

WGUMC August 27, 2017 "Eclipsed By Love"  
Romans 8:18, 22-28, 31, 35, 37-39

How many of you saw the eclipse? I didn't get to see it. Hank went to Oregon to see it. My parents and kid sister drove from Colorado to Nebraska to see it. I pouted and went to the coast and ran in the fog and missed it entirely.

Though I didn't see the eclipse, I enjoyed reading about it, especially the stories about how different cultures have understood it. The Vikings thought a wolf gobbled the sun. In Vietnam, it was a frog. In India, it was a demon. There's even a tribe in Africa that thought the eclipse meant that the moon and sun were having a romantic rendezvous and modestly turned out the lights.

Here in America, the Navajo believe that when the moon eclipses the sun, it signifies the sun's death and rebirth. They teach their people not to gawk or even glance at the eclipse out of respect. There is no talking or eating or fussing allowed.

For many Native Americans the eclipse is a time for spiritual renewal.

I like that idea. We could all use a little spiritual renewal. Eclipse or no eclipse, as we head into another busy fall season and school year, let's all take some time to reset. I can't think of a better way to do that than to read Paul's letter to the Romans. I've picked out some of my favorite verses and a bunch of them are in the eighth chapter, a chapter that has in my Bible the title, "Life in the Spirit." Sounds good to me, so I invite you to join me this morning in a little Scripture meditation, beginning with verse 18.

"I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." Paul states the obvious: in the present time there is a lot of suffering. And he states the promise: in the future there is glory. But we can't see it now because we are stuck in our suffering. Suffering keeps us centered in ourselves, and the

only way we can even catch a glimpse of the glory is when we are centered in God. That's the challenge of the spiritual life and it's because we ignore it that life so often runs us off the rails.

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." We have the blessing and the curse of having the first fruits of the Spirit or a taste of life in the Spirit. We have said some prayers, read some Scripture, gone to some retreats, so we think we have an inkling of what the spiritual life is like, but we haven't been able to live it consistently. We're looking for something more, not something more to do but something more to be.

It's just that this transition from being self-centered to being God-centered is such a long and painful one and not only for us but for everyone and everything around us. We have a

sense now that if we don't make this transition collectively, we may just destroy the whole creation. Our being self-centered fuels most of the brokenness in our world, all the fear and hatred, all the violence and oppression. Our self-obsession leads to pollution and deforestation and—there is no denial—global warming. In that sense, St. Paul was a prophet because it is very true that the whole creation is groaning because we are not making that transition.

But we are groaning, too. Giving up our little lives and our little loves for the fantastic life and boundless love of God doesn't happen without going through a lot of personal pain. In fact, pain is the very thing that is usually needed to force us into that process. Almost never do we choose to give up our self-centered existence, our ego, voluntarily. Think of the people you have known or read about who are God-centered. I guarantee you that each and every one of them has been through a hell of a lot of pain.

So we are in a quandary, aren't we? We want a God-centered life, but we don't want to have to die to ourselves and go through hell to get there. And so we groan inwardly, as Paul says. Some of us are praying for a way out and some of us for a way through—through the pain to the promise.

"For in hope, we were saved." Paul says that the one thing we must have for rebirth to happen is hope. We have to have hope that our pain has a purpose, that our suffering has meaning, that our groaning will eventually lead to new growth.

Now "hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?" The purpose of the pain in our lives and in our world is not obvious to us. Unlike a mother giving birth, we often can't see the good that is going to come out of our labor. But as William Sloane Coffin used to say, "Hope is a state of mind independent of the state of the world." Hope is what enables us to live for something we can't see and work toward something that we will never achieve just because it's worth it.

Hope is a very powerful drug, but not enough of us have enough of it. What do we do if we are losing hope, if we can't wait for what we do not see, if we have exhausted our patience, used up all our prayers? Sometimes we are in so much pain that we can't even pray. We may have an illness or we are taking drugs that make it impossible for us to clear our heads, focus our attention, feel any emotion, or form any words, and we give up on prayer.

In those times, Paul says, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." I have a confession to make. After all these years, I still don't know how to pray, but I know how to walk, so I walk labyrinths to help me center on God. I don't know how to pray, but I know how to run, so I run in the trees and as they reach up to the heavens, they remind me that there is a Spirit praying for me.

I'm a living testament to the truth that you don't have to have the right words or the right postures. Just show up. Let God search your heart and let the Spirit find the truth in the sighs that are under the words. Sometimes all we can do is sigh, and that's OK. The Spirit knows that our sighs are more honest than most of our prayers.

The Spirit will be there for us, pray for us and encourage us until we can see for ourselves that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." This is one of the most popular verses in the whole Bible, and I used to cringe when I read it, because I didn't believe that all things were good. Poverty, disease, war; they are all bad. And they can happen to you even if you love God very much. So, I used to skip over this verse, but then I grew up.

Eventually you live long enough to learn that all things work together FOR good and anyone who loves God, who is

centered in God, can see how everything that happens to us has the potential to bring us closer to God and closer to the Good.

Think of all the things that try to separate us from God. Pride separates spouses. Jealousy separates siblings. Fear and prejudice separate people by race, class, gender, and culture. Money and power separate the haves from the have-nots. Violence separates us from our humanity. Diseases have a way of separating us from our bodies. And technology separates us from our sanity. As I was writing this my mother called to tell me that she wasn't able to send the picture of the eclipse she took because her email is all messed up. She will take the computer to a repair shop again and be cut off from the world for a whole week.

There are so many ways to feel separated. But when we make a list and start stewing about them, that's when we should hear a loud "NO!" Because that's when the Spirit shouts



into our spirits: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." None of this can separate us from the God who made us and the Son who saves us. Whatever we are suffering, whatever we are facing may seem overwhelmingly powerful to us, but let me tell you that whatever force of evil is bearing down on us, it is totally eclipsed by the power of God's love shining in us.

The monks of the New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur are proving that all of us can live in the path of totality. By God's grace, we can all believe that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Let me read you a letter I got a few weeks ago from their Prior:

*Dear friends,*

*Thank you once again for the marvelous outpouring of support, financial and otherwise, and concern over these last few months. I am not sure what we would have done without them, and we are all extremely grateful.*

*To recap: after the torrential rains of this past winter, Highway 1, pretty much the only access to the Big Sur for nearly 80 miles except for a narrow windy road over the mountains just*

*south of us, suffered numerous landslides, mudslides and rock slides, too many to be counted...At several points we were cut off completely for a few days at a time, with no phones, only internet and walkie-talkie, and were on alert for helicopter emergencies.*

*When things finally calmed down the bridge over Pfeiffer Canyon, 25 miles north of us, had developed severe cracks and had to be demolished, cutting off access to and from the north; a huge landslide happened one evening 14 miles south of us at Mud Creek, dumping 5 million cubic yards of rock and dirt down and into the ocean, actually creating a new landmass on the coast (the surfers were thrilled about this); and just south of us the outer lane of the highway washed into the ocean at a very tender spot called Paul's Slide, a 4 square mile active slide, part of which is actually on our own property. Consequently a good section of our own two-mile entry road was also badly damaged. At one point, as someone described it, it was like driving up a one lane stairway. It was never completely impassable for the brave of heart, which includes the heroic food and fuel delivery trucks, but it was dangerous. Due to the work on the highway, we have only had access and egress twice a day for the past four months, 5:30 AM and 7:00 PM. For any trips to town we have either had to cross over the mountains during one of those windows of time, or drive 25 miles north, leave a car parked on the highway, walk a trail to the north side of the canyon, and retrieve one of the cars that we have left in a temporary parking lot at Big Sur Ranger Station. It has been like an elaborate game of chess, trying to figure out the logistics of practical matters. In the midst of that we have endured several health crises and two deaths.*

*Throughout, the brothers have been tremendous and our own staff has been loyal and resilient. It has allowed us to simplify,*

*shift priorities, and really coalesce as a community. There has been a real spirit of joy and cooperation pervading New Camaldoli throughout the spring and early summer.*

*Now I have some progress to report: Highway 1 is now open 24/7 at Paul's Slide...our maintenance crew has done a tremendous job of leveling off our own entrance road...and we opened for retreatants and visitors this past weekend, for the first time since January. Not only are we relieved to have a little income again, we are thrilled finally to be able to welcome guests. While we live a quiet eremitical life, hospitality is an essential element of all of our Camaldolese communities, and we have missed the gentle interaction we have with our friends and other pilgrims.*

*So, once again, thank you for all your support, and come and see us some time. Never have any of us appreciated so much nor been so respectful of the wild untamed beauty of the Big Sur that offers us hospitality to live out our contemplative life. With every good wish and our humble, grateful prayers, we bless you in the name of Jesus,*

*Cyprian, OSB Cam. and the Monks of New Camaldoli*

For the monks, the powerful storms of 2017 have been eclipsed by the love of God, their love for each other and the love of good neighbors. This crisis has been a real gift to their community. It has been a time to reset, a time for rebirth. While they were physically cut off, they became spiritually

more connected. And so the Prior's letter tells us how all things can work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.

I am convinced that the same can be true for us, that all the losses we experience in life will be totally eclipsed by the love. The Son of God is one Sun you can look at, and you don't need special goggles to do it. You only need the eyes of faith to see that, nothing—or as Wayne Williams used to say, *absolutely* nothing—in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Yea God!