

Psalm 19 Heavenward
Exodus 20
Philippians 3:4b-14
October 4, 2020

The way the 19th Psalm ends is not a bad way to begin a sermon, as is actually the habit of some,

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be pleasing in thy sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

The psalm *begins* this way, “the heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the works of his hands. Day after day, they pour forth speech. Night after night, they display knowledge.”

This psalm is inspiring to me because of the way it begins, looking up into the heavens. If it has been awhile since you have gone outside at night to look at the stars, give it a try. There is no scientific or even poetic expression that does them justice. What you might likely end up doing is just staring, gazing up.

And then the time will come to look around, and what the psalm does at this point is to speak of God’s law, which it describes as perfect and wise and right; reviving the soul, making wise the simple, and giving joy to the heart.

The reading from Exodus for this day is the 10 Commandments; the “law of the Lord,” culled down to its most basic form, and as it turns out, not so easy to

obey all the time. They serve as a precious warning, and a wonderful promise. I spoke them a few weeks ago and they are, of course, familiar,

Have no other gods and don’t make idols. Don’t profane God’s name and remember the Sabbath. Honor your parents. Don’t commit murder or adultery. Don’t steal or lie about your neighbor. Don’t desire what others have.

These are the rules Moses gave to the Israelites when they came out to the desert after having been rescued from bondage in Egypt and just before entering the land of promise, that is, a place of wonder, and beauty, and sustenance, a place where meaningful lives can be lived, where grace and mercy abound, and the best things carry the day. It comes with responsibility. The rules are meant not to oppress, but to guide and help, challenge and give warning, and delight.

We do well to understand that the rules did not come until they were on the doorstep of Canaan. That is the story of Israel. But inasmuch as the story of Israel is the human story, the rules don’t really come until the world is waking up to its precious calling, and about to enter into its inheritance, and it is what the apostle Paul refers to as a heavenward calling.

Paul

Of course, what one will also see, looking around, is not always beautiful and inspiring. Some 1200 years

had passed between Moses and Paul and in that time matters had become complicated by the human passion for complicating things by breaking all the rules; and then allowing things to devolve into deceitful ways to keep the facade of faithfulness while corrupting what it touches with greed and fear and anger, the very things the law is given to guard against.

So Paul speaks of his accomplishments as if they were garbage, completely worthless in the grand scheme of things. And then he gives nearly poetic expressions to his hope, by which he has been taken up and overwhelmed.

The Psalm, the Old Testament lesson and the epistle combine to work on our imaginations this morning. They challenge us to see the world and our lives beyond the boundaries we have set up and accepted as normative. They ask us to look forward and up.

For instance, we have accepted political power as the greatest source of human strength capable of ordering life and sustaining a status quo that works well enough for us, but not for everyone, and it gives us such community life as we can be said to have, and we can dream no higher dream.

Look at us. We are divided, by race and sex, by wealth and poverty, by this ideology and that, by power and weakness. In these divisions we are no different from the Egyptians that the Israelites escaped or from the Israelites themselves, whose destiny in the land was

to lose it by being conquered, first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians, those exotic peoples we know almost nothing about, then the Persians and the Greeks and finally the Romans, under whose earthy power Jesus lived and Paul himself, only they did not accept the vision of success that was common then and that is common now. They rejected it and by human standards they paid a heavy price because they paid with their lives.

But given what they had discovered, they didn't seem to mind the cost, because they gave up nothing worthwhile anyway, nothing that wasn't heading towards the landfill. And they gained eternal life.

"I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection," Paul wrote, "and the fellowship of his sufferings, . . . Not that I have obtained all this or have been made perfect, but pressing on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me."

Beloved, "I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Let us dare to do the same, leaving behind our fears and letting go of the past, and straining with all our might to reach for something better, as we make our way heavenward.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. 10 I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

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