***THE WORLD AND THE WORD***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

September 12, 2021

Texts: Psalm 19 and Mark 8:27-30

It was twenty years ago yesterday that the Twin Towers came crashing down and with them were lost almost 3,000 lives and our national sense of invincibility. I was in the Fellowship Hall with some of you in a Bible study when Lew Lewis came in to tell us what was going on, something we all found hard to fully grasp at the time. As the pictures and stories of that day emerged, we began to realize how very *vulnerable* we were! Church pews here and elsewhere filled with folks anxious to lift to God their prayers for help and protection in the midst of those anxious days; but that surge of pious devotion lasted only a couple of weeks, confirming the truth of the proverb: *Danger past, God forgotten*. As we commemorate the 20th anniversary of that tragic day, we recall the lives lost, the heroes who stepped up selflessly to help others, and the enduring legacy the attack has had upon our nation, our world, and ourselves. On that day we learned what much of the world had long known – life is fragile, and there is evil in the world that can rear its ugly head at unexpected moments in unexpected places. It is a lesson we are still learning!

Remarkably in the space of this weekend we have lost as many Americans to COVID as we did on 9/11! Twenty years ago those deaths on 9/11 were regarded as a national tragedy worth memorializing; it was all so sudden and violent! The deaths this weekend have gone largely unnoticed by many in our nation who have stopped paying attention, are just tired of the virus, or have moved on and no longer do anything to safeguard themselves or others in order to prevent further suffering. The dangers of 9/11 turned us as a nation to God, however briefly. The danger of the virus is not past; is God already forgotten? Has the virus so exhausted us after 18 months that we don’t even bother mentioning it to God in our prayers anymore?

For the psalmist, creation never forgets God, but continuously sings God’s praise without using any words. In a brilliant Blue Ridge sunrise or glowing Allegheny Mountain sunset,

in the power of surf or storm,

in the brilliance of a rainbow,

in the awesome wonder of starry, starry nights,

and the miracle of cellular mitosis,

God is praised. It is praise that is uttered from heaven to earth and everywhere in between, praise that is sung gloriously day and night without voice, praise that needs no words to find expression. In the words of John Calvin:

*Wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of [God’s] glory.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The psalmist simply says:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God*

*And heaven’s vault (the firmament) proclaims God’s handiwork.*

All creation sings God’s praise. The beauty of the earth, seas and skies, the intricacies of the web of life, and the substance of life itself point to the divine creator who shaped them all.

Across the centuries theologians have debated whether the wonder of creation alone reveals God to us, or whether our knowledge of God enables us to recognize the fingerprints of God in creation. Which comes first? Perhaps it is not “either…or” but “both…and”. For those who know God, divine fingerprints in creation are obvious; in the wonder of nature, we see a wonderful God at work. For those who have not known God but have searched for God or even denied God’s existence, the miracle of creation may reveal the work of divine hands. To think it all coincidence or chance may strain belief even more than does belief in a divine creator as Francis Collins suggests in his book, *The Language of God*. In those instances, the heavens ***are*** telling the glory of God, as are subatomic heavens we cannot even see! Some folks seem to think that is all they need. They suggest that simply being immersed in the beauty of nature is worship enough. They don’t worship in any church; they worship in nature – on a mountaintop, by a river’s edge, or more dubiously on a golf course where God’s name certainly is mentioned from time to time. That is all they need to know God, they say.

The psalmist agrees that the heavens are telling the glory of God, but he disagrees that such general revelations of God’s glory are sufficient to grasp who God is. In Psalm 19 he marvels at the glory of God revealed in creation, but in the middle of the psalm he turns from the laws of nature which sing God’s glory to the Law of the LORD, Torah, which is glorious in its own right. I will freely admit that when I was growing up the Law of the LORD didn’t seem so glorious; it just seemed to impose a lot of rules. You weren’t supposed to covet your neighbor’s stuff even if he got the best baseball card in the pack. You were supposed to honor your father and your mother even when you were sure they were wrong about your ability to stay up late on a school night. You weren’t supposed to take the Lord’s name in vain when mashing your finger with a hammer. There were several additional laws of the LORD that must have been hidden somewhere deep within the footnotes of Leviticus or Numbers or some other seldom-read book of the Bible that imposed rules like:

Don’t mow the lawn on Sunday (which was okay with me), or

Say you’re sorry even if your brother ***deserved*** to be hit, or

Wear a tie to church.

It was hard to imagine those Laws of the LORD as a blessing! Of course, some of those laws were not the Law of the Lord at all; they were cultural laws or family rules. They were not necessarily blessings! Israel regarded the Torah as a blessing, a gift from God that shaped life in a positive way and guided lives toward greater happiness and peace. As one of my seminary professors describes it, the commandments are not rules to limit life but fence posts to mark the boundaries of that field of faith in which we live and grow together in community.

For the psalmist it is not the wonder of creation alone that reveals God’s glory. God’s glory is revealed too in the Torah which comes to us from the hand of that divine creator. In Torah we find guidance for our lives and for our life together, guidance that leads us on righteous paths toward greater peace and harmony with one another, guidance that helps us distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, faithfulness from sin. The Creator of all things does not just leave us in awe of the grand universe in which we live, but offers us a blueprint for living day to day within the glorious bounds of creation. The heavens may be telling the glory of God, but they say little about how to live. We may worship in the cathedral of creation, but we find little help from that general revelation of God in identifying our purpose in being here or guidance for how to live amid all the glory.

The Torah offers that guidance, offers not only instruction on how to live, but also a means of identifying when we have strayed. As Paul says, “I delight in the law of the Lord, but my body and mind are at war with it.” We know what is right, but we do what is wrong. We know what is wrong, but we do it anyway. Even if we know what is right and manage to do it, too often it is for the wrong reason. Sometimes we sin intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, but try as we might, we do sin and deviate from the guidance God has given to us in the Law, commandments, and teachings of Jesus. Jesus claims that all of God’s laws hinge on just two commandments: *Love the Lord with all that you are, and*

*love your neighbor as yourself.*

If we could live by those two commands then everything else would fall into place. But even those commandments seem beyond our reach. It is perhaps not hard to love the Lord, but it is hard to love the Lord with ALL that you are. It may not be hard to love your neighbor, but if your neighbor is a bigoted bully or belligerent buffoon, then the limits of love are tested. Those laws are given by God, not to set us up for failure or punishment, but to bring us greater happiness and joy as children of God and disciples of Christ. Our inability to heed them may be disheartening to us and disappointing to God, but thankfully it is not desperately hopeless. For, Christ rescues us, Christ saves us!

We aren’t saved because we have done such a great job of obeying the Law. We are saved by grace even though we have broken the Law time and time again. Like the wonder of creation which is God’s amazing gift, salvation is God’s amazing gift in Christ. That’s how we are saved – not by **our** profession of faith, not by **our** good works, not by anything **we** do – but by the grace of God in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead for us. In him we find a special revelation of God – a glimpse of who God is in the person of Jesus – a God who loves us without end, a God who perseveres with us longer than we persevere with God, a God who forgives us but calls us to repent of our sins, a God who saves. In the words of John’s Gospel, he is God’s eternal Word made flesh, the savior of the world. The natural world reveals God’s glory in spectacular ways; Torah reveals God’s glory in shaping our lives and life together; Jesus Christ reveals God’s glory in his life, death, and resurrection that save us and give us hope.

It is that hope we hold as we recall the tragedy of 9/11 this weekend, that hope we grasp as we face this surge in the delta variant of the virus, that hope that enables us to sing with joy this day, to bask in the beauty of creation day to day, and to face the future with confidence, knowing that nothing can separate us from God’s love – not 9/11, not the coronavirus, not the next tragedy to come, not our sin, not even death – for God’s love prevails! God’s glory shines through! Hope endures! The heavens are telling the glory of God; and so are we! Amen

1. *Institutes of the Christian Religion Book 1, Chapter V.1* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)