

1

Are you ready for a week from Monday for the solar eclipse, what some are calling one of the most amazing astronomical events? I've got special solar glasses for my eyes and a sun filter for my telescope, and I have an app installed on my phone to track the shadow of the moon. For something so far away, it's amazing how much attention our Sun has received this year in anticipation of the eclipse.

The Sun is so far away—93 million miles—and yet it seems so close to us, for we feel the warmth of the sunlight on our skin every day. The light, traveling at 186,000 miles per second from the Sun, takes almost 8-1/2 minutes to arrive on our planet for us to experience.

It's amazing how something so far away can seem so close, as with the case of Kazakhstan and Suriname. Suriname is a South American country a little over 3000 miles away from Indiana, and Kazakhstan near Russia is twice as far away. Through our exchange students Jenneley and Elina, however, these countries will seem much closer this year as these two girls become part of our family and community.

In today's world, far away seems less far away in comparison to the vastness of the universe, for our view of the distance of space and time has greatly expanded. My son Jonathan is part of team that has detected a gravitational wave from two colliding black holes 3 billion light years away. That's the distance that light travels in 3 billion years. The collision of these black hole occurred before humans and dinosaurs existed on our planet, when only microbes and algae existed on this place we call Earth.

In the vastness of the universe, have you ever wondered, "Where is God?" Thousands of years ago ancient understandings of the world suggested that God resided in a dome just beyond the sky of the earth, but in the 1960s humans traveled in rockets beyond this dome, and we have seen much father into the expansive corners of the universe. The ancient worldview of a dome where God resides no longer makes sense. But we still wonder the same question as did our ancestors: How far away is God?

Have you asked that question? Maybe in the middle of a crisis you've wondered where God

2

might be. An illness detected in a loved one often prompts family members to ponder the question “Where is God?” When war breaks out against nations, those on both sides of the battle wonder about God’s presence. When you and I view the images of children dying due to lack of food or clean water, our hearts break as we think, *God seems so far away.*

The Bible is filled with people wondering about how far away God was from them. Ancient peoples offered animal sacrifices, thinking this would bring them closer to God’s favor, hoping God would delight in the smell of their offerings. Today we may enjoy a backyard BBQ, but I doubt many of us imagine God sniffing our food and joining the party if the food smells good enough. We have abandoned that ancient view of attracting God’s presence in the world through animal sacrifices, but we may still have that nagging question in the back of our minds: how far away is God and how do I get closer to God?

That’s a question some have wondered about Jesus as well, for when God came to Earth through

Jesus, God became an even more real presence among us, living and breathing and experiencing life among us—feeling our pains, sensing our joys.

But even with the experience of Jesus in our lives, we may still wonder where he lives, as did one little boy who questioned his mother. She explains:

“When my oldest was about 3, we found a baby bird in the yard that had fallen from its nest. When I went to check on it the next morning, it had died. When I took the kids out to play, I discreetly scooped him up, put him in a bag and in the trash. When we came in, my son said, ‘Mama, what happened to that baby bird?’ Trying to skirt the issue, I said, ‘Oh, you don’t have to worry about that baby bird; he lives with Jesus now.’ He looked at me thoughtfully for a few moments and asked, ‘Jesus lives in the trash?’”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus may not live in the trash, and yet we know he’s very close to us, as close as the air we breathe. When Luke wrote the book of Acts, he reflected on the day when many joined the church and were baptized, remembering the words Peter had spoken to the crowd. We heard a portion of that in this morning’s scripture reading: “Repent, and be

3

baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:38-39).

Baptism was a sign that God was very close to those who entered the waters of forgiveness, and did you hear the promise? Even those *far away* would be close to God.

When the early leaders of our Disciples of Christ movement 200 years ago thought about baptism, they knew it served as a reminder that God was not far away. They looked to the Bible for their understanding, and they noticed those early followers of Jesus were lowered into the water for baptism. Our early Disciples leader Alexander Campbell felt we should follow the same method as well. Campbell emphasized the assurance that our sins were forgiven through baptism, that God was not far away when immersed in the water. No one should make the decision for another person’s baptism, so rather than infants baptized by parents,

Campbell suggested that believers should make this decision themselves. As one historian has summarized, “For Campbell, baptism was for penitent believers ready to subject themselves to the command of the gospel to love God and neighbor.”<sup>2</sup> By being reminded that God was not far away, Campbell suggested we have a responsibility to tell others about what God is doing in the world.

Some criticized Campbell by suggesting he viewed baptism as a work done by humans to gain forgiveness from God, but Campbell replied, “We do not place baptism among good works. In baptism we are passive in every thing but in giving our consent.”<sup>3</sup>

Others wondered if you had to have a complete understanding of baptism for it to be effective, and if not, whether one needed to be rebaptized when they finally understood. Campbell replied that a full understanding was not necessary, for the forgiveness of sins through baptism is God’s work, not due to our perfect understanding, but due to God’s promise. Even after our baptism, we grow in deeper understanding of how close God is to us.

④

Baptism reassures us that God is not far away from us, but very close. The water reminds us that God cleanses us and forgives us each and every moment of our lives, that when we fall down, God picks us up; when we mess up, God cleans us. As one little girl asked her mother when she saw me immersing older children into the waters of baptism, “When is Pastor Doug gonna wash my hair?” She somehow knew that baptism represented a cleansing, of bringing God closer to our lives.

Baptism is such a wonderful gift from God, and whenever I baptize children, they seem to recognize the excitement and wonder of the event. Even younger children seem amazed, as was the case with

a father was who talking to his oldest son about the boy’s upcoming baptism. Wanting him to understand the significance of the event, he took great care to communicate with him. While they were talking, the boy’s younger brother, a little four-year-old, left the room. He seemed visibly upset so the father followed him to see what was wrong. Tearfully, the little guy confessed, “I want to be alphabetized with my brother.”<sup>4</sup>

In a sense, baptism puts us in order, like alphabetizing, reminding us that God is not far away, but that God is very close—within us, surrounding us, and loving us more than we even love ourselves. Where is God? How far away? Not far at all.

---

<sup>1</sup> Suzee Skwiot, “18 Funny Questions Kids Have Asked About God,” [http://thestir.cafemom.com/big\\_kid/185378/18\\_funny\\_questions\\_kids\\_have](http://thestir.cafemom.com/big_kid/185378/18_funny_questions_kids_have)

<sup>2</sup> Foster, Blowers, Dunnavant, Williams, *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, “Baptism, 58.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 59.

<sup>4</sup> <http://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/i-want-to-be-alphabetized>