

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

August 13, 2017
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 14:22-33

The Cosmic Meets the Personal

Are you ready for the coming cosmic experience? I'm talking about the upcoming solar eclipse which could potentially be viewed in totality by more than 7 million people across the United States. This "Great American Eclipse" has been described as "easily the most spectacular sight in nature when the sky suddenly darkens and the most beautiful object in the sky — the Sun's shimmering corona — becomes visible for two minutes or so." (<https://www.greatamericaneclipse.com/statistics/>) For those of us disinclined to join the crowds in the path of totality, who plan to stay here in Bozeman and see a 95% eclipse, the experience, I'm told, will not be nearly as cosmic. But even just hearing about this eclipse arouses feelings of awe and wonder at the amazing universe we live in.

Cosmos is the word the ancient Greeks used to describe the orderly arrangement of stars and sun, moon and earth. The word is used more than 150 times in the New Testament, usually translated into English as "world." But this meaning of "world" is larger than our planet. It means the whole created order, from tiny to magnificent, which is full of majesty and mystery—and terror. The *cosmos* is God's, according to Biblical understanding, the object of God's creation and redemption. "For God so loved the *cosmos* that he gave his only Son. . ."

Indeed, the *cosmos* is a dazzling home in which to dwell. We owe our every breath to the life-sustaining *cosmos*, the world around us. Sometimes it takes our breath away because it is so incredibly beautiful. On the other hand, as we've experienced too much this summer, sometimes it's hard to breathe in the *cosmos*. It is terrifying to witness fires, earthquakes, tsunamis, and storms. The *cosmos* is not always hospitable to life.

A cosmic viewpoint puts our human story in perspective. Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson tells us that if a one-year calendar represents the 13.8 billion years of the history of the universe, human history is comparable to the last minute of the last hour of the last day. It's humbling, isn't it? Yet throughout this relatively brief time, extreme experiences of the *cosmos* have caused humans to think about God. When we are confronted with something greater than ourselves, we wonder about God's cosmic nature, cosmic power, and cosmic existence. Increased knowledge acquired through scientific inquiry has not diminished this human curiosity about the divine. We imagine God, a distant cosmic architect, builder, and engineer.

We imagine a God greater than the heavens, more powerful than an earthquake, more spectacular than even a solar eclipse. The Bible's witness affirms this understanding of God. And while we might dare to ask for God's help in the face of a devastating natural event, what the insurance companies have often called "an act of God," we can also feel so intimidated that our prayers are timid. "God, if you are really out there, and if you really do hear me, then could you do something, anything to help?"

I suspect that the disciples, on board a boat in the Sea of Galilee in the middle of a stormy night, said a prayer or two. They were religious people, schooled in prayer. But they may have wondered if their little prayers could possibly make any difference in the awesomeness of the universe as they knew it.

And in the awesomeness of the universe as we know it, I know that many of us doubt the efficacy of our little prayers. What is my small voice in the vastness of the universe? Even if we are totally convinced of the reality of a mighty creator God, we are likely to wonder why such a God would even care about our humble opinion, our little needs, our teeny tiny infinitesimally small persons.

All night long, on that boat, the storm raged. Now, we call it the "sea" of Galilee, but it's only about 8 miles wide, and in daylight, you can see the shoreline of the entire lake from the mountainous land anywhere around it. Yet those mountains are the source of sudden and fierce storms, as winds descend from the east and turn a calm lake into a life-threatening sea. Throughout the night, as the boat shook from side to side, the fishermen aboard surely thought of others they'd known who had met their death in similar storms. Thunder, lightning, rain, and wind—if the elements of nature are so powerful, then what does that say about the power of the God who created them?

But where was Jesus? Back on shore, at a private prayer retreat. Once before, he had used his God-given powers to quiet a storm. This time, he was nowhere to be seen, all night long.

And then he appears. Walking on the water. The storm is still raging, the wind howling, the waves rolling. Is it a dream, a vision? Is it a ghost? The moment of recognition comes when he speaks: "Do not be afraid."

In the face of a life-threatening storm, fear is natural. In the face of the storms of our lives—storms of illness, storms of grief, storms of broken relationships and disappointments, sadness and despair—fear is to be expected. Courage is unnatural, a triumph of the will over the instinct for self-preservation. Courage relies on faith, not certainty, and not reason. When Jesus says to his friends, "Do not be afraid," he commands faith to overcome fear.

So Peter tries to live up to that command. He steps out of the boat, out onto the stormy waters. And it works! Like Jesus, he does the impossible. He walks on water.

Until he doesn't. We're all with Peter, sinking in the sea, letting fear overcome faith. Until, like Peter, we utter that desperate plea, "Lord, save me!"

It is a desperate plea, the only option Peter has left. He is beyond the slim safety of the boat. He has reached his own limits. He has slipped off the tightrope of his life and death is imminent, but Jesus is there. And maybe, just maybe, he will hear him, and maybe, just maybe, he'll do something, anything.

And then we see it happen. Jesus reaches his hand out to his friend, his trusting follower, Peter, and saves this one desperate soul. It is intimate, and personal, as hand-in-hand they step aboard the boat. And then the storm ends. Jesus is both lifesaver and cosmic ruler, the Lord who saves, master of the wind and waves and giver of salvation to one soggy guy who fell into the sea.

When we doubt our significance in God's cosmic plan, when we question whether God cares about each one of us, even me, when we are intimidated by our smallness in the vastness of the universe, we have this story to remind us that the Lord of all loves us personally, individually, for who we are. Lord of the *cosmos*, personal Savior, all wrapped into one, the image of God. No wonder those in the boat worshipped him, saying "Truly you are the Son of God!"

Presbyterian Outlook editor Jill Duffield writes,

when the cosmic meets the personal, we never, ever forget it. When we've been saved by grace and know the love of God, we can't help but worship and bear witness to the one who reached

out when we were the most scared and caught us. We proclaim the storm-story that fishers of people must tell.

([http://pres-outlook.org/category/ministry-resources/looking-into-the-lectionary/August 13, 2017](http://pres-outlook.org/category/ministry-resources/looking-into-the-lectionary/August%2013,2017))

Our little prayers, our little “Lord, save me!”s do matter in the universe, in the *cosmos*, because the one who hears them is great enough, and good enough, and loving enough to care. And when our pleas are joined with God’s will for peace, for salvation, for justice, for wholeness, the *cosmos* spinning through space turns in that direction. Toward God’s ultimate unity, the final redemption of all.

I cannot speak this week’s message about the cosmic and the personal in a vacuum, as if the world around us were not stormy. This week we have heard much talk of human power, threats involving the use of nuclear weapons. We need to pray for a peaceful end to this kind of talk. “Lord, save us!” For it is not God’s will that we humans should cause the destruction of the world, this portion of the *cosmos* which gives us life. Talk of using nuclear weapons moves us closer to self-destruction, and is a denial of God’s sovereignty, God as Lord of the *cosmos*. We need to pray.

And then we need to live into the direction our prayers take us.

In this week when we recall the bombing 72 years ago of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, I lift up the prayer of former Secretary of State George P. Shultz, who is a member of a group called “Voices for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons,” which meets monthly to pray for this purpose. Mr. Shultz is 96 years old, and he shares his personal prayer.

Dear God, please bring common sense and divine guidance to our work on the problems that nuclear weapons pose to our world. Man has invented a means to destroy us all. We must eliminate these weapons in order to preserve a sane and peaceful world. We pray for your help as we work toward this goal. Amen.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLRKALmJ4Yk>)

The personal meets the cosmic, the cosmic meets the personal when we pray for salvation and peace. Let us trust that God in Christ hears, and will respond, as we live in faith.