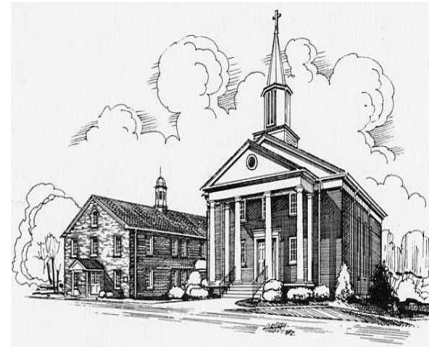


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to September 14

Proper 19

Year B

RCL



Proverbs 1:20-33

Psalm 19

Mark 8:27-38

The Collect

MY LORD GOD, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so. But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing. We hope that we will never do anything apart from that desire. And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road, though we may know nothing about it. Therefore we will trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone; through

Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Proverbs 1:20-33

Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.

At the busiest corner she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?

Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you.

Because I have called and you refused,
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
and because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,

I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when panic strikes you,

when panic strikes you like a storm,
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.

Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;

they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.

Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the LORD,

would have none of my counsel,
and despised all my reproof,

therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
and be sated with their own devices.

For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;

but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

Psalm 19 Page 606, BCP

Caeli enarrant

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the firmament shows his handiwork.
- 2 One day tells its tale to another,
and one night imparts knowledge to another.
- 3 Although they have no words or language,
and their voices are not heard,
- 4 Their sound has gone out into all lands,
and their message to the ends of the world.
- 5 In the deep has he set a pavilion for the sun;
it comes forth like a bridegroom out of his chamber;
it rejoices like a champion to run its course.
- 6 It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens
and runs about to the end of it again;
nothing is hidden from its burning heat.
- 7 The law of the LORD is perfect
and revives the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure
and gives wisdom to the innocent.
- 8 The statutes of the LORD are just
and rejoice the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear
and gives light to the eyes.
- 9 The fear of the LORD is clean
and endures for ever;
the judgments of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
- 10 More to be desired are they than gold,
more than much fine gold,
sweeter far than honey,
than honey in the comb.
- 11 By them also is your servant enlightened,
and in keeping them there is great reward.
- 12 Who can tell how often he offends?
cleanse me from my secret faults.

- 13 Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;
let them not get dominion over me;
then shall I be whole and sound,
and innocent of a great offense.
- 14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my
heart be acceptable in your sight,
O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.

Mark 8:27-38

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?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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.”

He 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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what

can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

SERMON

My dad was a man's man. That is to say he wouldn't ask for directions for the life of him. One vacation, traveling through South Carolina, he decided he would take a short cut. My mother kept telling him he was on the wrong road, but would he pay any attention? No, he would not. What's the use of asking directions if you know you're on the right path? And Dad was sure that he was on the right path.

The road got narrower and narrower and rougher and rougher, and Mom became more and more insistent that we turn around, but Dad was determined to follow his path to the bitter end. As it turned out, there was a sign at the bitter end which read “Cheraw Brickworks”. The road deadended into a brickworks. Forever after, whenever Dad came up with an idea without consulting Mom, it was referred to as a trip to the Cheraw Brickworks.

Sometimes, we need advice. That's why we read from Proverbs this Sunday. Proverbs is the “Dear Abbey” of the Hebrew Scriptures. It's properly called “Wisdom Literature”, and there's the problem for us guys. Hebrew and Greek both assign gender to nouns. Nouns are either neuter, feminine or masculine. The Hebrew noun for wisdom is chokmowth, the Greek noun for wisdom is Sophia, and they are both feminine. Sofia is sometimes even characterized as God's feminine side. Sorry to tell you, guys, but it's in the Bible – if you seek wisdom, you're going to have to ask a woman. We could have saved a lot of time if Dad had done the wise thing, and listened to Mom.

Unfortunately for us guys, when you do ask a woman, what do you hear?

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?

How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?

Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you.

Because I have called and you refused,
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
and because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,

I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when panic strikes you,
when panic strikes you like a storm,
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.

Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
they will seek me diligently, but will not find
me.

Or to put it in more modern terms, Wisdom says,
“Why don't you ever listen to me? I told you you not to
do that! You just never listen. You got yourself into this
boat. You can just paddle it for yourself.” Brothers, you
will find life easier and more tolerable if you just do
what the women say.

The question that Jesus poses today, “Who am I?”, is the question we touched upon last Sunday which disquieted many here – what does it mean to say that Jesus was “fully human and fully divine, one person in two natures, without confusion and without change, without separation and without division?” Wisdom calls out to us and demands that we engage this question. And if we missed hearing Wisdom's call, Jesus demands that His Disciples engage it.

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?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

This sort of answer sounds awfully familiar to me. I perceive a reluctance on the part of many people at the Chapel of St. Starbuck to engage this question, or indeed any question touching on God or Jesus rationally. People seem to have an unusual delicacy about thinking

through the implications of our confessions about God and Jesus. A friend of mine once asked me to lend him a book on the Bible. I gave him a pretty good book, and he looked anxious and asked, “Now...this isn't one of those books that make you question your faith, is it?”

To my friend, faith in God could not stand up to any sort of examination. In his mind, any critical thought about God would result in destruction of his faith. He saw God as fragile. I have a lot more confidence in God than that! I have to disagree with him and say that to my mind, an unexamined faith is not worth holding. We must engage the question, “Who do you say I am?” It is central to our understanding of our relationship to God.

When I pose this question at the Chapel, I get a remarkably diverse set of answers. Some understand Jesus as Superman – Jesus the son of Mary is the secret identity of God. Somewhere under His robes, there's a union suit with a big G on the front. Others seem to under-

stand Jesus as “God, Junior”, the Son, and hence lesser, manifestation of God. You should be aware that there was a time when merely uttering this understanding in the wrong company could get you burned at the stake. Just sayin...

I heard a preacher on the radio once explain that just as water can appear as ice, or water or steam, so God can appear as Father, Son or Holy Ghost. The preacher on the radio clearly didn't have the first clue about the history of the church's teaching, because this is another one of those things that could have gotten you burned at the stake at one point in our history. When I raise the question of who Jesus is around the Chapel of St. Star-buck everybody goes for the easy answer, just as the Disciples did.

Well, everybody but Peter. Peter announced, “You are the Messiah”, and that's troublesome, too, because my perception is that if I turned the question around and

asked at the Chapel, “Who is the Messiah?”, I'd get answers as confused as before. It seems that there just are no simple answers when it comes to Jesus.

I'd suggest that the problem is our stubborn need to domesticate the divine. We are only comfortable with a God who is small enough for us to put in a box, but big enough to heal our illnesses if we pray hard enough. At the busiest corner Wisdom cries out; at the entrance of the city gates Wisdom speaks: “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?” God is not simple. It is we who deceive ourselves.

Clinging to the explanations of Jesus which we were given as children, and refusing to engage Jesus' question as adults is a very good way indeed to wind up at the Cheraw Brickworks. So far as I know, there is nothing in the Book of Order which requires you to leave your brains on a hook by the front door when you enter a Presbyterian Church. We are to engage all of us – heart,

mind and soul – in the pursuit of a relationship with the ineffable, and that relationship begins with a confession that although God reaches out to us in love He, Himself, is ineffable – beyond our power to capture in a box of our thoughts. He can comprehend, indeed, create! you. You cannot comprehend Him.

So, here we sit, modern people with our brains firmly in our heads, proud of our understanding of the natural world, reading texts written by and for ancient people who understood thunder to be the voice of the gods. We can boast that we now know that thunder is the sound made by the discharge of millions of amps of electricity through the atmosphere. Thunder is perfectly understandable without imagining the voice of angry gods, unless you actually get struck by lightning. Speak to one who has survived being struck by lightning and you will find that there is no talk of amps or watts or the laws of electricity which will adequately describe his experi-

ence. Some things, you just can't describe in words. It is this we call the ineffable – that which exceeds our capacity to capture in words.

I mentioned two very ancient heresies, understandings of Jesus which the church rejected very early in our history. One was that Jesus was God's secret identity. The other was that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are simply modes of appearance – reflecting how we perceive God. There were many, many more as people strove to understand the remarkable story that was unfolding. One by one, they were rejected. They were rejected because each of them sought to make God a thing. God cannot be a thing, one of many other things in His Creation, unique only in His attributes. Any attempt to characterize God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as a thing amounts to an attempt to put God in a box of our making. Following a God confined in a box will lead you only to the brickworks, and you will have to laboriously back your

car into a ditch, turn around and make your way back to the main road with Wisdom's words ringing in your ear, “Why don't you ever listen to me? I told you you not to do that! You just never listen.”

Recognizing that we cannot capture God's attributes in human words, an ancient writer who celebrated in the name “Dionysius the Aeropagite”, advocated knowing God by negatives. He first attributed some quality to God, like goodness, or mercy, then confessed that as a fallible human he wouldn't know goodness or mercy if it hit him in the head with a Cheraw brick. If he couldn't know the attribute because he was a sinner, then he couldn't use the attribute to describe God. Then, he attributed the negative — God is not good, God is not merciful — and found the same limitations. At the end of long meditation, he wrote, the seeker would have confessed his utter inadequacy to define God and could only fall on his face proclaiming, “Holy, Holy, Holy is

the Lord”. That's not too bad, church. That's not too bad. Every time I see a bumper sticker reading, “Honk if you love Jesus”, or even, “God is GOOD!” I want to rip it off the bumper and re-stick it over the driver's lips. Be still, and know that I am God!¹

Standing before the second person of the Godhead, Peter wins approval with his confession, “You are the Messiah”, but immediately fails to understand what that means when Jesus explains to him the consequences of the title – he tries to talk Jesus out of following the path of sorrow for which He came. It's as if Peter had been suddenly instructed in the nature of lightning, then undertook to argue with a bolt of lightning about its path, or that he had been told that the earth orbits the sun, and tried to talk the earth out of it. Jesus, the Incarnation, is not an opinion to be disputed. Jesus, the Incarnation, is not a thing to be described. Jesus, the Incarnation is

¹ Psalm 46:10

come to undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. That is why Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Jesus, the Incarnation, cannot be understood apart from the crucifixion and resurrection.

All of us are fearful of change. All of us, like my friend who borrowed my book, are attached to the stories of our faith from our childhood. All of us feel, at some level, that to attend to the indwelling Holy Spirit when we are led in ways we would not have anticipated, is somehow improper if it leads us from the comfortable stories of our childhood. We are much more comfortable following the path laid out for us as children, even if it leads to the Cheraw Brickworks. When my friend became anxious about the book I lent him, he was like a child who had been taught to write his letters, but who was fearful of using them to write the story God had

placed him here to tell. Such a story can only be told if we stop trying to capture God in a box and throw ourselves upon the ground crying, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord”!

Forgive me, but I do not see this sort of soul-searching involvement with God in today's discussions. I hear people at the Chapel offer up their understanding of God and the Incarnation as “The Truth” as if they were capable of containing the truth. I see a lot of self-righteous involvement with the sins of others. I see a lot of insensitivity to the deeply held beliefs of our brothers and sisters. I don't see many at the Chapel of St. Starbuck who throw themselves upon the ground crying, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord.” In a word, I don't see in today's society much submission to the ineffable.

In his Epistle, James, the brother of our Lord, advises:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who

teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.

Indeed, James. Indeed. When we are compelled to speak of God we should be overwhelmed by an awareness of our inadequacy. Such a thing should be undertaken only with fear and trembling, for those who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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