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12 Pentecost A
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Our Fragile Island Home

The great eclipse of 2017 came and went this week. It was the first to be seen from coast-to-coast in nearly 100 years with its shadow racing across the surface of the earth at 2000 mph. We will our chance in seven years when the next solar eclipse will pass directly over the North Country here in New Hampshire.

Of the many quotes and comments from those who experienced the great eclipse in person, there were common threads: awe, wonder, community.

Two of our members from Christ Church, Elaine and Steve Portalupi, drove over 2000 miles and back for 2 minutes and 32 seconds that they said did not disappoint. Elaine commented how it was such a moving experience it brought tears to her eyes – “during totality I felt like I was touching the face of God.” Steve: “It was both profound and exhilarating. Seeing and feeling the effects of our moon's interaction with our sun made me feel much more a part of our solar system.”

An Episcopal priest whose church was in the sweet spot in Kentucky picked up those themes: “It was like a moment of seeing the holy. And you had nothing to do with it. It was just a gift. It’s like you are looking at perfection” (The Rev. Alice Nichols). During those 2 brief moments of totality, people everywhere cheered, howled, applauded, cried, danced, stood with their mouths gapping open. An event of a lifetime. The ultimate bucket list event. “Magical,” “spiritual,” “more than I could have ever imagined.”

What was so clear to me was how the goal for so many onlookers was not to find a remote and solitary place to see the moon pass in front of the sun, but to experience this natural wonder alongside others. Entire football stadiums filled -- churning with anticipation.

For two brief minutes, millions of people in our country looked into the heavens and were elevated and drawn out of and away from their daily concerns. The weight of the world’s problems lifted for a brief time. There was little talk of politics, terrorism, hatred or war. Bill Nye the Science Guy gave the best advice leading up to event: don’t spend too much time looking through a camera or phone: “just be in the moment.”

One of the more memorable phrases in the Eucharistic prayer C in our Prayer Book and gave rise to its nickname as the “Star Wars” version is: At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses.” And then: “this fragile earth, our island home.”

As we witness the change in weather patterns and rising global temperatures – we see the enormous amount of rain being dumped over Texas as Hurricane Harvey pounds the coast -- perhaps the liturgical scholars who wrote Prayer C were onto something true. This earth is fragile, it is home to all of us.

This past Monday I imagined what the God of creation would say to humanity. Looking down at so many of people wearing those funny glasses. “Is this what I have to do to get your attention? Send the moon every few years and place it between the earth and the sun for a few minutes so that the light of day turns into darkness? Is that what will bring you together, stop working and go outside, make you realize your place in the vast universe, bring tears to your eyes and smiles on your faces and experience something of nature with millions of other people? OK, then. That’s what I will do.

We know and believe now that God does not live up there and the devil down under the earth as our ancient ancestors did -- God is beyond space and time -- but looking heavenward for inspiration and meaning is still worth our collective effort.

We stand in need a constant reminding of our place and purpose in this world. Who God is, what God does, and what we ourselves are called to do and become to respond to this gift.

Paul wrote his most theological letter to the emerging church in Rome: ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

What might this mean to us? Do not be conformed: be transformed.

We spend a lifetime essentially conforming to what we should be. It starts early. Most of us, I believe, grow up as children seeking the affection and approval of our parents. Many us desire to be accepted within circles of friends. So we incorporate ways of living to conform. Be kind. Play nicely with our siblings. Share. Don’t be rude. Later on: study hard. Pay attention. Pick the right kinds of friends. Stay in your lane. Don’t color outside of the lines. Know your place.

We spend a great deal of time and energy conforming to what our society and world tell us makes one happy and successful and good. We know that advertisers paint a skewed version of perfection: the perfect body, family, career and life. The hard part is moving beyond what we are sold and told.

Paul knows the Gospel and imagines a different way of living in the world. True transformation is a process that gets kick-started by this God we are all trying to understand more deeply and be in relationship with.

It is wonderful to stand in awe of the creation God has made: mountaintop experiences, eclipses, watching the sun rise and set over the ocean, enjoying the fruits of earth. It is good to be transformed and changed by the awe and wonder that the God of creation forever activates. And, let us be as inspired as we look into the heavens, to also look at our fragile island and those with whom we share this island home.

We are to care for and about fragile things and people – the faces of God. We can never forget those Jesus cared about: the hungry, poor, sick, marginalized, sinner, outcast, and the stranger. Who are they today? The single mother, the disabled veteran living with the trauma of war, the transgender youth trying to figure out why she never felt in her own body what the world told him to feel, the immigrant who fled a violent homeland, risked his life and that of his children to work on our farms, pick our crops, and do other back breaking and tedious work that many here would rather not do.

The late English writer G.K. Chesterton wrote this: “We should always endeavor to wonder at the permanent thing, not at the mere exception. We should be startled by the sun, and not by the eclipse. We should wonder less at the earthquake, and wonder more at the earth.”

Permanent things: the sun, the earth, our island home. It is all we have.