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“Crown of Glory”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year B)

March 22, 2015

Jeremiah 31:31–34; Psalm 51:1–12; Hebrews 5:5–10; John 12:20–33

**Never view a total eclipse with the naked eye or with any optical device
such as binoculars or a telescope!**

That’s what the experts advise in advance of a full solar eclipse.

The last full solar eclipse visible in our neck of the woods occurred on August 1, 2008.

The next full solar eclipse visible in Durham happens on August 21, 2017.

The first one that I was aware of took place in July 1963.

I was made aware of it because of the strict ban laid out for us by my mother:

Do not, under any circumstances, look directly at the sun!

If you want to see it, she said, punch a pinhole in a piece of paper

and look at the image that is projected through the pinhole onto the ground.

She was so worried about us damaging our eyes

that she took us to see a matinee showing of *The Wizard of Oz* during most

of the eclipse to remove the temptation to peek at it.

But I distinctly recall little crescent shapes dotting the sidewalk through holes

in leaves as we drove to the theatre that afternoon.

And I remember the eerie shadow sliding over the city

and the birds becoming more and more quiet, gradually sinking towards sleep,

as the supernatural darkness deepened.

At the height of a full solar eclipse, a most wondrous phenomena is visible

to cameras that can capture the moment: *the corona*,

the sun’s outer atmosphere that appears as a pearly white

crown at the height of the eclipse.

It is the sun's crown of glory, corona meaning crown,

and it can include a variety of streamers, plumes and loops.

But one dare not look at it directly, although some say it is safer at this point

to sneak a peek. The best advice, however, is to avert one's eyes,

like the birds of the air.

Such glory is too awesome and threatening to behold directly!

And so it seems with Jesus at this point in his journey.

Jesus has just made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem for the Passover festival.

And all eyes are on him in the wake of his miraculous revival of Lazarus

and his humble but jaw-dropping entrance into the city.

Jesus is wildly popular with the crowds at this point

and wildly unpopular with the Jewish authorities

for whom the cult-like adulation has become problematic.

The Greeks, who are non-Jewish followers, wish to view Jesus with the naked eye.

They clamor to see Jesus up close and personal.

But even they are daunted by his holiness and must approach him indirectly,

co-opting the Galileans, Philip and Andrew, to arrange a meeting.

So they cry out to Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

And Philip conveys their request to Andrew, who passes it along to Jesus, to which Jesus replies, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

The hour which Jesus speaks of points forward

to a quickly approaching point in time

to which his whole life has been leading.

The critical moment in his earthly pilgrimage has arrived.

To be glorified, he suggests, is to align oneself closely with death,

like a seed that falls to the ground where it will die as a seed

in order to be transformed.

The Gentile Greeks, the Jewish crowds, too, wish to see his fame... his flash...

his razzle dazzle... his charisma.

What they are going to find difficult to gaze upon is his glory

because glory is drastically different than fame.

Fame is all about celebrity, notoriety, popular acclaim and renown.

Fame is all about how many eyes are upon you,

how many people friend you on Facebook, how many readers follow you on Twitter,

how many books you have sold,

how many records have gone platinum.

John Lennon caused quite an uproar in 1966 with his controversial suggestion

that the Beatles were more popular, more famous than Jesus.

But Lennon was right because Jesus never sought popularity or fame;

his domain was that of glory, God's glory.

Fame, like beauty, is in the adoring eyes of the human beholder.

Glory is in the adoring, redeeming eyes of God only,

and it implies the eschatological hope of finding favor in the eyes of God,

not of being seen by adoring fans.

Glory—the Greek word for it is “doxa,” like doxology—

is hammered to a smooth sheen through suffering associated with death.

The civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in March 1965

marked its 50th anniversary earlier this month.

I suppose we could also call it another kind of March madness.

The movie, *Selma*, commemorates Dr. Martin Luther King and those

who endured great suffering, threats of death, physical injury,

and even death itself to make the march happen.

Selma, the movie, was released at the beginning of the year, but I have had

a hard time making myself go see it.

Like an eclipse of the sun, the glory of Dr. King and his followers is hard on the eyes.

I'm okay looking at words about Dr. King, little pinpoint images on a piece of paper

that suggest his story and all that he stood for.

But to see history played out on the big screen with film clips from the actual events—the rubble from the church bombing that killed those four sweet little girls in Birmingham in 1963, the overt brutality of legally sanctioned white privilege, the sneers and the flicking of the finger, the spitting, the sound of the billysticks connecting with flesh and bone, the sickening cheers of the white crowd—

I wanted to avert my eyes from reliving that.

The theme song from the movie, “Glory,” written and performed by John Legend and a gospel choir, won an Academy Award as this year’s song of the year. *Selma*, the movie itself, was virtually overlooked by the Oscar nominating committee. It is not a pretty movie. It is not easy on the eyes.

It is not about popularity or fame.

It suggests glory, as the song implies.

And I think the film Academy’s snub of *Selma* at the Oscars is a spot-on affirmation that the movie hits its mark, its uncomfortable mark.

Glory is just too awesome and too threatening to behold directly, whether it’s in the sun, or in the Son of Man, or in one of his suffering servants.

There is a particular scene in the movie where Coretta Scott King confronts her husband, Martin, about a recording which exposes his infidelities that has been leaked to her, in all probability by the FBI.

Their living room hushed-so-the-children-can’t-hear dialogue over this breach of trust is painfully powerful, especially when she asks of her husband:

“Do you love me? And do you love any of them?”

But the part of her commentary that wrecks of glory to me, that aligns her story and his story with the Jesus story, is her lament over having to live life, every day, with the constant closeness of death.

“It’s like a fog of death,” that envelops us, the children, all of those involved with the civil rights movement, she says, and that’s hard to live with. But Jesus, I imagine, would say that’s the nature of glory. It’s like living with the fog of death, not with fame.

One of the many ancillary stories emerging from the 50th observance of the march in Selma is about a Catholic nun, Sister Barbara Lum, who came to Selma from Rochester, NY, in 1959 to work at the Good Samaritan Hospital and teach in its practical nursing program. Many of her students there were African American, and they relayed to her the shunning and indignities they suffered under the Jim Crow system. Because the sisters of St. Joseph convent lived and worked in the black community, they were also shunned by most of Selma’s white residents.

On Bloody Sunday, Sr. Lum rushed to the Good Samaritan emergency room to care for demonstrators suffering from scalp lacerations, broken bones, and the effects of tear gas, clubbing and being run over by horses. Later, when out-of-town civil rights supporters converged upon Selma, the sisters of the convent afforded lodging in the hospital and fed the guests. Their supervisor, Archbishop Thomas Toolen of Mobile, AL, strictly forbade them from actively taking part in the demonstrations, so they stayed at their posts and cared for the wounded, fed the hungry, and provided hospitality for the out-of-towners.

“We were really terrified,” Lum said, “but we felt it was very important to stay at our posts.”

Have you ever heard of Sister Barbara Lum? I haven’t!

Was she ever highly acclaimed or famous? Hardly.

Do you see God’s corona of glory surrounding her as she placed herself so close to suffering and the fog of death?

(Paul Murray, *National Catholic Reporter*, “Selma March at 50: St. Joseph Sister Cared for Demonstrators on Bloody Sunday,” March 11, 2015)

At this point in the Jesus story, and all the way through until Easter morning,
quite frankly, I want to avert my eyes.

The Greeks might wish to see Jesus, but to me, this part is almost as
painful as looking at a solar eclipse with the naked eye.

The passion of Jesus, the chain of events leading to his death, to his final hour,
to his poured-out cup, the flesh and blood suffering of this one human being,
the unraveling of his compassionate and altruistic life
that will culminate, ultimately, in his death are just overwhelming to me.

The light of his life is about to be eclipsed by the darkness
of the powers and principalities who wish to extinguish him.

I wanted to punch a pinpoint hole in a cardboard box and let only a little
Light of the World filter through.

I want to put my hands together and block out most of Jesus,
only allowing a little Bread of Life to make a pattern on the ground.

I want to watch the Good Shepherd sifted through tree leaves or read about him
as tiny images on a sheet of paper.

And obviously, I'm not the only one who has issues with gazing upon glory.

If you track any church's attendance during Holy Week,
you will notice the crowds who clamor to wave palms on Palm Sunday,
the faithful few who file in quietly for Maundy Thursday,
the remnant who trudge the way of the cross on Good Friday,
and then the throngs who gather to celebrate Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday.
I don't blame them, quite frankly.

It's hard for me to make the whole journey with Jesus all the way to the cross.
I want Jesus to walk with me, as the song suggests,
but I don't necessarily want to walk the whole way to the cross with Jesus.

Like the turnaround that Dr. Martin Luther King made
on the Edmund Pettis Bridge that second day,

I am tempted to turn my face away and shade my eyes from the painful, shameful

eclipsing of the human Jesus in his passion.

But then I might miss his Glory that shines through even death,
the Glory of the undying love of God.

We must die to what we expect to see
and open our eyes to what God actually is doing.

Dr. King, less than a year before his death in Memphis, continued to
oppose the war in Vietnam, racism and poverty, and he said,
"It may hurt me. But when I took up the cross, I recognized its meaning...
It is not something that you wear.

The cross is something that you bear and ultimately that you die on."
(Martin Luther King, Jr., "Speech at Staff Retreat," Penn Center, Frogmore, South
Carolina, May 22, 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change,
Atlanta, GA)

To open one's eyes to what God is actually doing, to rest one's eyes on
the suffering servant's crown of thorns is to glimpse Christ's corona,
God's glory radiating from around the edges of his life.

The power of Christ's passion in our lives is mystically healing, forgiving, liberating,
redeeming, strengthening, and salvific beyond explanation.

Just ask Ed or Dewey or others who would love to be in worship during Holy Week.
A paraphrase of the conclusion of the Lord's Prayer that we have used
in worship during Lent suggests just this:

With the bread we need for today, feed us.

In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.

In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.

From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the GLORY of that power

THAT IS LOVE, now and forever. Amen.