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RCL

Christ Our Wisdom And Our Strength

When I was in seminary I was much intimidated by the idea of a lifetime of preaching. After all, what could one say anew after four or five years? Wouldn't you run out of topics; wouldn't everything have been said? Well, that shows you just how naive seminarians can be about the human spiritual life, especially Christian spiritual life. As I began to preach, I found the problem was not finding something relevant to talk about but rather choosing among the myriads of things that offered themselves each week. Sometimes the idea rises from daily life, both great events (like the 9/11 attack or the election of our first African-American president) and small ones (like what grows or dies in my yard's landscape). More often, something in the readings for that day from the Bible catches my attention and I want to explore that. That's especially fun when a familiar passage reveals new truths previously unseen. Finally, the process of preaching is a symbol for the process of our life, for both are intimately bound up with the activity of God's Spirit. I can't tell you how many times I have finished composing a sermon and said to myself, "Where did *that* come from?" I know my own inner landscape and I know what my themes and interests are; some sermons just feel as if they come from somewhere else entirely. God's Spirit blows where it wills and we cannot predict it, either in preaching or in living (John 3.8). I very much appreciate it when someone says that they were challenged by a sermon or enjoyed it, but I often want to reply that I didn't have all that much to do with it. God is the principle author.

As an example, look at the richness of our biblical readings for this Sunday. The gospel is John's story of Jesus attacking the Jerusalem Temple financial establishment, the event that eventually led to Jesus' death. How does the Messiah's condemnation of an abusive, blood-sucking financial arrangement speak to our lives today?

The *Exodus* reading, what we familiarly name as the Ten Commandments, is God's attempt to give guidelines for a creative, satisfying personal and community life. How often are they seen that way, or do we experience them as constriction, as the forbidding of forbidden fruit?

Then Saint Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth “proclaims Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles...” For Paul, who was an educated, sophisticated crossroads of Greek education and Jewish piety, Christ was the reality against which everything else was to be measured. Not that human wisdom was invalid or human strength to be ignored but that they are limited in what they can reveal about God’s purposes, which arise out of passionate love for His creation. The medieval theologians, for whom I have a great admiration, such is my traditionalism, said that we have to go as far as human wisdom and strength can take us and then launch ourselves into another, supernatural realm with the enabling power of God’s grace, good will, and guidance. It is a respect for human wisdom and strength which recognizes their strengths and limitations, powers and limitations. Don’t we need that kind of discernment today?

And then there is one of the loveliest of Psalms, the nineteenth, which begins, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork.” For the amateur scientist in me it is validation for the God I find revealed in creation. Saint Paul says in the first chapter of *Romans*, “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature... have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” (1.20) So there is a place in our spiritual journey for the searching of the universe (human wisdom) that leads to the recognition of the universe’s Creator, Pattern, and Sustainer (divine wisdom). But Psalm 19 does more. While verses one through six extol the physical universe as a glory of God, verses seven through thirteen exalt the moral universe as another revelation of God’s glory. The author, in a sophisticated composition, draws us in to understanding the parallel structure of these realities, a parallel structure that shows to the discerning eye and ear the source of each in the One God who has knit together all aspects of reality into one. Wise man that he is, the psalmist closes with a prayer of humility before the wonder of his creator.

You see what I mean. There is so much to choose from in exploring the God who reveals Himself in the universe of nanoparticles and galaxy clusters as well as in the human world of beating hearts and sacrificial love.

I fear that for most Christians our problem is one of lack of imagination in our explorations and responses to God’s initiatives. Our vision gets narrowed down (tunnel vision is a wonderfully apt expression) and we see so little of God’s physically and spiritually unified world. That tunnel vision can create seeming contradictions. If we see mud and stars, roses and jellyfish, human and virus, as completely separate realities, no wonder we are confused by their seeming

contradictions. But if we expand our vision in conformity to our natural and supernatural abilities, we begin to see how roses draw nourishment from mud with the energy of the stars coming from our sun, and that the rose shares with the jellyfish and the virus and the human an enormous amount of the dna that encodes our life. If morality is to act in accord with the principles of creation, then the physical universe is a moral universe, of which the human world is only a part. If we are humble in spirit, we would allow the possibility of different kinds of life in the grandeur of the universe, the multiverse. Then we wouldn't be surprised at the biblical witness for devils and angels and God knows (literally) what other kinds of sentient life created in the image of God. Neither would we be surprised at the possibility that God might give Himself intimately into the reality He has created, what Christians call the incarnation of the Divine into the universe in Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Isn't all this a wonderful vision of divine beauty and goodness?

You and I are the lucky ones. We have been given this vision of God's goodness and graciousness to our world. Our vision comes through the grace of God and the story of our people in Bible and Church. We are part of God's holy story every bit as much as Abraham and Sarah, Mary and Joseph, Jesus our Christ.

Let us be wise and strong in our living God's gift of this subtle and multifaceted life filled with grace and beauty and wisdom and strength. It is what God-in-Christ wants for each and every one of us. Christ is our wisdom and our strength, and He includes all the lesser forms of those energies. May His name be praised beyond the furthest star. Amen.