

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, August 27, 2023

The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, *Vicar*

on

Matthew 16:13-20

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“Illuminating Darkness”

The Great Historian, Herodotus, gave an account of a stalemate of war east Asia, taking place between the Medes (*pron. meeds*) and the Lydians. A feud had grown into a senseless full-fledged war that dragged on for years. Unlike most ancient history, we know the exact date when the war ended, May 28, 585 B.C., because this day was special, the day of a solar eclipse. As he wrote, “just as the battle was growing warm, day was on a sudden changed into night. The Medes and Lydians, when they observed the change, ceased fighting, and were alike anxious to have terms of peace agreed on.” And that is indeed what occurred. The enveloping darkness of that eclipse somehow illuminated what had been hidden to them, leading them off their warpath to a way of being at peace with their enemy. And it was at the place of darkness, at the site of the eclipse, that the Medes and the Lydians established a new, peaceful border. It was not the light of dawn, but the darkness that woke them up, that saved them from evermore mutual destruction. It was the darkness that showed them the light.

The disciples, represented by their most prominent member Peter, come to the light in our gospel reading for today. They see something new that they had never seen before, yet in a very dark place. Caesarea Philippi. This was the administrative capital of the particular region of the Roman Empire that included Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, and the Golan Heights. There was a spring and a temple devoted to the trickster god, Pan, there. And, recently, the Jewish governor Herod the Great had built a white-marble temple to the emperor, worshiping him as a god on earth. It was an unholy place. And the staging ground for the relentless domination and abuse of their people.

To look upon this Roman, pagan stronghold was like looking at an eclipse, in that a dark force had consumed their hopes. Looking upon Caesarea Philippi, especially for disciples who hadn’t grown up there, would have been at once infuriating and heart-breaking. Like looking at an eclipse that had never ended, and trying to remember what the sun looked like.

It is here that Jesus leads the disciples in a discourse about what is happening among them, nothing less than the heart of the matter: who am I? He asks this question obliquely, by asking “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Now, they would have all remembered the passage from the Book of Daniel that describes “the Son of Man.” You could also translate it as “the Human One.” Daniel writes about these fantastic beasts that dominate and devour everything in their path. One beast looked like a lion with wings. Another looked like a creature with iron teeth and ten horns. Visions of the Empires of his day. And in Daniel’s prophecy, the throne of God is stormed and challenged by the beasts, but, in the end, the beasts are vanquished, and the Son of Man sits on the throne. Daniel ends this vision with this: “And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most

High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.” Daniel foretells a complete triumph, not just of a single land, but all lands.

It looks like the coming of the Son of Man is nothing less than the end of Empires and a new kind of Humanity, a new kind of existence where humanity doesn’t need domination and war to thrive. And so, when Jesus starts a line of questioning that references the Son of Man in a discourse about his identity, well, that’s a big deal.

And it is even more powerful to be discussing this at the Roman headquarters of Caesarea of Philippi, in the belly of the beast in their era!

Who do the crowds say that the Son of Man is?” The disciples tell him that most of the crowd think that this could have been one of the great prophets coming back to save them, or perhaps John the Baptist, who had taken up the prophet’s mantle. But when Jesus asks “Who do *you* say that I am?” it is Peter who makes the most vivid connection. He actually gives Jesus both a Jewish and a Roman title. “You are *Mesiah*! The Messiah. Son of the Living God.”

Two titles. The ancient, longed for savior of the Jewish people from domination, the Messiah. And, “Son of the Living God,” They would have found this title inscribed on the marble temple to Caesar in Caesarea Philippi. They would have found “Son of the Living God” on the face of the coins in their purses throughout the Empire, right beside the face of Caesar. The Citizens would have called Caesar Savior, and Lord, too! But Peter, in the belly of the beast, gives the Title the Beast had chosen to Jesus. In the place of darkness he sees a great light.

Peter is saying, “I see now. Caesar isn’t Lord, you are. Caesar’s not the Son of God, you are. Caesar is not our ruler; you are. You’re not just inviting us into a life on the sidelines of the mess Rome has made. You are inviting us into a new kingdom, one that will truly vanquish the one that we see so cruelly dominating our Promised Land.”

Jesus blesses Peter for this. He calls him “The Rock.” He tells him that his conviction is so solid that the armies of hell could not win out against this. He gives him the keys to the kingdom, because he had the epiphany, he was the one to unlock the door first, a door that so many would follow through after him.

It is quite something for Peter to be in one of the most despairing and darkest of places and then able to perceive the hidden, inner light of what was happening through Jesus, these glimmers of the true world shining through.

That’s how it often is. Like during an eclipse, we don’t really see something, take it in, until it is taken away from us. The question for us is how can we really see our world without having it taken away from us? Can we see the value, the true, of the person next to us, and love them, before they depart? Can we see the value of our virtuous institutions, and support them, before they falter? Can we see the beauty of our ecological systems, and defend them, before they collapse? Can we learn how to study war no more, before the ruination that it brings is at hand? Can we see the light, before the dreadful, illuminating darkness comes?

Of course, we can. We see that light, even now. We are stewards of that light, yet not just on Sun-day, but every day. Not just when hope is eclipsed in our lives, when it is darkest, but every day. The presence of Christ is made so very vivid here, in prayer, sacred story, music, bread and wine, it is just as present out there as it is in here. The work of God is relentless and far-reaching. Not just in the highs and the lows, but in it all. In everybody. And if we can keep looking, keep straining to see God’s work out there, with our hearts and with our souls, then all this (gesture to the Church) will be just a shadow in comparison, just a veil to be lifted to reveal the true beauty of God among us.