

GLOBAL POSITIONING SYSTEM



Scripture:

Psalm 19

God's Glory in Creation and the Law

1. The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his 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.
5. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, 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 hidden 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 for ever; 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.

Luke 4: 14-21

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

14. Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.
15. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.
16. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,
17. and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:
18. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
19. to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'
20. And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.
21. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'



GLOBAL POSITIONING SYSTEM

Some of you know that I have a twin brother who lives in New Jersey. (No, we are not identical! That's not possible.) Bill and I are both alike and very much not alike. While we were growing up, my dad used to get a kick out of saying, "They fought in the womb, and now they fight in every room!" I guess he thought he was pretty cute. Bill and I *did* scuffle now and then as kids, but now we just joke around a lot, actually in a way not too different from dad, and we think we're pretty funny too. Well, last Monday he called and was making some silly comparison between God and dog, how they are similar because all they do is listen, they don't talk. He was kind of joking, but kind of not, so I decided to make a point. First of all, I said, MY dog really does communicate quite a bit, and I imitated some of Dodger's sounds and what they mean. Then I got kind of serious and said that God communicates in all kinds of ways, though indeed, I have an easier time imagining God as a listener, for whatever reason.

GOD'S COMMUNICATION

Brother Bill didn't get the full sermon, and actually, neither will you (at least, not in one sitting). God communicates in too many ways that I don't even know about, for me to pretend that one sermon could do them justice. The one way I'm ready to talk about today, however, is an easy one to access, and that is through Scripture. Scripture is one way God uses to help us position ourselves in our worlds: in history, in society, in community. We can locate ourselves within a faith tradition and it helps give us identity and purpose. Let's look at how this worked in the life of ancient Israel.

After the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Hebrews, at a time when there was no more temple, the Israelites used the reading of Scripture to remind them of who they were; whereas their temple worship had centered around the altar, they needed a new identity and they became, in effect, a people of the book. We see this in one of the other lectionary passages for today, excerpted from Nehemiah 8. After the exile, Nehemiah was sent from Persia's king, as a new governor with authority to rebuild Jerusalem's Wall. In spite of the harassment of many enemies, the Jews succeeded in re-fortifying their city in only 52 days. Then, the next order of business was to re-establish their

identity and reconstitute their national life. This they did by spending an entire week, each day from early morning to mid-day, hearing Scripture read aloud as their priests interpreted for them, since the people were a bit out of practice. They wept, it had been so long since they'd heard Scripture as a congregation.

Such was the global positioning system of the Jews, chastened by years of exile. They were again open to God's guidance in the written word, and there was a wave of repentance and revival, preparing them for witness to the world. In that vein, Luke the Evangelist relies on Scripture to locate many of the events in his gospel. Mary's great song, the Magnificat, which she sings to God in her pregnancy, recalls Hannah dedicating her son Samuel at the temple, the same Samuel who, as a boy heard God calling in the night and became the prophet who anointed Israel's first king. Luke quotes Isaiah to show us how John the Baptist's ministry fulfilled prophecy. In chapter 4, the global positioning system is even clearer, as Jesus matches wits with the devil by quoting Scripture each time he is tempted. All this is background to the ministry Jesus began when he had survived those temptations.

GOOD NEWS

Now we turn to the story that unfolds in today's passage. Jesus arrives in his hometown and stands up to read Scripture. At the start of his ministry, what is it that he reads from Isaiah 61? Hear it again,

**"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives and
recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

This is what Jesus read. We don't know if it was the passage prescribed in their system for that day, or whether it was his free choice; either way, it became his mission statement as he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes on him, he started to tell them how Isaiah's words had been fulfilled in their hearing.

Was it for his own benefit or for the congregation that Jesus used this quote? He was ready, we are led to believe, to begin roughly three years of active ministry. These words could have served as a pep talk for himself. If so, it was put to immediate use – no sooner had Jesus delighted the assembly with the gracious words of prophecy fulfilled, than he changed his tone. Even as he acknowledged that he was the boy they remembered, Joseph’s son, he let them know that he was not coming home to serve *them*, because they were not ready to receive him; he would follow Elijah and Elisha and take his good news beyond the borders of Israel. This news information was by no means pleasant to the Jews, who strongly believed they were the chosen, and the ONLY chosen ones of God. So suddenly had they been delighted; just as suddenly, they were now filled with rage, drove him out of town and prepared to throw him off a cliff. Yet Jesus eluded them and went away.

SCRIPTURE’S POWERFUL ROLE

So again, this passage positioned Jesus to begin what would be a very challenging ministry. If Scripture played such a powerful role for the patriarchs and prophets, and to Jesus, why do we not commit passages to memory ourselves, passages we might use to thwart a devil or deliver a pep talk? Granted, we read passages each week in worship, and many of us have devotional practices that keep us daily in the word. But some of us would agree with the honest assessment given by Frederick Buechner, part of which formed our Word of Greeting. Buechner says further of the Bible, that

**“It is a swarming compost of a book,
an Irish stew of poetry and propaganda,
law and legalism, myth and murk,
history and hysteria.
Over the centuries it has become hopelessly
associated with tub-thumping evangelism
and dreary piety,
with superannuated superstition
and blue-nosed moralism,
with ecclesiastical authoritarianism and
crippling literalism.
Let him who tries to start out at Genesis
and work his way conscientiously
to Revelation beware.”**

How do *you* feel about the Bible? Last week I heard Rit Anderson refer to the Bible as God’s love letter to his people. Do you read it that way? That seems precisely to characterize the way the Psalmist reads it. Listen again at verse 7 of Psalm 19: “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” This writer is in love with Scripture and with God! And I have to confess that I have always loved this Psalm, because I feel much the same way about Scripture, even though I would not want to be thought of as a Bible thumper any more than I wanted to be identified with the Jesus freaks of my youth. But I do know what it is like to need a global positioning system, believe me, and Scripture has met that need.

GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Now, although I am an admitted Bibliophile, I hasten to add that my relationship to Scripture has always been couched within the context of my relationship to the Word Incarnate – the Word of love God spoke whose name is Jesus. There are times, for me, when what I read seems in tension with my experience of Jesus, and so I pray and follow as best I can the leading of the Holy Spirit. I trust the Holy Spirit also to guide me in interpreting Scripture, and yet we all know that sincere Christians often disagree about interpretation.

Take for example, the recent full page advertisement in the *Press Democrat* of Sunday, January 7, where several local Episcopalian congregations openly declared their disagreement with the stance of St. John’s in Petaluma; that congregation recently chose to leave the Episcopalian denomination because it had consecrated an openly gay bishop. Through this communal letter, I know some who have experienced welcome; they heard it as good news of liberation. However you feel about it, I know the letter was intended in the spirit of Jesus’ mission statement from Luke 4, as a sacrificial offering. At the same time, it is sad to reflect on how many of

our denominations are experiencing the acute grief that accompanies such splits, even as we are encouraged to pray for Christian unity this week.. We struggle with the necessary decisions raised by our various interpretations of Scripture. And yet, Scripture is one of the main ways we have been given for our global positioning.

On a more hopeful note, as Rector Matthew Lawrence of the Church of the Incarnation has fielded questions on this issue, he has made clear that Christians do not want to be sidetracked, as it were, by the current controversies. In an ironic quote last Monday, he reiterated what is true for both liberal and conservative churches around the world – that their priority is still to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, build hospitals and generally care for the needy. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us to do these things.

GOD'S LOVE LETTER TO US

So where does this leave us? This morning I hope to encourage us to read the Bible as Rit suggests, as a love letter from God to us, helping us to live well in an ever more challenging world. Again I turn to Buechner, who reminds us of an idea from Karl Barth, that reading the Bible is like “looking out of the window and seeing everybody on the street shading their eyes with their hands and gazing up into the sky toward something which is hidden from us by the roof. They are pointing up. They are speaking strange words. They are very excited. Something is happening which we can’t see happening. Or something is about to happen. Something beyond our comprehension has caught them up and is seeking to lead them on ‘from land to land for strange, intense, uncertain, and yet mysteriously well-planned service.’” Buechner says, “To read the Bible is to try to read the expression on their faces. To listen to the words of the Bible is to try to catch the sound of the queer, dangerous and compelling word they seem to hear.”

MAKING THE BIBLE COME ALIVE

Finally, Buechner offers suggestions for making the Bible come alive for us, including reading it in a foreign language or a radically unfamiliar version. I will share the last of these ideas, my favorite: “If you look *at* a window, you see fly-specks, dust, the crack where Junior’s Frisbie hit it. If you look *through* a window, you see the world beyond.” May we all read Scripture, then, in such a way that we see beyond what our eyes can see, with understanding that reaches deep into us, beyond what our minds can grasp; and may we use that deep understanding to hold steady our hopeful position in the world, as we preach good news and proclaim the Lord’s favor. Amen.



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