

Holy God, draw us into the mystery of Your love. Replenish our spirits, teach us, and give us hope, that we may joyfully proclaim Your grace in every place that needs the Gospel. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.



Hermon Stream Nature Reserve

Jesus and his disciples are walking toward Caesarea Philippi, 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. They're in the foothills of Mount Hermon. The terrain is lush and green; spray from a rushing waterfall sparkles in the air. Here, one of the largest springs in Israel bubbles up out of a cave to supply a major tributary of the Jordan River. This stunningly beautiful area has been sacred to many. The Canaanites worshiped a deity they called Baal Hermon here, and the Greeks made offerings here to the gods Pan and Hermes.

The disciples are energized as they walk with Jesus. They've witnessed healing upon healing, seen Jesus cast out malevolent spirits, watched folks touch the fringe

of Jesus's cloak and be healed! ^{6:56} They'd helped Jesus feed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish, then 4,000 more with seven loaves and a few fish. Abundance and new life and fruitfulness are all around them! Jesus says those who embrace the Word of God will bear fruit beyond imagining—thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. ^{4:20} He says the kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into an enormous shrub with luxuriant foliage, sheltering countless birds! ^{4:31-32} An incandescent hope glows in the faces of those who hear him.

Jesus is changing people's lives! More than that, he's transforming the political landscape. Life under the Romans has felt like walking through the valley of the shadow of death: injustice and fear rampant in Jerusalem; outside the city walls, mutilated bodies of dissidents publicly displayed as a gruesome warning. Now, walking with Jesus in this verdant landscape in Galilee, the disciples witness the desert becoming lush with green grass, blossoming shrubs, and pools of water!

^{Isa 35:6-7} The Messianic age is dawning before their very eyes!

Peter, always the boldest, says it out loud: Jesus is the Messiah! The Savior for whom God's people have been yearning for centuries, ever since the prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem and Micah of Moresheth!

Yes, Jesus is the Messiah.

But it won't be what they expect. They have to prepare themselves.

This Messiah will not defeat the Roman empire on the battlefield,
commanding legions of angels to crush their enemies.

This Messiah will be present with those who suffer—he’s going to be flogged and executed. He’ll know the agony of the oppressed and the despised firsthand, bearing witness with his own tortured body.

Because God’s power is not like human power.

God’s power does not despise, dominate, and destroy.

It’s a paradox: God’s power made perfect in weakness. ^{2 Cor 12:9} In vulnerability.

The Prince of Peace will rule through love and solidarity, not domination.

Well, Peter is horrified at the notion that the Messiah will be executed.

Nobody wants a vulnerable hero! They need a Savior who’ll ride triumphantly into Jerusalem. They don’t need paradox, they need to survive. What, are they supposed to die and somehow, that’ll be “paradoxically” like being alive? ^{Mark 8:35}

The disciples do not understand.

Jesus is right there with them, telling them plainly, and it still seems impossible.

To be fair, even with two thousand years of theology behind us,

we still don’t understand the truth of the One we follow, Immanuel, God-with-us:

the paradox that dying to ourselves, we live with the Lord of all Life.

Thankfully, the Scriptures keep teaching us, over and over, the scandalous paradox at the heart of our faith: that our loving God is mighty to save even though the world remains broken and suffering. What’s a “paradox,” you might ask? Something that seems impossible and yet is profoundly true. Every book of the Bible is built on

theological paradox, from Genesis to Revelation! Our sacred traditions brim with exquisite ironies and gorgeous ambiguities and astonishing paradoxes. When we explore the stories of Scripture, paradoxes pull us away from simplistic theology, drawing us into the wondrous mystery of God's ways.

Let's explore together. Take today's psalm. Psalm 19 tells us the law of the LORD—the Torah—is perfect, true, righteous, sweeter than honey! Now, Torah is not only the 613 commandments God gave Moses on Mount Sinai: you know, worship no other gods, observe the sabbath, leave harvest gleanings for those in need. The Torah is not just statutes but all of the first five books of the Bible—with commandments, yes, but also historical memories, sermonic exhortations, and dramatic stories, all brilliantly interwoven to form believers in faith. So, this is not a Baptist worship service where I might have 45 minutes to lay all this out from the pulpit! But I want to bring by you a couple of points, a quick glimpse at some paradoxes this perfect Torah teaches us about God and the life of faith. Things that seem impossible, yet are profoundly true.

Remember Jacob in Genesis? Jacob is journeying homeward, dreading the prospect of war with his enraged brother Esau. On the way, Jacob wrestles with a divine adversary at the Jabbok river. Though it's terrifying, Jacob limps away with a new name—Israel—and he's ready to reconcile with his brother. This Torah story teaches the paradox that wrestling with God **revives the soul**. When we struggle

spiritually, it can be exhausting and painful, but it strengthens us. Seems impossible, but it's profoundly true.

Remember Moses in Exodus? Moses hears the voice of God speaking from a burning bush, commissioning Moses to lead the Israelites out of enslavement in Egypt. What?! How?! Moses is utterly baffled, and quite afraid he's not up to it. {If you are one of those who suffers from impostor syndrome, I encourage you: read Exodus 3 and 4.} Moses bows before this incomprehensible mystery, yielding to God even though he cannot begin to understand what is happening. When we are baffled or anxious about the work God has given us to do, yielding **makes us wise**. That our unutterably powerful God needs us to do something might seem impossible, but it's profoundly true, and we see, then, over time what God can do with our gifts and our vulnerability.

Remember in Leviticus, believers are called to love the neighbor as ourselves? That sure seems impossible. We'd rather guard boundaries and build walls than actually, seriously love the neighbor, the stranger, the refugee in proximity to us. Yet it is profoundly true that in order to flourish, every community must love the neighbor. Not just a little or in a patronizing way—love them as our very selves! And in the book of Numbers, the Israelites are 40 years in the wilderness, learning to trust God whenever they are afraid and don't have what they need. Loving the stranger and trusting God in wilderness terrain: these things often seem impossible, but they **rejoice the heart**. Torah teaches us that.

Finally, in Deuteronomy, believers hear that the transcendent Creator not only rules over the cosmos, God is intimately present in our moments of abandonment, wreckage, and despair. Seems impossible, but it's profoundly true—and it **enlightens our eyes**, it clarifies our vision, to know that about God. Moses says the Word of God “is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” ^{Deut 30:14} The Psalmist sings that studying Torah revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, and enlightens the eyes. And all of it is built on the paradox that our loving God is incarnationally present in this suffering world!

So often, the light of the Living God illuminates a bleak landscape: cities seething with tumult and violence, valleys full of dry bones, a planet groaning under ecological devastation. Believers so often have the experience of walking through the valley of the shadow of death. But that has always been the paradox of a Messiah who comes in love and solidarity, not domination! Remember that, friends, when you struggle. When you wrestle with the Holy, as Jacob did, trust that paradoxically, you will be **revived**. When you're baffled and anxious about God's call, as Moses was, yield to the Holy and know that you will be **made wise**. When you struggle to love the neighbor, when you feel lost and don't have what you need, trust God and build community; **your heart will rejoice**. When anything holy or lifegiving seems impossibly distant, reach for Scripture—the Word is very near you!—and **your vision will be clarified**.

Friends, we walk now with our Risen Lord. Whether we find ourselves in lush green terrain with the spray of a waterfall sparkling in the air, or we're limping through the valley of the shadow of death, we are not alone. Our Messiah has come! Other disciples are near. And "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

Rom 14:8

In the Name of the One who fulfills the Law and the Prophets, ^{Matt 5:17} the One who makes all things new ^{Rev 21:5}: Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

15 September 2024

Proper 19B

Proverbs 1:20–33; Psalm 19; James 3:1–12; Mark 8:27–38

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut