thanks a lot! Can I get a little help around here? These are YOUR people.

You said so yourself. You said we were special. Well, if you're not even going to travel with us, there won't be anything special about us, and you might as well just leave us out here in the desert!"

And God replies, "Oh, I'll go with you. And you ARE my favorite."

Moses figures he will press his luck, so he says to God, "By the way, could I get a look at you?"

With amazing patience God responds, "I will show myself to you, not because you demand it – but because I choose to. But you need to be clear what you are asking, who this is you are arguing with. If you actually look at my face, you will die. So, go hide in that little cleft in the side of the mountain, and I will use my own hand to cover you while I pass by. Then when I take away my hand, you may see my back, but my face shall not be seen."

It seems to me that the lessons from this story are the lessons of the solar eclipse. The first thing children learn about the sun is that it provides all the energy that supports life on earth. It is the same with God. As Moses says, it is only God's presence with the people that sets their life apart from the ordinary. But remember that being God's chosen people is a two-sided proposition. It is a covenant, a contract with obligations on both sides. God promises to be present, and the people promise to be faithful, to behave as though they understand the weight of the gift God has given them. Like the sun warming the earth and calling seeds to life, our covenant relationship with God calls us to a life that is whole and holy. If we are

God's people, we had better act like it, because only inside that relationship can we find abundant and eternal life.

The next thing children learn about the sun is that in an eclipse, the sun is there, whether we can see it or not. It is the same with God. God isn't really absent when the people of Israel melt down their jewelry to make the golden calf. It just SEEMS like God is gone, because at that point, early in their covenant relationship, the people have only learned to relate to God through Moses, and Moses isn't there for a few weeks. But God has already promised on Mt. Sinai to be forever in covenant relationship with God's people, with or without Moses, and even after they have done everything in their power to push God away, God sets aside wrath and promises to go with them on their whole journey, no matter what. Whether we can see God clearly or not, God is always there. For all of us there are rough patches in our relationship with God, times when we can't feel God beside us, when it seems that our prayers go off into the air with no response, when worship doesn't spring up in us naturally. In those times we may feel deeply isolated from the divine source of life. But when everything around us seems suddenly and unexpectedly dark, it doesn't mean that God is gone. Even in those dark times, we can still see signs of God's continuing presence indirectly, like seeing the indirect image of the sun through a solar projector. Whether we can see it at the moment or not, God's life-giving presence is always with us.

Perhaps the most important lesson that children learn in an eclipse is not to look for the sun, even though the darkness may scare them. It is the same in our relationship with God. In those times when God seems absent, it isn't the apparent darkness in our lives that is really dangerous to us; it is what we might do to fill

that scary void that can hurt us. We see this in today's story, when Moses traipses up the mountain for a while and the people of Israel fear that God is gone and they become frightened. But just like the eclipse, the thing that seems scary to them isn't the thing that can really hurt them. The truly dangerous thing is abandoning the faithful life to which God has just called them. They begin to rely on things they can see and control, like their gold, their artistic talents to create images, or the temporary pleasures of a life that is less than whole. The people search for the light of God in all the wrong places, and they are blinded in the process. What they learn is that even in the dark times, abundant life is still to be found in the covenant relationship with God, not outside it. In the dark patches of OUR lives, it isn't God's apparent absence that can hurt us, it's the things we do to fill that void that can burn our eyes and leave us blind.

None of us can know God directly, any more than Moses could see God's face. But God gives us the grace to see enough. And what we can see here is our faithful God, calling us always and forever back to the relationship that gives us light and life, and promising to walk with us on every step of the long journey home.

Thanks be to God.

Amen