

Sermon – Empty Yet Full
Sunday, September 12, 2021
Scripture – Psalm 19, Mark 8:27-37
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C.S. Lewis considered Psalm 19 to be “the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.” Using the richness of the Hebrew language, the psalmist affirms that creation proclaims the sovereignty of God. *Seeing is experienced as hearing...in the midst of an unending concert sung by the universe to the glory of God. And it is in this universal context that the spoken word of the Torah is given.* Let us read this psalm responsively this morning.

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament^[a] proclaims God's handiwork.

2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens God has set a tent for the sun,

5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,

and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

*7 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;*

***8 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;***

*9 the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous
altogether.*

***10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.***

11 Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

12 But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

13 Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me.

Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

*14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.*

The metaphor in this psalm is especially rich in light of the gospel reading last Sunday as Jesus reached out and healed a man who could not hear or speak...and in light of today's gospel reading as the disciples (who have been listening to Jesus words and seeing Jesus' miracles) are asked for the first time to articulate who they believe Jesus is. Hear now God's Holy Word.

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 Jesus asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."^[a] 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 34 Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life. Amen.

The title of the meditation: Empty Yet Full

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The art of telling and listening to stories is as old as humankind and a tool of the Potter in shaping and forming who we become. As we begin a new ministry year at Westminster, I would like to share a children's book entitled The Empty Pot which retells a Chinese folktale about Ping, a little boy who has a wonderful ability to grow flowers. He is praised for his skills and the beauty the flowers possess.

One day, the emperor of China decides to hold a competition so he can choose a successor to the throne. He invites all the children of China to come to the palace and receive a single seed. Whoever can grow the best flower from that seed will be the new ruler of China. All the children receive their seeds and the little boy has high hopes for what he will grow. Ping filled the flower pot with rich soil, carefully plants the seed and waits to see it sprout. Day after day pass but nothing grows in his pot.

Ping transplants the seed into a larger pot with richer soil. He waits and still nothing happens. By and by the whole year passes.

Spring comes and all the children put on their best clothes to greet the Emperor. They rush to the palace with their beautiful flowers, eagerly hoping to be chosen. Ping is ashamed of his empty pot. He thinks others will laugh at him and they do. Ping's father says, "You did your best and your best is good enough to present to the Emperor." Holding the empty pot, Ping goes to the palace.

The Emperor looks at the beautiful flowers and frowns until he sees Ping. He asks him, "Why did you bring an empty pot?" "I planted the seed you gave me and I watered it every day but it would not spout," Ping said, "I bring an empty pot because this is the best I can do." The Emperor smiles when he hears these words. "I have found my successor!" he proclaimed. To the rest of the children he said, "Where you got your seeds I do not know, for the seeds I gave had been cooked and it was impossible for them to grow. I admire Ping's great courage to appear before me with the empty truth and now I reward him with my entire kingdom."

When we gave this book to our son Paul years ago, we inscribed on the inside cover, "To Paul Denham Kieffer, from mom and dad with much love and affection. May you have the courage to accept the 'empty truth' life sometimes offers."

What particularly draws me to this ancient Chinese folktale is Ping's ability to be true to himself, to accept the disappointment of an empty pot after giving his all and his best. There is a strong connection between having integrity and being faithful to oneself. So often we are each tempted in our own lives, when we have given our all and there is still an emptiness whether it's a relationship gone awry, a dream unfulfilled, or a loved one lost, to fill that void with half-truths, clichés, or unhealthy distractions rather than accept the empty truth life sometimes offers.

The disciples in our gospel reading today are being asked to accept the truth of who Jesus is as they begin their journey together toward Jerusalem. The importance of this encounter at Caesarea Philippi cannot be overstated. The geographic setting fits the function of the text. From this location in the foothills of Mount Hermon the view of the south stretches across Galilee toward Jerusalem.

The first seven chapters of Mark's gospel focus on Jesus public ministry in Galilee emphasizing his power and authority. Now, at this turning point in the gospel Jesus invites his disciples to look back across the Galilean ministry, to reflect on who Jesus is, and then to look ahead and understand that they are "on their way" not only to Jerusalem but to suffering, to death, and to resurrection.

This turning point in Mark's gospel begins and concludes with stories about Jesus healing two blind men. In the first, there are two stages to the man's healing. He sees a little at first and, then after Jesus lays his hands upon him a second time, sight is restored. This is not unlike the disciples who have a partial vision of who Jesus; however, have not yet grasped the full picture of his Messiahship.

As Presbyterian theologian and missionary, the Rev. Dr. Lamar Williamson points out, "If Jesus is the Christ, then he should be all powerful, above the fray of life and surely beyond suffering. Yet, what we learn from this Messiah is that he is not only subject to the terrible forces that afflict us in this life, he anticipates the brutal reality of tribulation and declares his commitment to experience it."

The invitation to follow Christ, first extended to Peter beside a sunny sea is now redefined in the shadow of a cross. Peter and the others are asked again now that they more fully see who Jesus is if they still want to follow.

Ping found his integrity in an empty pot.

Jesus Christ, the anointed one, our Messiah, offers us an empty cross and invites us to take up our own. It is part of the divine wisdom, that if we have the courage to endure and to accept our own suffering and emptiness, we will find ourselves...and that by being willing to enter into the emptiness and suffering of one another, we will find our God. This is the paradox at the heart of the Christian faith.

We teach our children the stories of Jesus as they grow up in this congregation, yet their character and integrity are shaped during those defining moments on their own personal faith journeys when they are asked to be true to themselves in adversity and to accept the empty truth life sometimes offers.

May the empty cross which proclaims the love of Christ inspire us when we are empty yet full to sing joyfully in the Lord. Jubilate Deo! Amen