



THE EPISCOPAL
DIOCESE OF OHIO

ECLIPSE 2024: A STUDY OF ASTRONOMICAL EVENTS IN THE BIBLE AND OUR LIVES

Welcome to Eclipse 2024! This Bible Study and resource packet is designed to help engage congregations and their communities in reflecting on how astronomical events such as the upcoming solar eclipse remind us of our relationship to our Creator. It can be used as an in-house study and/or a community outreach program, over a period of weeks or over lunch before an eclipse-viewing party (don't forget the protective glasses!). It could be an opportunity to invite conversation between theology and science, using local expertise and partnerships - the sky's the limit! May the wonders of the heavens remind us all of the limitless imagination, creativity, and love of God.

I. THE ORDER OF CREATION

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 1:1–31
(OR 1-19 IF TIME IS SHORT)

CONTEXT:

In Job 9:1-10 and Amos 5:6-9 the constellations are named the Bear, Pleiades, and the Orion. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* notes “Though astral bodies could inspire illicit worship (e.g. 2 Kings 23:5), to the faithful they testified to God’s power (e.g. Ps 8:3)” (NOAB 1310 Hebrew Bible note to Amos 5:8-9)

The scriptures from Job and Amos reference three constellations that can be seen in our night sky today. The Bear (Ursa Major) is visible year round, but is best visible between April and June. Pleiades is visible between October and April. Orion is visible from January to April. Looking at the same constellations as referenced in our Scriptural traditions from generations ago can offer us a wider perspective and invite us to reflect on our own place in time and space as part of God’s bigger story.



Credit: Bibhu Dev Misra.

REFLECT:

What do you make of the order of creation? Although there is light from the first word, the sun, moon, and stars do not appear until two days later, after the seas and the dry land are separated and the vegetation begins to grow. What does it mean to you that (in this telling) the light that God creates is independent of and preempts the light of the sun and the stars?

Finish your reflection by saying together Canticle 11, The Third Song of Isaiah (BCP 87-88)

II. EPIPHANY: NERO, HEROD, AND THE MAGI

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 2:1-12

CONTEXT:

The Magi of the Epiphany were pagan or secular astronomers and astrologers who saw in the movements of the stars indicators or echoes of human history playing out on earth.

Isaac Asimov writes in *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*, "The word [magi] is derived from 'magu,' the name given to their priests by the Persian Zoroastrians. Throughout ancient history, the priests were considered the repositories of important knowledge. Not only did they know the techniques for the propitiation of the gods, but – in Babylonia particularly – they studied the heavenly bodies and their influences upon the course of human affairs. The priests were therefore learned astrologers (who, in the course of their studies, picked up considerable legitimate astronomy as well.)" (Asimov, 788)

Herod was not the only king to be frightened by portents in the heavens discovered by astronomers and astrologers. In his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius relates the experience of Emperor Nero a scant few centuries after Herod's scare: "A blazing star, which is vulgarly supposed to portend destruction to kings and princes, appeared above the horizon several nights successively. [Nero] felt great anxiety on account of this phenomenon." Nero was informed by an astrologer that he could avert the danger to himself by sacrificing some other nobles instead, which he did, including in his destruction, like Herod before him, their households and their children. (Suetonius; also NOAB 10 New Testament, note to Matthew 2:1)

Nero, Herod, and the Magi between them teach that our perception that God is offering us a special sign can lead either to pride and perversion of power or to homage and appropriate worship of God.

Asimov considers that the magi may have seen a close encounter between Jupiter and Saturn that occurred in 7BC, or the return of Halley's Comet to close orbit in 11BC; and that either of these phenomena was picked up and woven into Matthew's Gospel as "the star." (Asimov, 792)

Whatever the natural phenomenon that drew the Magi, according to the biblical account they recognized the power of God made manifest in the Christ, and listened to the word of God not only as relayed by the scribes of the people who studied scripture, but whispered in their dreams.

REFLECT:

Have you had a spiritual or mystical experience associated with a natural phenomenon? What draws you to seek out astronomical events – whether a spectacular sunset, a "supermoon", or a solar eclipse – and how do they feed your faith?

III. THE STORM AND THE SUN

SCRIPTURE: JOSHUA 10:12-14 AND HABAKKUK 3:9-13A

CONTEXT:

As modern astronomy emerged during the Renaissance, Galileo (1564-1642) considered its relationship to scripture, especially when faced with the problem of interventions like the one that halted the sun for Joshua.

While the biblical writers would simply have seen the sun crossing the sky, Galileo pointed out that the sun stopped in the middle of the sky - where the Copernican system placed it, at the center of our solar system. He put forth an explanation of the miracle in which, "if God had stopped the Sun's rotation, the Earth would have stopped, too, and the day stretched out to accommodate Joshua's needs." (Sobel, 65)

Although the sun does rotate on its axis about once every 27 days, the original context was the image of the sun going across the sky. These days, we might attribute the extended day to the longer days during summer months.

Even Galileo, for all of his efforts to reconcile the miracle, argued for a kind of “separation of church and state” between scripture and science, each having its own purpose. “I believe that the intention of Holy Writ was to persuade men of the truths necessary for salvation,’ Galileo continued his letter to Castelli, ‘such as neither science nor any other means could render credible, but only the voice of the Holy Spirit.” (Sobel, 65)

Yet throughout scripture God is portrayed as directly affecting God’s creation, even speaking through it. The passage from Habakkuk sounds like a storm, but it is one attributed directly to God. Robert Alter comments that, “Sun and moon stand still ... in astonishment, but also their light is not needed because the radiance of God’s weapons light up the world.” (Alter, 1338, note to Habakkuk 3:11)

REFLECT:

What do you make of the curious detail that it is Joshua, in the story, who commands the sun to stop, by speaking to it in the hearing of God (can we pray a storm away, for example?)? What happens when we assign moral value to a natural disaster or anomalous event? What is our responsibility at that moment? (Hint: God loves you, no exceptions.)

IV. DARKNESS OVER THE WHOLE LAND

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 27:45–54

CONTEXT:

An annular eclipse (when the moon doesn’t cover all of the sun) occurs somewhere on earth every 6 months. A total eclipse (where the moon covers all of the sun) occurs somewhere on earth every 18 months. The difference is because the moon’s orbit is not circular but an ellipse.

The moon's orbit is tilted 5 degrees compared to Earth. The tilt results in partial eclipses occurring every 6 months since the moon would be higher or lower than the earth-sun plane.

If not tilted, a solar eclipse would occur every month. A total eclipse will occur at the same location once every 360-410 years. Typical eclipses will last approximately 3 hours from start to finish.

It is out of the darkness of the eclipse that persists from noon until three o'clock in the afternoon, the height of the day, that Jesus cries, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Psalm 22:1a); but the Psalm continues,

Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame. (Psalm 22:3-5)

And in a foreshadowing of the resurrection and ascension, the curtain across the holy of holies is torn open, just as the heavens were torn open at the baptism of Jesus, (Mark 1:10) when the Spirit descended like a dove, and the graves of the saints fell open, and many of them were seen after Jesus' resurrection also walking the streets, and the centurion and his companions, like the Magi at the beginning of Matthew's story, recognized by the natural signs of revelation that this was God's Christ, God's Son, and they rightly feared God.

REFLECT:

Are there times and places where the veil between creation and Creator grows thin? What does that say to you about God's enduring relationship with the world? With you?

EPILOGUE

**STAND UP, AND RAISE YOUR HEADS, BECAUSE YOUR
REDEMPTION IS DRAWING NEAR**

SCRIPTURE: LUKE 21:25–28; REVELATION 22:20B

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

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LITURGICAL RESOURCES

PREACHING NOTES FOR 1 JOHN 1:1–2:2

(SUNDAY, APRIL 7TH; YEAR B, EASTER 2)

The Epistle for Sunday, April 7th, lends itself to exploring light and darkness in the wake of the reading of the eclipse of Good Friday and in anticipation of the total eclipse on April 8th. We find through our Bible study that the light of God is independent of the lights that God has placed in creation: the sun, the stars, their reflected light from the moon.

Therefore the darkness that covered the land on Good Friday could not eclipse that light of God, which is mercy, which is love, which forgives and redeems us from sin.

Therefore our created dualisms of light and darkness (race and racism) cannot stand against the light of God.

If we walk in the light, we see the joy of that mercy, that love, that creative and creating life that God has in store for us. We have only to open our eyes.

SUGGESTED HYMNS

From Hymnal 1982:

#427 When morning gilds the skies (esp v 4)

#412 Earth and all stars

#60 Creator of the stars of night

#490 I want to walk as a child of the light

#31 Most holy God, the Lord of Heaven

#35 Christ, mighty savior (esp v 1)

#125 What star is this, with beams so bright

#373 Praise the Lord! ye heavens adore him

#383 Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature

#398 I sing the almighty power of God

#409 The spacious firmament on high

#580 God, who stretched the spangled heavens

LEVAS- Lift Every Voice and Sing

13 My Lord, what a morning (when the stars begin to fall)

189 Great is thy faithfulness

58 The Lord is my light

76 Jesus, Jesus (... Jesus when the sun goes down!)

This little light of mine (see preaching notes above!)

MHSO- My Heart Sings Out

59 Longing for Light

77 I the Lord of Sea and Sky

129 God of the Sparrow of the Whale

133 Heaven and Earth

WLP- Wonder, Love, and Praise

746 and 747 God the Sculptor of the Mountains

750 so the day dawn for me

812 I the Lord of Sea and Sky

Additional Songs:

Arise, Shine: Ruth Cunningham (Music Makes Community)

Evening Lamps Are Lit/ Firelight Praise: Ana Hernández (Music Makes Community)

Veni Creator Spiritus (Taizé)

ADDITIONAL PRAYERS

Canticle 12 - A Song of Creation, BCP p. 88 (and see: S 228 in the Hymnal 1982)

Psalm 148

Prayer for Knowledge of God's Creation (BCP 827 #40)

For Joy in God's Creation (BCP 814 #1)

SOME CRAFT IDEAS

- Tissue paper suncatcher: <https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/learn/projects-at-home/suncatchers/>
- 3D sun: <https://twitchetts.com/2020/02/yellow-sun-craft-for-preschoolers.html/>
- Foil Moon: <https://www.mombrite.com/aluminum-foil-moon-craft/>

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