

Albany Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 19 begins, “The heavens declare God’s glory, and the sky shows his handiwork. Day after day, speech is uttered, and night after night, knowledge is revealed. Their voice is heard in every speech and language, their influence is felt in every corner of the earth, and their words resonate to the world’s end.”

Looking up to the sky and heavens can be a spiritual experience. It can make you see the bigger picture and shift your focus from the narrow and limited view of the world to the vastness of God and creation. This is true when we see the blue sky, with the glory of the sun and clouds and the beauty of sunrise and sunset; the night sky, with the moon's brightness, the starry sky’s wonder, and the cloudy spread of distant galaxies. They remind us of God's glory in all their colors, shapes, and grandeur.

The heavens and the skies have been speaking throughout. The ancients gained so much wisdom from looking up to the sky. From studying the moving of the stars and fixed stars to studying the ordering and understanding of the celestial systems and their movements and how they affect the lives of the people and creatures on Earth, the glory of God is revealed for all to see. It communicated to many what it was, is, and will be. In about 350 BC, Aristotle described weather patterns by studying clouds and the movements of stars, leading to a book called *The Book of Signs*, which people still study today. Many, including the ancient travelers of Polynesia, used the movement of stars to tell the direction. Many had learned the exact time for the change of seasons when it is a good time for plowing, sowing, and harvesting by looking up the skies and studying the heaven.

C.S Lewis said Psalm 19 is a symphony of praise to the words of God. Firstly, the Psalm describes the glory we see in the heavens that speak to us silently, telling us the knowledge of God's glory, wisdom, and creative greatness. It says it utters and shows the knowledge of the glory of God, like the spring of water pouring out sweet, refreshing waters of revelation. It says the message from the heavens is strong and glorious. In them, God sets a tabernacle of the sun, like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoices like a strong man to run his race. Its rising is from one end of heaven and its circuit to the other end. And there is nothing hidden from its heat. And God’s glory is like the sun spreading throughout the heavens, dwelling in the Tabernacle at night.

Not only does God reveal to us and communicate with us in the heavens and skies, God also speaks to us in the Word, which C S Lewis calls the voice of God in His Word. This is what we learn first in Theology 101. God reveals to us in general revelation, which is all around us, that God has created, and in special revelation, which God has given in the scripture. Equally or even more specifically, His word tells us much more about God, especially what God has in mind for us and with us. As Emmanuel Kant said, “God fills our minds with ever-new and increasing admiration and awe, with both the starry heavens above and the moral law within.” In this, God reveals His covenant of love and faithfulness to God’s people. The word of God has the power to change people’s hearts, converting the soul. It revives, restores, and heals through forgiveness and cleansing, giving life to those who love God. The word of God testifies to God, whose words are sure, reliable, and certain. It sets our hearts and minds, and lives in the right way. The word keeps us in the way of God, enlightens our lives, and brings joy, comfort, knowledge, and confidence even amid darkness. It keeps us in the presence of God, enduring and deeply connected to the awe and majesty of God. (Psalm 19:7-9)

And so we all have confidence in God, who is revealed to us in creation and knowledge of faith through the Scripture. And we do not look up to heaven in ignorance, in complete mystery; though we might not understand it fully, we have the eyes of faith and confidence in God, who is present with us through his Holy Spirit.

Yet we also know we don’t have everything figured out; we often fail to see or understand. And thanks to the stories like the one we read this morning, we don’t feel so bad. While traveling around Caesarea Philippi, they were having a Q&A with Jesus as often as they did. Jesus asks, “Who do people say I am?” John the Baptist, Elijah, or a prophet of the Lord... were a few names that they named, which is understandable; seeing what he did and hearing what he said, they were not wrong but not right. God has revealed in Jesus all the characters of these people, calling for repentance, demonstrating a great power of restoration and healing, and teaching them the secrets of the Kingdom of God, the promise of the future yet to come. As if he was expecting more, Jesus

continued with his disciples. He asks them, who do you say that I am? And Peter answered confidently and proudly, "You are the Messiah." Top of the class!!! But then, Mark tells us that Jesus warned them not to tell anyone, and instead, given that answer Peter gave, Jesus laid down all God had planned for him, the Messiah. How he will be rejected, he will be killed, and he will rise again in three days.

And so, Mark tells us immediately, Peter took Jesus aside and began, not asking, not correcting, but rebuking. Peter must have felt quite proud when he got to say, "You are the Messiah." Matthew tells us that Jesus praised him and even promised Peter that he would build his church on him. The greatest honour! But, little did he know, Jesus then rolled out a plan Peter had never anticipated involving persecution, crucifixion, and resurrection. Like the other disciples later in chapter 9:33 who asked to be placed on the right and left hand of Jesus when he came into his glory, Peter must have expected Jesus to be the Messiah, the one with authority, power, and the glory of the earthly King. Jesus rebukes him back, "Get behind me, Satan!" "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

So often, we are, like Peter, dumbfounded by what God is doing in our lives or our world. We don't even realize how we got there, from the highs to the lowest of the lows. In a way, it is true that because we live in the land of man, it is hard for us to understand the things of God.

Therefore, looking up to the heavens, opening your hands, and letting your mind go in surrendering is a perfect posture before God.

As Psalm 19 says, to pray: "Help me understand my errors, forgive my hidden fault, keep your servant from wilful sins, may they not rule over me, so that I will be blameless before you.

Is that what it means to carry the cross and follow? Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me."

Because, as Psalm 19 says, who can understand his errors? How do we know our secret faults that we have forgotten or are unaware of? What will make us blameless and innocent of great transgression if it is hidden or unknown to us?

As it says, only God can prevent these things from dominating us. Only by surrendering to God in prayer can we be blameless and avoid being overcome by hidden and deliberate faults and transgression.

This is also why most preachers say the prayer in Psalm 19;

Let the word of my mouth and meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Carrying one's cross and following Jesus is a humble surrender to God, a plea to be made innocent and blameless and have the power of God to transform our thoughts and hearts.

And that we see that for Jesus, the cross was the will of God, the divine plan God had for his life. The cross was his death, obedience to God's will, and the way to his resurrection and saving the world. Carrying the cross for Jesus meant having the mind in the things of God and completely surrendering to the will of God. And for those who learned from him, the only way to live is to follow Jesus, his obedience, surrender, and do the will of God. "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." (Mk 8:35)

This is what is at the heart of the gospel; even in our understanding of what we are to do in caring for the world, we must completely surrender to God in prayer and supplication to understand God's will and plan for the salvation of all, including the creation that surrounds us, like the skies, the air, and all that is in them.

God speaks to us through these two passages this morning, the messages of the wisdom of the heavens, of the glory and splendor, and of what God has spoken in his scripture, and Jesus, the Word made flesh, that calls us to humble ourselves to surrender to God in prayer, take up the cross and to seek God's will, follow Jesus, and gain life for our souls and the souls of all creation; Have the minds in things of God not in the things of man. For the heavens declare the glory of God, and the skies proclaim the work of his hands. And through it all, God wants to give us life, fill us with joy, restore and heal us, strengthen and save. Thanks be to God. Amen.