

NUMINOUS 3: SEEING GOD IN UNEXPECTED PLACES
KING CYRUS - EZRA & ISAIAH
AUGUST 20, 2017

You might notice we are a little bit lighter in attendance today. That is because more than a few people are driving for hours to see an event that will last about two minutes. A total solar eclipse is crossing the United States tomorrow, and that hasn't happened since 1979. So tomorrow across 14 different states, there will be a clear total solar eclipse. This eclipse can be seen in a band about 70 miles wide from Oregon to South Carolina and several spots along the way. I am impressed with the lengths that people are going to see this. There will be a huge migration of people to very specific towns and areas so they can see this rare event.

A town called Driggs, Idaho has a population of 1,600 people, and they are smack dab in the middle of that 70-mile-wide band and are perfectly poised to see this event. Driggs, Idaho is expected to have over 100,000 people visit to see this rare event. If there is proof that people are hungry for the numinous, I think we need to look no further than the total solar eclipse. People are excited to see something they have never seen before. They are excited to see that moment when the stars come out in the middle of the day. They are excited for that moment when it will get five degrees cooler. They are excited for that moment when it gets roughly 10,000 times darker than it was a few seconds before.

I am certain they are not excited for the traffic, the parking woes, the endless crowds and the price gouging, but that is the price these people are willing to pay. People are hungry for these numinous events. Something mysterious and awe inspiring. Something that gives you a glimpse of the divine.

Now luckily for us, we have scientists and astronomers to tell us exactly where to be and when to be there. Samuel Williams wasn't so lucky. In 1780, Williams was a scientist and Harvard professor. He knew the solar eclipse was coming and realized the 70-mile band would mean he needed to go to Maine to see it. The only problem? The Revolutionary War was under way and this area of Maine was held by British forces. After a lot of work,

Williams received permission from British forces to survey this event as a scientist. After all of his hard work, preparation and travel, Williams' team set up in the bay and awaited the grand event. They watched with grand anticipation as the sun began to be covered up by the moon. In disbelief, they watched as a crescent of the sun remained, they had missed the total eclipse.

As it turns out, Williams' team was 30 miles too far south. All that work and all of that preparation and they missed it by thirty miles. There is something powerful in that moment of anticipation and unmet expectation. There is something powerful in that moment where light and darkness converge and the payoff is nowhere near what you expected. That moment is confusing. That moment is frustrating. That moment had to make them have questions about the justice and design of the universe.

I am fairly certain we all know a little bit how Samuel Williams felt. We live in an age where the light seems to be regularly eclipsed by darkness. Where unmet expectations seem to overwhelm us. Where injustice and the fact that we might have missed our best opportunity sweep over us. This is the world we live in. Whether it's global disasters, personal disappointments or national politics, I think it's safe to say, we have all felt that moment of anticipation for how we thought God might care for us, provide for us and let the light through only to be surprised by darkness.

The people of Israel were well acquainted with such feelings. Many times over, I know they were well acquainted with such a notion. Today I want to read to you about an event a long time in the making, 70 years to be exact. A numinous event of God's promised goodness and deliverance. While the promise comes true, I think how it came about could have been a bit shocking and disorienting to the Israelites. The question emerges, what are we supposed to learn in such a moment? When we look through the haze of dark and light in this world, when it seems like God has been eclipsed, how do we make sense of what we are currently facing?

If you are new here with us or haven't been here in a while, we are in a series called *Numinous*. A numinous event is a mysterious spiritual experience. John Updike in one of his

novels referred to numinous events as divine encounters that have the signature of God, decisive yet illegible. Numinous events are clearly divine, but they can sometimes be illegible. We aren't quite sure what to make of them, especially if they don't come in the way we expected or through whom we expected. Today we will read about just such an event in Israel's history.

Ezra 1: 1-4

There is a lot of background to understand for this passage. Last week we talked about the impending destruction of the southern kingdom of Babylon. That all happened around 600 BC. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies were rising to power and consolidating a kingdom. Judah is conquered by Babylon and then is confronted with their sinister plan for assimilation. Babylon doesn't conquer and then suppress and hope you eventually grow to love them and become Babylonian. No. They would conquer and deport you to Babylon so you would assimilate. Thus this stage in history for the Israelites was called the Babylonian exile. The people of God are conquered and forced from their homes. This is where you get stories like you see in the book of Daniel. Daniel and his Israelite friends are brought into Nebuchadnezzar's court and forced to assimilate.

This is a sun-being-blocked-out moment. The world has to seem dark and the Israelites are probably terrified, but they also cling to a promise. Jeremiah, the prophet, who prophesied the Israelites would go off to exile also said that after 70 years, they would return home. That is where we find ourselves in today's passage. The Babylonians have been conquered and replaced by a new empire, the Persian empire, under the leadership of a king named Cyrus. In the edict we read today, Cyrus sends the exiles home. Not just the Israelites but several abducted/exiled nations. He allows them to go back home.

Here is the twist for the passage today. This was a highly anticipated moment not unlike the Israelites in captivity for hundreds of years in Egypt. You know they were praying for a numinous moment when God would set his people free like he did so long ago with the Pharaohs and Egypt. I'm sure they prayed for deliverance and a deliverer. Like Moses they were probably praying for a valiant Israelite to march in and say, "Let my people go," like

Moses did. Or maybe someone in the vein of Joshua or one of the Judges who would come in and vanquish Nebuchadnezzar and demand their freedom.

Instead freedom comes from an unusual deliverer, Cyrus the Persian king. Their freedom is granted them not only from an unlikely deliverer but their deliverance comes through no Jewish influence. God influences the heart of Cyrus to let the people go. In the past, he used Moses, Joshua, Samson, Gideon and David to come in and speak for him and do great works for him. But now, without any influence from anyone other than God, a foreign pagan king speaks for God and acts on his behalf.

Do you want to talk about a moment of confusion? A moment where the lines of darkness and light are blurred? A moment where you aren't sure what God is up to? That is this moment. The Israelites were used to God having the victory through them. That made it clear who was in the light and who was in the darkness. When little old Israel was delivered time and again against world super powers, it was obvious that God had done it because he did it through a Jewish messenger or leader. But now, with no influence, a pagan king sets the people free. You have to believe they were wondering, was this God's hand or are we just living at the whims of the powers that be? What are we to make of this unexpected deliverer and this unforeseen deliverance? Did God do this? Is God leading us home or is it just the ups and downs of geopolitics that have set us free?

You can see it either way. When you read the words of Cyrus, it seems clear that he is speaking for God and from God, but this might have been a political move. Cyrus was shrewd and it's just as likely he was just couching his edict in language that the Israelites would understand and appreciate. Maybe he was just trying to curry favor and keep the Israelites sedate by keeping them busy with rebuilding their temple and being in his debt.

If you want a great snapshot of this moment, Isaiah 45 has some interesting language about Cyrus. In Isaiah 45, there is a prophesy about this day. It is said that Cyrus will set the people free and send the exiles home. It is said that God will allow Cyrus to build this massive kingdom by God's hand even though Cyrus doesn't know God. At different points, God refers to Cyrus as my anointed, the same word for Messiah and also calls him a

shepherd. He also says Cyrus doesn't know me. He works for me. I gave him everything he has and he doesn't even know it.

That only feeds the confusion we are talking about today. That confusion the Israelites must have been sensing. It is that decisive but illegible moment in which God is delivering them from what they think. But there is no Jewish deliverer and a foreign pagan king is seemingly speaking for God. He is God's chosen anointed shepherd, yet in the same chapter, it is explicitly said that Cyrus doesn't know God.

Did you know solar eclipses aren't actually rare? At least on the global scale, they happen a couple of times every three years, so roughly every 18 months there is a solar eclipse. So why such the big deal? Why are people driving for hours to Driggs, Idaho in a sea of people with lots of traffic and huge prices when it happens every 18 months? I'm guessing you know the answer. It happens every 18 months somewhere on the planet. On a regular basis, these numinous events are happening, but they don't strike the same spot that often. It's estimated that a solar eclipse will revisit a given place every 360 years. Because of the rotations of the earth and the orbit of the moon, it happens a lot. It just doesn't happen in the same place often. We can develop an expectation for God to show up in the way in the same place. Maybe you know someone who saw the eclipse in 1979 in the United States and they told you you have to see it. It changed their lives. The problem, of course, it's been almost 40 years and it is finally happening again. What do you do with this moment where light and darkness blur, where anticipation and unmet expectations collide?

You look for the sliver. You look for the divine signature, decisive and yet illegible. Samuel Williams saw a partial eclipse and missed the totality, but he saw a sliver of what could be. He saw some of the brilliant colors of the corona. He might have missed the clearest picture of the eclipse, but he still saw the brilliant light.

There is this great verse in the middle of Isaiah 45. In the midst of all of this language regarding an anointed shepherd who doesn't seem to know God, there is a deliverer who seems to be totally unaware that God has given him everything he has.

Isaiah 45: 14-15

He is still speaking to Cyrus. All the nations will be yours. They will plead with you and say, "Surely God is in you." Then this fantastic verse 15, "Surely you are a God who hides himself." Sometimes the light is hidden. Sometimes the moon covers up the sun. Sometimes darkness seems to rule the day. Yet, this is just another way that God reveals himself by hiding himself. The absence of the light sometimes causes us to seek him more, sometimes gives us eyes to see even in the darkness.

The numinous nature of Cyrus is a bizarre one. It is decisive but illegible. It's decisive because the people of God were set free and sent home and not only that, they were sent home with a lot of resources along with their stolen religious artifacts. The illegible part is that it came through a foreign pagan king, who we find out speaks for God but doesn't know him. Who is favored by God but doesn't seemingly know him. A man who is the anointed shepherd yet is seemingly outside of the covenant community. That is decisive but illegible.

Have you had any Cyrus-like events? Have you had divine events that are decisive but illegible? These could be eclipse-type moments from a God who hides himself. From a God who proclaims himself in one sense with a megaphone turned up to 11 and in another sense, seems to be barely audible like a whisper. A still small voice. A God who speaks through messiness. Dark and light moments simultaneously. The bottom line is to seek our hidden God. Look for the light in the darkness.

For some of you, this could be a financial situation that has gone south. You've had moments of hope but plenty of reasons to doubt. Look for our hidden God. Find the light in those dark places. For some, your marriage is on life support. You could lean into the darkness and declare it deceased or you could open your eyes, find a glimmer of light and see God in a dark place. For others, your faith is wavering today. A cloud of doubt has covered up all the things you used to hold certain. Look for our hidden God. Find that ray of light.

We live in a culture that wants certitude. We want a God who speaks through a megaphone. We want a God who keeps the fleece dry. We want a God who clearly opens a door and closes a window, but sometimes he is the God who hides. Sometimes he is the God who confounds. The invitation is simple, lean in and pursue him. Be ready for the light he wants to show you.

There is no clearer picture of this than Jesus on the cross. In this series, we are seeking to train our eyes to see God in unexpected places. I think I can argue there is no more unexpected place to see God than hanging on a Roman cross. You want to talk darkness overcoming the light? You want to talk about losing the day and not seeing redemption? It quite literally goes dark for six hours when Jesus dies. The sun has been eclipsed by darkness, and for three days Jesus became the God who hides. He was hidden behind the tomb. The invitation was the same, seek me. Even in the darkness, look for me even when it seems I'm hidden. You know that story ends with the resurrection and the return of the Son.

Samuel Williams missed the total eclipse, but he saw something else that day. He saw Bailey's Beads. It's something that happens momentarily when you watch a total eclipse, but it lasts a lot longer when you are about 30 miles away perhaps one to two minutes longer. Bailey's Beads is this strange phenomenon where the light seems to trickle and become disconnected. This happens because the lunar topography of craters and mountains breaks up the light and allows it to drip through to those watching. They don't see it perfectly but it drips into their field of vision. We serve the God who hides sometimes. We serve the God who confounds and surprises. We serve a God who is never truly eclipsed. My prayer is that God is shining brightly in your life this week, but if it seems dark, look for the beads. Find the light. Seek the God who hides.