



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Pentecost 12
Proper 16 (A)**

Totality

[RCL]: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Fun fact: before there was coronavirus, the last time “corona” was in the news was during the solar eclipse of 2017. Back then, it didn’t refer to a virus, but to the dazzling light of the sun’s plasma or “atmosphere” that is usually invisible to us, but which we can see during a solar eclipse. It is that type of “corona” that we’ll be talking about today.

For a moment back in 2017 – in a year that seems like it was decades ago – the world stopped and people stepped outside to observe the strange phenomenon happening in the sky.

These days, we plan for months and perhaps years to observe solar eclipses, but obviously, the first recorded solar eclipses were quite a shock to humanity. As with other celestial phenomena, humans had no way of completely observing or explaining what was happening in the sky, so they came up with their own theories: one was that a dragon was eating the sun. In response, people would sacrifice animals, sometimes even humans, to try to get the dragon to leave them.

Those sacrifices “worked” every time. The sun always returned.

The Greek historian Herodotus tells us about when the path of totality crossed a battlefield as the Medes and the Lydians fought a long-standing war. When the sky became dark, the soldiers immediately stopped fighting, and their leaders took the eclipse as a sign that they should agree to a truce. It’s called the Eclipse of Thales, named after the philosopher who is said to have predicted it ahead of time. That battle, eclipse, and truce occurred on May 28, 585 BC.

Eclipses are much less of a mystery to us now. We now know that there is no dragon in the sky. We know that we do not need to sacrifice anyone or anything to convince the sun to

come back. We can predict the exact dates and times of every eclipse, so it's much less of a shock; they no longer change the course of history in quite the same way.

However, a total solar eclipse is still a big deal, and science has made it possible for more people to witness one. The next one, in case you're wondering, is predicted for April 2024.

In 2017, people streamed in from all over the country to get into the "path of totality," where the moon completely obscures the sun, the birds stop chirping, the land goes dark, and all you can see of the sun is the corona — the shimmer around the sun.

People of all faiths and none describe it as a deep spiritual experience, and on August 21, 2017, the whole country stopped bickering about everything for just a few minutes to witness the cosmos putting on a show. And then, just like that, life restarted again.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus has come a little way since having healed the Canaanite woman's daughter in last week's reading. Between that passage and this one, he's fed four thousand men plus women and children and had plenty of leftovers, and right after that, he's bickered with the Pharisees and other religious authorities about showing them a sign that he's really sent from God. Of course, he *had* just given them a sign — he'd just fed a huge crowd of people out of nothing. No sense of irony, those Pharisees.

Then, after that, even his disciples don't seem to understand who he is or what his mission is. It's one of those times when Jesus must've felt like *nobody* understood him or his mission, despite him constantly talking about it.

Finally, Jesus directly asks his disciples, "Who do people out there say that I am?" Perhaps he starts with the crowds rather than the disciples because he knows it'll be easier for them to talk about other people's feelings and assumptions, rather than their own.

The reply comes, "Well, some say John the Baptist" — which could be a case of mistaken identity on behalf of the crowds, or it could be a case of "he's back from the dead," depending on whether they'd heard the news that John had been killed. But then there are also other, definitely "they think you're back from the dead" cases. One response to Jesus' question about who the crowds say he is comes in: "Some say Elijah, others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

Then Jesus asks his disciples pointedly about their own views of him: "Who do *you* say that I am?" A disciple who, up to that point, has been called Simon steps up and delivers: "You're the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And just like that, something extraordinary has happened and something hidden has been revealed. They finally said it out loud.

You know those moments when you know something is true, but then when you hear yourself say it, it becomes real for you? This was probably like that for Peter. All of a sudden, things shift dramatically, and you can see things in a way you never have before, all because someone said what he already knew *out loud*. Peter finds himself in a kind of path of totality, where everything stops for a moment, and where all the disciples look up and see the same thing.

In a few minutes, everything will be back to normal and Jesus will quickly tell them not to tell anyone that he's the Messiah. But for a few shining moments, everything shifts, and Simon even gets a new name: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! ...I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and all of hell won't be able to touch it."

We are the heirs of Peter and all those who built the church. The church's history is not a clean one — the church has done plenty of evil in Christ's name to all kinds of people. But every now and then, we find ourselves in a kind of path of totality. Every now and then, everything stops, and we see clearly not only who God is — a self-giving God of love, patience, and welcome — but who *we* are and who we are meant to be.

We have come from God and we are going to God, and right now, God says: "*Who do you say that I am?*"

Consider that question for yourself, because it will shape who you – and we – will be. Sometime today, put yourself in the path of totality. For just a moment, say it out loud: Who is Jesus to you? Who is Jesus to our church?

Solar eclipses shake up a lot within us: they make us see how very tiny we are amid a huge solar system and universe. Eclipses help us to understand something about ourselves. They provide those rare moments of clarity when we can see things that we usually can't — both literally and metaphorically. They stop everything — all the bickering, even all the suffering, just for a few moments. They help us all to look up and see the same thing.

When we worship together, sing together, take the Eucharist together, we are in a kind of path of totality. Everything can stop for just a few minutes as we all gather around Christ. Christ may be the only thing we have in common, but luckily, Christ is the only thing that matters.

Let us put ourselves in the path of totality. Let us say who we think Jesus is and who we think we are in Christ – out loud. For once, let us look to Christ, and in so doing, may we look up and see the same thing: love, grace, and the path of totality — total, complete, and all-encompassing grace. *Amen.*

Anna Tew is a Lutheran pastor serving Our Savior's Lutheran Church in South Hadley, Massachusetts. A product of several places, she was born and raised in rural south Alabama, lived most of her adult life to date in Atlanta, and has called New England home for the past four years. Anna graduated from the Candler School of Theology in 2011, and since then she has served in both parish ministry and hospital chaplaincy. In her spare time, Anna enjoys keeping up with politics and pop culture (especially music), hiking, running, and CrossFit.