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In Peter's Shadow
Acts 5: 12-16 | John 5: 25-29

I know I've shared with you previously how I experienced the solar eclipse in 2017. I took the day off from work to drive three hours south of Des Moines to St. Joseph, Missouri, to put myself in perfect alignment between the earth, the moon, and the sun. Only it was a cloudy day and storms were blowing in from the west. It turns out that celestial bodies show little gratitude for their audience and make few accommodations for my convenience. So when I arrived at our destination and could not see the blue sky, I got back in the car and drove another two hours south and east to the city of Columbia. There, in a city park with hundreds of others spread out on blankets with picnic baskets, birds chirping loudly in the trees and dogs chasing frisbees in the distance, we all looked up and waited. It didn't last long; it started and finished in just a couple of minutes. The black disc crept across the face of the sun and paused briefly in the center. Like Moses I dared just for a moment to gaze directly into the brightness of the sun but there was nothing to see. A ring of fire around a black hole. The park where we gathered turned as dark as the early evening. The temperature fell and a chill took the air, silencing the singing birds. The panting dogs laid down in the grass. I could feel it in my body, too, like a drafty door closing in my heart and opening again, as the moon cast a shadow over my little world and then got out of the way.

It's so rare that we experience movement on such a cosmic scale that there's little wonder the biblical narrative makes use of eclipses and eruptions and deluges. Three of the gospels say that the earth fell dark at the death of Jesus, leading to all sorts of astronomical speculation that there must have been a solar eclipse precisely

at that time. Historically accurate or not, these cosmic movements recorded in scripture always reveal the power and authority of God. Just think of all the Psalms speaking of God's glory in terms of the wonders of the world - high mountains, vast seas, open plains. "The earth is the Lord's in the fullness thereof." Or the withering speech concluding the book of Job. God speaks out of the whirlwind and claims command over the earth and also whole constellations of stars.

Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,
or loose the cords of Orion?
Can you lead for the Mazzaroth in their season,
Or can you guide the Bear with its children?
Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?
Can you establish their rule on the earth?

God's speech also mentions great mystical creatures, like Leviathan, the great mythical sea serpent, or Behemoth, the immense monster of chaos. Our God is the creator of all the wonders of the world. And God's authority reaches even beyond what is close and real to forces far away and beyond us. God holds all of this in the palm of God's hand. Scripture uses astronomical imagery and mythical imagination to assure us that there is no great power that could threaten the purposes of the One we worship.

What the Old Testament strives to demonstrate in poetry, Peter does his best to convey in prose. The first third of the book of Acts is mainly a record of Peter's breathless speeches. Addressing small groups of the disciples and apostles, addressing larger groups of Jews and gentiles alike, addressing the high council of priests. "Let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel" that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, God has raised from the dead... We cannot keep

from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” Their testimony is to the power of God that defies our understanding and imagination. Peter speaks of a God not contained by death, of God not limited by human understanding, of God not threatened by our small schemes and designs. Don’t you understand - what we have experienced is a cosmic event. Did you not notice when the birds stopped singing? Could you not feel the chill in the air? Were you not held in awe and wonder? How could we not be moved in our heart and soul?

And here the author of the book of Acts does something very interesting. He’s speaking of Peter’s shadow. Remember how cold and eerie it felt when I stood in the shadow of the moon. Think about everyone about whom it has been said - they have a shadow side. Remember that this is the same Peter who denied Jesus and failed Jesus. Luke takes the image of the shadow - with all its connotations of darkness, of death, of evil - and flips it into a blessing. Standing on the Portico of Solomon, great crowds come to hear Peter’s vigorous testimony. And in the first miracles of the early church the power of Peter’s presence brings more people into the fold and there are healings and other miracles attributed to this moment. Peter’s testimony is an expansive proclamation of grace, directed to all who can hear - to both Jews and to Gentiles. Elsewhere he will say that through the life-giving power of God in Jesus this grace extends to all of creation without partiality. So expansive and inclusive was this message that people were coming out of their homes. They were carrying the sick out into the street, laying the infirm out on cots and mats so that everyone could hear about the power of Jesus. And so long as Peter’s shadow passed over them they were made well by this good news.

Even the shadow is a blessing. Peter’s good side and his bad side are blessed by God. Even the Earth when it is enshadowed by other celestial bodies is still in God’s hands. So transcendent is the grace revealed in Easter that there truly is no place untouched by the goodness of God. Such is the immensity of grace that we

could be blessed even in Peter's shadow. The sun shines on me and on you just as well. My own life casts a long shadow. Wherever we go. On whomever our shadows fall, the light still comes from the sun. And we are all always in God's care.