

Sky Sunday (26Aug18)
from Isaiah 13, Mark 15, Psalm 19

Did you know: thunder is the sound of God bowling?

Lightning is the flash of God taking your picture. Wind is God going <puff> across the map. Rain is when God is crying. In the most biblical form, thunder is the sound of God speaking. But what in the world is God trying to say? And are these just clever explanations, which manage to misinform both our view of God and our view of the sky?

That goes with these Bible readings to get us started on this Sky Sunday. Whether in jokey clarifications or in actual practice, we're used to trying to read the sky for messages or revelations from God. If we want to take beautiful stars or a colorful sunset or the cheer of blue summer days as indicators of a good and gracious God, we're left confronting cloudy days, stormy weather, destructive events and wondering how they relate to God.

I mentioned two months ago that as the ELCA Social Statement on human sexuality was being voted on at the Churchwide Assembly in 2009, a tornado went directly over the conference center. It's a great example of a really ambiguous sign: does it mean God was against how this church graciously considers the fullness of sexuality? Or by the tornado not touching down, did God intentionally spare the assembly? Or maybe it had to do with summer air currents in a warm and humid metropolitan environment.

Our Psalm says the heavens declare the glory of God, that they proclaim their maker's handiwork. So what in the world are they telling, declaring, proclaiming?

We have two Bible readings set side-by-side that would have almost opposite perspectives on what skies are saying about God. In Isaiah, the darkened sky is an indicator of punishment, because of God's fierce wrath at evil. That omen is ominous. It's not an uncommon perception of skies in the Bible, that they show portents as the moon turns to blood and the sky to sackcloth. If

we're looking for meaning and trying to find answers, we shouldn't just write this off as ancient superstitions about eclipses. We should legitimately consider what a darkened sky may tell us about God and our relationship with God.

But we cannot simply say it's a sign of punishment or that we have a vindictive God who will use weather patterns to unleash fury on us. Because the reading from the Gospel of Mark ostensibly is the opposite. We turn from a reading about skies darkening as a sign of violence *from* God to a reading about skies darkening as a sign of violence *to* God. We hear the verbal abuse Jesus receives on his way to crucifixion, from the authorities on down to people who are suffering the same fate as him, only making his situation worse by heaping insults on him. And Jesus dies and the sky goes dark and the curtain of the temple is torn in two.

That tearing is an interesting detail I want to examine. The other time that word comes up in Mark's Gospel is right at the start when the heavens are torn open at Jesus' baptism. It's a powerful word, like ripped apart or torn asunder. When something is torn, it's not easily repaired. So the tearing open of the skies at Jesus' baptism is paired with the tearing of the temple curtain. These are often seen that the abode of God can no longer be closed off. The barriers that kept us from God have been irreparably split open. Nothing can any longer separate us from God.

I want to consider another aspect of it, though, too, which will keep us closer to our theme of skies. Much of the time this word for tearing or rending is for clothes, with lamentation. It's about sorrow and grief, a visible outer sign showing internal feelings. So in some way, the temple curtain tearing could be seen as God tearing God's own garments in sorrow. And when the sky is like sackcloth, that also is a sign of sorrow. The sky is mourning. M-O-U-R-N-I-N-G. That is why the darkness.

So maybe our readings aren't opposites. Maybe we see them together. The sky is mourning. It mourns violence. It mourns the breaking apart of relationship. It mourns death.

This is a very different perspective than usual. We are more likely to think of the sky as having the initiative, as the instigator, doing something to us. But in these biblical ways, the sky is responsive. It responds to human brokenness and evil. It responds to the death of Jesus. It responds in sorrow.

When we stop to reflect on it, it should be obvious: this is a relationship. We keep reiterating this about creation: that we aren't somehow separate. That it's not only about us. We're all in it together, inextricably bound in relationship. We easily recognize it the other way; I started writing down this sermon on a day with sunny blue skies, and I know that affected my demeanor, but finished in more somber rain. My mood and my writing were different because of the sky. Probably this is why lovers like moonlight. And why energetic people and birds like the sunrise. We're in relationship. It affects us.

What we consider today is simply the other side of it. Not only that we are affected, but that we affect. As in any relationship, it's mutual.

Again, we often consider only one side of this. This week certainly is a clear time to be considering skies. But not clear skies and the exuberant sun of the Psalm. This provoked the wondering about punishment and anger and violence, and a week that unleashed furious torrents on us may feel like the rain was out to get us. Or God was against us. Not a few of us who were mopping the carpet of our basements or worse may have been asking, "What did I do to deserve this?"

One honest answer has less to do with the sky providing evidence of God's behavior and more evidence of our behavior. The real and unfortunate answer for what we did to deserve it more and more clearly connects to a changing climate, where we've turned the sky more volatile and violent, to hold more moisture, to produce bigger storms and in less usual places, or made the sky fickle to avoid even a drop where wildfires scorch, as we're reminded in glowing orange sunsets. What did we do to deserve it? We burned coal and drove cars, ate beef and flew jets

and bought too many things from across the globe. We made the sky sad. And God with it.

In another way, those changes to the climate offer a fascinating view of this complex relationship. If our Psalm says the skies declare God's work, I reflect on the composition of our atmosphere. We do what with air? Breathe. And we breathe what? Oxygen. Well, the air around us is only about 20% oxygen. That means most of each breath you take is not the part you're trying to use for your blood cells to take from your lungs and offer to the rest of your body. About 80% of the air is nitrogen. It is part of amino acids in your DNA and that plants use to grow. It makes the air not be so combustible where total oxygen would be unstable and burst into flames. So is this part of God's design?

It's more glaring with our carbon dioxide emissions. This enormous globe has an atmosphere seven miles thick (at least the part with which we mainly interact), but our small human actions are able to have an effect because this is SO finely tuned. The carbon dioxide in our atmosphere is supposed to be about .00035%. It is now at about .0004%. What is that difference? It's like a thousand charging elephants stumbling over a pile of 50 apples. It's minute. But it's so precisely balanced. Again, I don't know if we call that part of God's glorious handiwork of the heavens, or observe it as the precarious nature of our relationship with the sky, where it can go from normally calm to raging and violent and vindictive at the drop of a hat.

It may not seem we've arrived much closer to an answer on what the skies tell us about God. So I want to come back to relationship once more with a specific example. I felt less affected by the storms this week, not because my basement stayed dry but because my emotions were elsewhere. Some of you know that my dog, Douglas Fir, died this week, two days after getting hit by a car. As the torrents of rain stalled cars, his little body was suffering its own storm, and we were being buffeted by sorrow. Exactly a year before his death, he'd been along as we watched the solar eclipse, not a bad omen but a delight that

somehow all is sized and in orbit so our moon exactly can block our sun. Now with Doug's death, I'm not looking at the sky as the cause. But I do look for response, including where God is.

Thomas Aquinas, the greatest Catholic theologian, famously called God the Unmoved Mover, who set everything else in motion. But I don't need one who blows clouds at me or is responsible for all the events that follow. That's not my question.

I need one this week who won't put up with evil, much less cause it, or who stood by carelessly. I need one who responds with sorrow at storms that ravage and batter life, one who will irreparably tear down barriers to relationship, and darken the sun in mourning and tears falling from above. God's glory, then, isn't in the serene beauty. Where God's hands are working the hardest is when life is suffering the worst damage and death is threatening or seeming to prevail.

In Jesus is the promise that the breath of God isn't working violence and death but is life-breathing Spirit, renewing the face of creation, directly against and through death. We look to the skies not for evidence that something is out to get us, but that we are in it together, and God is with us, through the mourning and on to a new day of life.