

## **Sermon: Light Has Come**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 10, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A total solar eclipse is coming our way. In about a month, on April 8, 2024, a spectacular and rare celestial event is about to unfold over Canada and the United States. As the Moon aligns, somehow perfectly between the Earth and the Sun, that in itself is quite a cosmic coincidence, a temporary darkness will sweep across parts of North America.

I've looked it up, the so-called 'path of totality'. It will come close to Ottawa, but not quite. We will still get to see a partial eclipse here in the nation's capital. But if you want to see, to experience that totality, where the Moon covers perfectly the surface of the Sun, you will need to travel on April the 8th. Not too far though, to Belleville, Ontario at 3:21 pm, or to Montreal, Quebec at 3:26 pm.

I still recall the last time when a total solar eclipse swept across North America, in 2017. I took my family, Daisy, Justin and Neo, four of us packed into a Mini Cooper, and drove 17 hours non-stop, down to Nashville, Tennessee, just to witness an experience of a lifetime. It was a rough yet memorable road trip. We had to leave immediately after a Sunday worship service. I was sick, nursing a cold; so were my two boys. The car broke down early during the trip. We somehow managed to get it to a Canadian Tire, switched out a burned fuse, and resumed the journey.

We tried to, on the way, get our hands on specially designed U.V. blocking sunglasses, but to no avail—they were all sold out. So we had to make crude substitutes, a box pinhole projector out of, if you can believe it, cereal boxes. This is what you do: you cut a small opening on one side of the box, cover it with Aluminium foil, drill a pinhole through the foil which allows sunlight to project onto the other end, inside the box, so one can see the eclipsing sun safely—very MacGyverish; I was very proud of that.

We made it to Nashville just in time. Drove to an elevated clearing, amongst an excited crowd, and waited for the Moon to metaphorically eat into the Sun. When that moment came, it was spectacular. Bright sky gave way to a creeping darkness, the ambient light changed, the air got colder, and the Moon slow glided into place. All around us, it went silent. People,

birds even insects stopped their busy chirping, froze and looked up. The brilliant beams of light around the Sun simmered and disappeared, one by one until there is nothing left, but that dancing glow of the Sun's corona.

It was a spectacular view (did I say that already?), a perfect blend of light and darkness, held however briefly in perfect harmony. Was it a life-changing experience? Not really, but that view of a glowing circle of light in the midst of complete darkness did leave a lasting impression. It made me wonder what it was like when God called forth light out of darkness in Genesis 1:3-4, "*then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.*"

This duality of light and darkness is picked up by Saint John in the opening chapter of his Gospel. As in verse 4-5, "*in him was life (speaking about Jesus), and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.*" Jumping to verse 9, "*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world*", announces quite hopefully by both John the baptizer and John the evangelist.

Saint Augustine, in his commentary on Genesis, reflected on the theology of light and of vision. He noted that light was the first 'creature' made out of nothing. As the 'first incarnation' of God's Word, light is the supreme example of God's beauty and form, for "*God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness*". Moreover, since light is incorporeal, it is the most spiritual of all 'creature'. And since light is not only incorporeal but also visible, it is the ultimate mediator between the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial.

Saint Augustine also noted elsewhere, that "it is no advantage to be near the Light, if the eyes are closed." Undoubtedly a commentary on the state of sinfulness of humanity. As John the evangelist noted in our Scriptural reading today of John 3:19, "*that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.*" The tone and the content certainly was judgemental, no escaping that. But it is worth noting this ultimate mediator whom Augustine speaks of is no other than Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who has come as true light shining into a darkened world.

Christ is the gift of God to us, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*" (John 3:16) It is one of the best-known and best-

loved verse in the Bible, proclaiming God's extravagant love for the world seen through a singular act of self-giving grace. Furthermore, John's Gospel assures us that '*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.*'

The key is faith, yet it needs and seeks understanding. In the Reformed tradition, particularly of Calvinism that is neatly summed by this improbable acronym 'TULIP'—of total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. By such understanding, human beings are utterly incapable of truly loving God and neighbours, for all have been corrupted by sin, original, personal, or systematic. We cannot overcome our own depravity, our incapacity, or our enslavement to sin, except and only through Christ. Only Christ can atone for our sin and bring about meaningful and lasting reconciliation, between God and people, and between people and people.

But, since not all people are reconciled, living in God's grace of faith, hope and love. It stands to reason that the atoning sacrifice of Christ must be limited to those whom God has chosen, of God's elects. This is the gift of God, being drawn into the circle of God's grace, and nothing can separate them from the love of God that is in Christ.

However, within the Reformed tradition, there exists another understanding—the so-called Arminianism. It holds that God's gracious love for creation extends to all. All people can receive this gift of salvation. Nevertheless, individuals can and must choose to accept God's grace by faith—that is believing Jesus Christ as Saviour, believing in Christ's atoning death, his resurrection and glorification. Alternatively, persons can also refuse to believe—refusing salvation through faithless neglect or active disobedience. In a sense the opposite of faith is not unfaith, but disobedience and outright rebellion.

These descriptions are, of course, caricatures, failing to do justice to John Calvin or Jacob Arminius. Yet they illustrate this possible polar opposites of faith and grace, of *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, by faith alone and by grace alone. If salvation comes by grace alone, is faith redundant? If salvation comes through faith alone, is grace superfluous? Put it more personally, is my salvation dependent upon the steadfastness of my faith, or on the overwhelmingness of God's grace?

In my humble opinion, it is neither and it is both. The relationship between grace and faith is a mystery, not in the sense of 'too hard to explain so I won't even try', but in the sense of the dynamic tension held

between the two extremes, neither giving in to another, neither making sense without the other. As author and theologian Joseph D. Small explains, "Mystery is not an excuse for a lack of understanding, but a journey into understanding that leads ever deeper into the fullness of comprehension and appreciation. With mystery, the more we know, the more we realize that there is more to be known."

Faith and grace, light and darkness, to condemn and to save, it is worth reminding ourselves that the central to this passage of John 3, is in verse 16, more specifically the first part...for God so love the world. It was after all, divine love that stirred God's heart at the cries of a group of slaves in Egypt. It was love that God bestowed upon Israel both the the Law and the the Promised Land. It was love that God raised up prophets to declare to them of God's desire for compassion and justice, of God's preferential care for widows, orphans, and sojourners.

It was divine love that sent Jesus, the Son of God, to be incarnated in the world. It was love that Jesus taught us to love not only those who look and think like us, but to love even our enemies. It was love that inspired the early church to open doors of fellowship not only to Jews but also Gentiles, not only to those deem worthy but also those on the margin of society. It is love that still compels the Church, compels us to proclaim Christ, that the light of the world has come, the light that saves not condemns, so embrace this light, not run away from it.

So embrace this light, not run away from it. You can stare at it if you like, it won't blind you. Rather, the light of the world will truly open your eyes.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**