

Deep in the changing sky:

Called to deep wisdom

I Corinthians 1:18-25; Psalm 19; Prov. 8 verses

What do you think of when you look to the sky? Sunrises and sunsets on the horizon catch our attention because of their beauty & colors. The various shades of blue remind us of the sea. Some people associate the sky with depth & stability. For some it symbolizes confidence, wisdom, intelligence, faith, truth, and heaven.

Here we are in big sky country. It's one of the metaphors during this Lent that we are most familiar with. We enjoy the nice blue sky and the sunshine at any time of year. Often clouds catch our attention. Sometimes, when we look out around us – there is different sky encircling us. A few times, I have seen five significant different skies. In one direction it was dark black. Another direction offered a nice blue. A third direction had gray sky. And I could see one with white wispy clouds. And the fifth sky was full of heavy cotton balls.

And of course within these clouds are all kinds of configurations, many with their own names that signify how high up the clouds are. Have you ever spent time just studying clouds and trying to see shapes in them? And there are formations of clouds that cause us to stop and look and wonder – am I seeing what I'm seeing? Am I safe? Is it issuing a warning?

Of course there is star gazing. Looking for constellations. We have occasions to study the sky for events like meteor showers, planets aligning behind each other, eclipses, and even spotting satellites. Plus we know the story of the name of this church, finding our way.

And today we use the sky for travel. Sometimes looking down on clouds is as much fun as looking up at them. It's amazing how airplane wings are shaped to make air molecules move faster over the top of the wings. So the pressure on the top of the wing is less than that on the bottom of the wing. The pressure difference creates a force that lifts wings up into the air.

Have you ever found yourself looking up to the heavens? Help!! Or offering grateful thanks? Or seeking for wisdom? How often have you found yourself wanting to see further than you can? An obstacle is messing up a good sunset!

One focus today is on **wisdom**. There are all kinds of wisdoms. It's knowledge. It's ability. It's for lack of a better word – street smarts. There is much wisdom focused on specific aspects of life. Let's consider some quotes.

Will Rodgers was known for his pithy sayings. "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there." And, "The quickest way to double your money is to fold it over and put it back in your pocket."

Megan Rapinoe urges: "No matter what life throws at you, or how unfair you think it is, never give up. Pick yourself up and go on." Norman Vincent Peale offers: "Change your thoughts and you change your world." Billy Graham advises us: "When wealth is lost, nothing is lost; when health is lost, something is lost; when character is lost, all is lost." Erma Bombeck wrote: "When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left and could say, I used everything you gave me."

The Bible has many proverbs on a variety of aspects of wisdom. And it frequently writes about the importance of following God's laws as wisdom. Hope you remember the variety of views about wisdom from Pierre Gilbert this last January. And you should have recently received an email from North Star about the wisdom of the Song of Solomon from him.

The Voice translation commentary of our I Corinthians text offer this wisdom. "The cross challenges human values because no one expects to find freedom through capital punishment like Jesus did. Unlike most of the thousands who faced crucifixion before and after Jesus, He was clearly not a criminal. God uses this contradiction to reveal His power and wisdom: Jesus has offered Himself to death

and has been raised to life to bring liberation to others. Those who truly follow this crucified king do not seek power and authority through the normal patterns of the world; they offer themselves in loving sacrifice for others. That is where God's transforming power is truly revealed in our selves and the church."

Why did the Apostle Paul offer these words to a church in conflict? The Corinthian church was in enough conflict for him to write them two letters. Paul makes no sense in saying, "look to the cross." Or is he making the most sense of any advice in the world? Uplifting a most cruel form of punishment as the model for life and faith, is foolishness. Or is it the best wisdom we find? It's simply that our Creator is revealed in the cross and all its implications.

The Bible is full of what theologians call "2 way" theology. There is a way of death and there is a way that leads to death. Jesus used this theology in the Sermon on the Mount when He compares the broad way to destruction and the narrow way to life. Paul talks about the competing sets of behaviors in how we live. One leads to devastation and ruin, but Jesus' example, values and way of life offer life.

But for those who are being saved, the word of the foolish weakness of the cross is the very power of God. Paul quotes a prophecy from the book of Isaiah to make his point. In it, God promises to destroy the wisdom of the wise and set aside the understanding of the intelligent. "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. The world did not know God through wisdom."

This story illustrates Gospel wisdom. Clarence Darrow, the famous atheist lawyer, took part in a debate at a church in Chicago. In his attack on the Christian faith, he tried to play on the emotions of the African Americans who were there and on their social misery. This was at the heart of the depression so he pointed out – you

have no money, jobs and little hope. He amplified their despair and frustrations. Then Clarence Darrow said: "I don't understand it – you sing such great music. I have heard you singing here today – amid all the woes of life. How can you sing? What in the world do you have to sing about in the face of life like this?"

Darrow had asked a rhetorical question, not expecting an answer. Like a flash a woman stood up right in front of him & said, "Why do we sing? What do we have to sing about? We have JESUS to sing about!" And the crowd all shouted, "Amen!" What faith & commitment! What deep wisdom in the midst of suffering!

C.S. Lewis calls **Psalm 19** "the greatest poem in the Bible." It speaks of God's majesty and power and tells us how God has shown His love for us. It touches on a number of major biblical themes: creation, law, sin, forgiveness, and ethical conduct among them. It also offers a rich set of imagery and well-known language on which to draw. There are 3 clear sections.

First, verses 1-6, focuses on *creation*. It's a poetic hymn that uses the generic name for God – El. The sky is speaking about its creator. We receive a vivid description of the glories of creation, focused particularly on the heavens. Their voices go out and the world hears. The orderly succession of day & night offers mute but eloquent testimony to the power of the God who has created and continues to maintain them. Some of the other cultures at the time, viewed the sun as divine in itself or, a visible indicator of a god's presence. But, the Psalmist sees its movement across the sky as evidence of the remarkable power of the One who created, arranged and regulates this beauty.

The next part of the psalm, verses 7 to 10, turns from God "showing" God's character in the sky, to "telling" about God's character through divine instruction about who God is and how God intends us to live in relationship. We are given in these verses, 6 different synonyms for the Hebrew word *torah*. They are: law, decrees, precepts, commandments, fear, & ordinances.

Notice this section gives us the personal name of God - Yahweh, "the LORD," instead of the more general name El, used in the first section. The torah, the first five books of the Bible are praised repeatedly. One translation of these descriptions, as the focus switches from God's creation to God's laws & instruction, is we are offered six labels. The law is true, perfect, reliable, correct, clear, clean, and sound.

And it turns lives around, instills wisdom in open minds, gives satisfaction to the heart, lends clarity to the eyes, sustains us for all eternity, it is right through and through. It's worth more than pure gold and is sweeter than honey or the drippings of the honeycomb. These words praise the wisdom of the LORD!

In another translation we find, the wisdom of the Creator's instruction is for "reviving the soul, making wise the simple, rejoicing the heart, enlightening the eyes, enduring forever, and is true and righteous altogether." This certainly goes a long way toward explaining why God's law is more valuable and desirable than the finest gold and sweetest honey.

Then the third section, verses 11-14 speaks about recognizing all of the *virtues* of torah. The focus is specifically the value of God's laws as a guide to right conduct. The ethical consequence of receiving law, the Almighty's instructions, seems straightforward. If one keeps the law, great reward will result. If one does not, their consequences are alluded to.

Then it's fascinating a difficulty is pointed out. This is, we may not always realize when we have transgressed the law. As CS Lewis in the book, *Mere Christianity* points out, most of the time we don't need to be instructed about some thing, but we need to be reminded – often!

So the psalm continues with a series of pleas to God for *forgiveness* of unknown unconscious sins. For protection against evil influences or as one translation puts it - pride. If the Lord God does this for us, we will be acceptable to our Creator, whether we deserve it or not!

Then the psalm ends with a well known prayer. It recognizes where ultimate wisdom comes from. Instead of the heavens or the torah law talking, its time for us to appeal for *help*. "May the words that come out of my mouth and the musings of my heart meet with Your gracious approval, O Eternal, my Rock, my Redeemer."

The flow of the Psalm through these 3 sections, with torah law serving as the bridge between creation and human conduct, are life giving. Holy Scripture as the essential authority and guide for determining Christian moral & ethical conduct is laid out as wisdom for us. Only after God gives torah to enlighten, make wise, and inform us, are we forgiven, warned and guided to proper conduct and choices.

Our recognition of "hidden faults" and of the need for God's protection from evil influences is a deep admission of human inability to live according to the law. So we need the power of forgiveness & the Gospel. I think this is where we tie into the word **deep** in our sermon title. This is not a light and fluffy message. It's heavenly wisdom that comes from our Creator.

Psalm 19 could be summarized as saying "The heavens may tell of God's glory, but it is only after God gives torah law that the believer can make enough sense of the creation to recognize sin, to cry out for forgiveness, and to place all hope and trust in God's grace."

Let's close with an **illustration**. The last major battle in WW2 in the Pacific Ocean was the Battle for the island Okinawa about 700 miles south of Japan. The Allies fought to take this island because it was close enough to Japan to establish airbases that would be within easy reach of their enemy's homeland.

It was a terrible fight. Thousands of Americans and Japanese lost their lives in the struggle for this island. But the success of the Americans was never really in doubt. As Americans took the island many Okinawans believed the lie that the Americans were vicious conquerors who

would mercilessly kill all their captives. So, many of them committed suicide.

But there was one exception. An advance patrol of American soldiers approached a remote village of nearly 1000 people, and stopped dead in their tracks. Barring their way were two little old men who bowed low and began to speak. The sergeant summoned an interpreter.

The interpreter listened & shook his head. "I don't get it. Seems we're being welcomed as 'fellow Christians.' One says he's the mayor of the village; the other's the school master. That's a Bible the oldest has in his hand."

The war correspondent who filed this report said "We'd seen other Okinawan villages, uniformly down-at-the-heels and despairing. By contrast, this one shone like a diamond in a dung heap. Proudly the two old men showed us their spotless homes, their fertile terraced fields, their storehouses and granaries, and their prized sugar mill."

They'd only seen ONE American before, ever! 30 years before to be precise. An American missionary on his way to Japan had paused at their village. He'd stayed only long enough to make a pair of converts, these same two men, teach them a couple of hymns, leave them a Japanese translation of the Bible and exhort them to live by it. They had had no contact with any Christian since.

Yet during those 30 years, they picked their way through the Bible. They had adopted the Ten Commandments as their legal code. The Sermon on the Mount as their guide to social conduct. In their school the Bible was the chief literature. It was read DAILY by all students. Major passages were memorized. In this village, the precepts of the Bible were law.

Later, the correspondent and his driver returned to the village & took part in a worship service. The villagers only knew two songs - "Fairest Lord Jesus" and "All Hail the Power of Jesus'

Name." The hymns had "suffered some changes, but they were recognizable."

The worship was so powerful that - when the service over - the driver whispered, "So this is what comes out of only a Bible and a couple of old guys who wanted to live like Jesus! Then, with a glance at a shell-hole, he murmured, "Maybe we are using the wrong kind of weapons." (By war correspondent Clarence W. Hall, in "Together" Magazine, October 1960)

I think this is what David saw as he wrote this psalm. He knew the power of God to transform and to improve the lives of those who would listen to God. And in that deep truth & wisdom, David realized God believed in us. The Creator has not given up on us. The Almighty believes that we can be better than what we've been.

One more thing. As much as David understood the love of God, there was one thing that David did NOT know about God's love. The OT was not fully written. And he did not know the truth of John 3:16. Please repeat it with me: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

We could say: Nature forms us; Sin deforms us; Education informs us; Culture conforms us; Prison might reform us; but only the Bible's and Jesus' wisdom, transforms us!

So when we read this Psalm, we celebrate 3 great gifts from the Almighty: creation, law, and forgiveness. Plus it provides the real wisdom this world needs. Its interpretation and reading should summon all people to join in; giving thanks for the particular ways these gifts have been manifest in our lives, in the life of our community, country and world. This kind of celebration is appropriate for any congregation, and will be found acceptable in God's sight. It's a call to go deep into the changing sky, to find the ultimate life giving wisdom.

Let's read the psalm responsively.