

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

October 4, 2020

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

AFTER CHRIST MAKES US HIS OWN

Did you see the full moon earlier this week? It was the first of two full moons in October, so some will call the one that happens on Halloween a blue moon. Full moons have lit dark nights, have inspired romance, and have instilled hope. I love seeing a full moon, don't you? When I have been traveling someplace distant, it is reassuring to look up in the sky and see the moon or the sun up there, and realize that loved ones in another part of the world have the same heavenly bodies over them. It entices me to look up and gives me a feeling of connection. On this World Communion Sunday, I can affirm that there are sisters and brothers in Christ all around the world who have the same sun rise in the mornings and the same moon shine at night for them as well as for me.

And in times that feel quite chaotic, and many of us feel like that term may characterize these days, I find it reassuring to look up to be reminded that the sun is always there each new day, that the moon has not fallen out of the sky, even if that reality is sometimes hidden by the clouds. In the 19th psalm which we just heard, the psalmist starts with the wonders of nature in the lights that are above us, affirming that the heavenly lights proclaim the glory and presence of the One who created such wondrous things that have been there for billions of years. I wonder if it was at a chaotic time in the psalmist's life when the 19th was written. The psalm then moves from one source that declares God's glory to another – the second being the revealed word of God that was given in the Hebrew law, and for those of us who are Christians, then augmented in the good news of Jesus Christ. The second part of Psalm 19 is a bit of a love poem to the scriptures. And then there is a concluding verse to the psalm, which is a prayer, asking that the truth of creation and the truth of what is revealed through scripture might shape who we are. The words of that prayer are: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." It is a prayer lifted up by many a preacher before writing and delivering sermons, but it is a fitting prayer for more than just us preachers. During contentious, chaotic, frightening

times, even as people of faith, our words, thoughts, and feelings can go off the rails. “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord,” is always a fitting prayer, especially so during challenging times.

The Apostle Paul wrote the Epistle to the Philippians while he was facing a challenging time. He was in prison at the time for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the portion from that letter that was our reading for today, he writes about things that earlier in his life he had counted on for his sense of status or importance. What Hebrew tribe he had been born into, that his parents had followed Hebrew law from his infancy and had taught him to abide by it, and that he had committed himself to zealously interpreting and upholding these commandments for himself and for other people of faith, were all an integral part of his self-image. But his prime identity changed through his conversion on the road to Damascus. He understood that Jesus Christ had taken the initiative to make him one of his own. No longer was he reliant on his own identity and accomplishments to have a sense of righteousness. Rather, he had been given that as a gift. So, he no longer wanted to be oriented as if he were in a rowboat, facing backwards working the oars while moving along through life, looking back on what he had inherited or on what he had done in the past to define his life. He had moved figuratively to a canoe orientation, where he faced and paddled forward, looking forward with a hope that had been delivered to him by his Lord, our Lord, Jesus Christ. He said, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” This is what he was pursuing each and every day of his life.

Whether you came to faith through a Damascus road experience like Paul, or were baptized into and grew into the faith throughout your life, all of us can affirm that Christ has made us his own. By God’s grace, we belong to him. How then do we further come to know Christ and live in, live out the power of his resurrection, particularly during these unsettling times? We begin by looking at how Jesus navigated the challenging times in which he lived. He relied on God as his rock and showed the redemptive ways God desired for humanity. He relished the scriptures so much that he didn’t just accept the interpretations that had been dished out to him. He counted on God’s Spirit to help him understand God’s will for himself and for others. He refused to take a direction toward spiritual death that embraced

hatred for one's enemies or settled for practices that left those on the margins of society where they were. He lamented suffering in the world, but then he proclaimed godly hope through demonstrating caring responses. He expressed and embodied God's redemptive initiatives instead of descending into an empty state of despair. He refused to let fear be a guide for his priorities and actions, choosing love as his north star instead. He modeled resurrection power well before he was placed in a tomb.

Two days from now will be the 125th anniversary of when our congregation's sanctuary burned down. The fire was discovered about 3 a.m. early on a Sunday morning. Everything burned except the stone walls. On that Sunday the congregation did not have a sanctuary in which they could worship, but instead they gathered in the Abington schoolhouse that still stands just a few hundred yards away over there on Susquehanna. When they rebuilt the sanctuary, they placed a stained glass window of a phoenix bird over the front door. This mythic bird was imagined to be one that burned up, but that then arose anew out of the ashes. The year 2020 keeps bringing events and challenges that may keep us feeling like we will ever be stuck in an ash heap of mourning and grief. Our stewardship visual this year is this beautiful rendition of a phoenix, painted by one of our youth, Eliza Feil. The campaign theme is A Spirit Rising, based on a passage from 2 Timothy, because God has given us a spirit of power, and of love, and of self-discipline. Our congregation from 125 years ago, encountered devastation, but then arose and built in less than a year the beautiful sanctuary we have used and will use again.

We may find ourselves in the ashes of health, economic, relational, institutional, societal, spiritual challenges. However, God beckons us to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. God wants to bring to us a spirit rising, so we can face forward with hope to live out the ways and priorities of our risen Lord in this time. I have to imagine that the Abington Presbyterian congregation had to take as a source of hope, that even though most of their sanctuary had been destroyed, left standing were the stone walls, a reminder of constant presence of the One who was their rock and their redeemer. "Let the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer," not just once in a blue moon, but every day and night of our lives. Amen.