

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 4, 2020

(Psalm 19)

*The heavens declare the glory of the Lord, and the firmament shows his handiwork.*¹

There is no place, either in heaven or on earth, where we cannot see God at work. There is no day or hour when we cannot catch at least a glimpse of the miracles God places in our lives. For me, yesterday was one such day, one that began with a wonderful service for the blessing of the animals – the beloved creatures of God entrusted to our care and deserving of our love – and continuing with another remarkable drive-through service in which the food pantry served our neighbors – the beloved children of God also entrusted to our care and deserving of our love.

The important thing needed for us to hear the declaration of the heavens, however ... what we need to do to see God's handiwork on earth ... is that we must first be willing to look and listen. In times such as the ones in which we have found ourselves during the past few months, looking and listening become understandably difficult. When life is thrown into chaos and the earth begins to shift under our feet, other voices we should perhaps be open to are drowned out by the sound of our own, and the hope we should be seeing – the light at the end of the tunnel – instead becomes a vision of deepening gloom.

In moments of greatest fear, we cling to those two things closest at hand: our own words and our own vision of how things should be.

It's easy to get inside our own heads; frankly, in the months since the onset of COVID and the upheaval of our lives I've done it more than a few times. Like those we've been studying in our adult forum on the Book of Lamentations, when feeling threatened there have been moments when I've wanted to throw up the defenses ... fortify the walls ... retreat into the center and prepare for the siege. But when I do that – when any of us do that – the only voice we hear is our own; the only thing we see is the tiny little space we've jammed ourselves into for safety.

We can't hear the heavens declare anything; there's nothing new we're seeing revealed on the firmament.

Withdrawing also leads to a lack of communication and a lack of understanding. When we do take a moment to cautiously peer outside our tiny fortified inner spaces, we see things we may not be able to wrap our heads around ... things that challenge the one voice that we are allowing ourselves to hear ... things that, as for the people of Jerusalem in Lamentations, may threaten to lay siege to the fortifications we've built up. When we try to not only control but build up our own narrative, we may become judgmental about the narrative of someone else's life, or choices, or beliefs. We block the ability of one day to tell its tale to another and one night to impart its knowledge to another.

¹ Psalm 19:1 (NRSV).

We drown out the glorious sound from the heavens. We block our view of God's incredible handiwork here around us. We forget that like those I encountered here yesterday, we too as children of God are each – are all – entrusted to one another's care and are deserving of one another's love.

I was talking to a close clergy friend this week who mentioned a new twist she had heard on the acronym WWJD: What Would Jesus Do. As she shared with me, that's the wrong question to ask; the question instead should be WDJJ: What Did Jesus Do? And what did Jesus do? He didn't listen to his own voice; he listened to the voices of his heavenly father and those for whom he was sent to care. He didn't build up walls and hide away from the problems he encountered; he demolished walls ... he challenged conventions ... he tore up the old narrative and wrote a new one.

He proclaimed judgment, yes, but he loved those whom he judged. He removed the blinders from the eyes of those who approached him and gave them a new vision of what was possible in this world by trying to get them to understand the narratives of the lives of others. The parables we have heard over the past several weeks were attempts by Jesus to persuade the chief priests and the Pharisees – and any others who would listen – to come out of their small places back into the world and stop listening to their own voices so that the voices of others could be heard.

What did Jesus do? He lived and died and rose again as the one whose glory was proclaimed by the heavens. He taught and healed and preached and listened and demonstrated miraculous things ... his handiwork here on the firmament.

So in those moments of deepest despair or fear, fight the instinct – fight the temptation – to silence the world around us ... to silence the voices of those around us ... and hide away from the sights of this world. Instead, be open to greater potential; be open to greater sounds and more magnificent vistas.

Have open ears to hear the heavens declare the glory of the Lord and clear and open eyes for when the firmament shows his handiwork.

Above all else, remember this: in your darkest moments when you seem most walled off, you are not alone. God is with you. God is in you. And when you take a peek out of your walled-up space and look for God, you may be surprised at just how close God is to you.

As the 13th century Persian poet Rumi wrote, "When you look for God, God is in the look of your eyes, in the thought of looking, nearer to you than yourself, or things that have happened to you. There's no need to go outside. Be melting snow. Wash yourself of yourself. A white flower grows in the quietness. Let your tongue become that flower."²

Amen.

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7188481-when-you-look-for-god-god-is-in-the-look>