

January 8, 2017
Sermon for New Year's Day
St Peter Lutheran Church
Bowie, TX
Larry Knobloch, Pastor
Psalm 19

J.J.- Jesu Juva—Help me, Jesus

Psalm 19

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. ² Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. ³ There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. ⁴ Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, ⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, 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 there is nothing hidden from its heat. ⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; ⁸ the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; ⁹ the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules 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 Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. ¹³ Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not 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 in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

In 1995, 20 years ago, the Hubble Space Telescope took a famous series of pictures of the Eagle Nebula, a cluster of approximately 460 stars nearly 7,000 light years away.

In the midst of the nebula, Hubble captured a section which has been dubbed the “Pillars of Creation.” Three massive columns “composed of interstellar hydrogen gas and dust are said to act as incubators for new stars”—literally a place where stars are born.

Inside these columns and “on their surface astronomers have found knots or globules of denser gas, ‘Evaporating Gaseous Globules.’” It is thought that within these globules are stars that are being formed. [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EagleNebula>]

In the book by C. S. Lewis, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (from the *Chronicles of Narnia* series), young Eustace, a boy from our world, encounters a mysterious old man named Ramandu. He soon discovers the surprising fact that Ramandu is actually a retired star, living on an island in the east of the Narnian world after a lifetime of shining in the night sky.

“In our world,” says Eustace, “a star is a huge ball of flaming gas.” Ramandu responds, “[but] even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is but only what it is *made of*.”

Lewis makes a profound and important distinction here often lost on our culture today. For example, science has been very good at determining what a thing is *made of*—whether that be stars, or snakes, man, or woman—but that is certainly different than answering the question *who* we are, what we are *for*, *why* we are here.

On the other hand, the Scriptures say very little about what we are made of, but says quite a lot about who we are, what we are for and why we are here. So the Bible may not tell us what a star is made of in the way the Hubble Space Telescope can, but it certainly begins to tell us what a star *is*.

In the very beginning, in Genesis, we learn that the stars have a meaning and purpose beyond the stuff they are made of: they are to light up the sky, they are to mark the seasons, and they are to serve as signs—portents of God's purposes.

Likewise, our psalm this morning ascribes further meaning to the celestial canopy: they declare God's glory. Without voice or sound, they proclaim a message universal, from one end of the earth to the other. In the stars' silvery light the beauty of God's handiwork glimmers. And the sun, our greatest star, spreads the warmth of its life-giving rays over all the earth.

The deeper we peer into the vastness and mystery of space, the greater our wonder and the more profound the message. Truly, whether in night or day, the firmament reveals the glory of our Creator.

In the words of the poet, Joseph Addison, “[the heavens] all rejoice, and utter forth a glorious voice, forever singing, as they shine, ‘The Hand that made us is Divine’” (*Ode*, by Joseph Addison, 1672–1719).

But the psalm soon moves on to speak about another source of revelation, the Word of God. In it our being and purpose are made known.

We may be *made of* cells and atoms, patterned on strands of DNA, but our identity is as creatures who live and move by and for the Word of God.

The psalmist says that through His word, God revives the soul, makes wise the simple, gives joy to the heart, and enlightens the eyes. For His word is perfect and pure, it is right and true. Through it God made all things, and by it he guides our lives into that which is more beautiful than the finest gold—that which is sweeter than the sweetest honey: the great reward of life with God.

But as we read on, the psalm suddenly changes themes. So disruptive are the next verses to the flow of the psalm that some scholars have thought it to be an entirely different psalm added on at a later date.

But the disruption does not lie in the psalm itself or in its author, it lies with us. The psalm has something more to say about *who we are*. It reveals what we cannot fully understand and or grasp. The psalmist asks: “*Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults.*” (V.12)

We are creatures that have been gifted with the word of God—a word that warns us of error and yet the psalmist declares that we are still so full of errors we can hardly perceive the extent or breadth of it.

For the psalmist, the fullness of our faults lie hidden; we are unaware of the depth of our sin. We may outwardly appear rather decent but *who we are* has been deeply marred by sin.

We are sinners—a people fundamentally estranged from our Creator and creation, a people presumptuous in our dealings with one another with a preference for our self-made identities rather than the beauty and sweetness of what God desires to make us by His word. Nevertheless, the psalmist is not without hope. Having the *Word of God*, the statutes and the commandments, the precepts and the promises of God, the estranged are not cut off.

As St. Paul explained in Romans chapter 3, the advantage of Israel lay in this fact: they “were entrusted with the oracles of God.” And so the psalmist, struck by the wholesomeness of God's word in contrast to his own errors and faults, prays for forgiveness, for a declaration of innocence.

He prays that he would be as God created him to be—free from the dominion of sin, free from transgression. It is a prayer made in hope yet without a clear answer.

But today is Epiphany, and Epiphany is about the answer.

Epiphany is when the heavens declare the glory of God anew, the glory of his *new creation*.

Epiphany is when the word of God moves beyond just Israel and into the rest of the world.

Epiphany is when a new identity for humanity is ushered in: the estranged are brought near, the foreigner becomes friend, and the sinner receives a declaration of innocence.

And so in our Gospel reading we encounter the journey of the magi, led by an incredible star to encounter a prophetic word that directs them to the Word incarnate. It is a remarkable unfolding of our psalm's themes, but on a scale that could not have been imagined heretofore.

The stars, created for signs and seasons, shine now to point us ahead to a new and eternal spring. The beauty and sweetness of God's word is now sought and recognized in a child, worthy of precious gold and sweet smelling incense.

In this young child found in Joseph and Mary's house, these wise strangers to God's word find a new identity: *"neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave, nor free, neither male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus"* (Gal 3:28).

So different from what they may have known. A Savior from heaven, who came as one of the people, who came for ALL of the people. Royal, rich, merchant, slave and free.

The magi of Epiphany were the beginning of what Paul would call the "mystery hidden for ages" (Eph 3:9) but now brought to light; namely *"This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."* (Eph 3:6).

This mystery of cosmic scale was the mystery of birth and death—the death of who we used to be as sinners and the birth of who we are now through the gospel of Jesus. For the birth of Jesus was intended for His death, a death that would encompass the death of all sinners: *"for one has died for all, therefore all have died"* (1 Cor 5:12).

And all this was so that in His resurrection we might be born again to life with God. And the good news of *who we are* in Christ does not stop here.

Like the glory declared by the heavens, this news is to "go out through all the earth ... [its] words to the end of the world."

Like the sun which shines from one end of the earth to the other, so in Epiphany is all revealed to the world...to all mankind.

Nothing be hidden from the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

And like the psalmist, we pray that in the telling, our minds and mouths would please God, filled with His word so that we may declare the Lord as foundation and Savior of all creation: our Rock and our Redeemer. So let it be for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and mind through Christ Jesus!

Amen.

Sermon Outline

The Heavens Declare

Psalm 19

- I. What are we made of vs. who we are?
- II. We may be *made of* cells and atoms, but our identity is as creatures who live and move by and for the Word of God.
- III. Epiphany is the new identity for humanity in Christ Jesus.

BEAUTIFUL SAVIOR, KING OF CREATION

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