

THE HEAVENS ARE TELLING

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In 1561, Guido de Bres, an itinerant preacher in the Spanish Lowlands (which we know today as Belgium) wrote a confession of faith which he sent to King Philip II of Spain. de Bres was a Protestant; King Philip was a Catholic. The Spanish Lowlands became very pious and dominated by the Catholic Church under King Philip. Protestant believers were increasingly persecuted. Many Protestants fled to Holland, but many were charged as heretics and witches, which carried the penalty of death by burning at the stake.

The confession of faith which de Bres wrote became known as “The Belgic Confession.” His purpose was to prove to King Philip that Protestants were law-abiding citizens who followed only those doctrines found in the Scriptures. In 1562, a copy of the confession was sent to the king, along with a request for relief from persecution. The Protestants told the king they would obey his government in all lawful things, but they would “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to fire” rather than deny God’s truth.

The confession did not cause King Philip II to end the persecution of Protestants. Guido de Bres himself died as a martyr in 1567. However, the confession was used to instruct Protestant Reformed believers and expressed their faith in times of suffering. The confession is very personal. Each article begins with “We believe” or “We believe and confess” or “We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth.”

Here are the first two articles of The Belgic Confession:

Article 1: The Only God

We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God — eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and the overflowing source of all good.

Article 2: The Means by Which We Know God

We know God by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: God’s eternal power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict humans and to leave them without excuse. Second, God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God’s glory and for our salvation.¹

Article 2 of the Belgic Confession is a good summary of Psalm 19, our Old Testament reading today. We know God by two means.

The psalmist writes, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge . . .” The confession affirms, “First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: God’s eternal power and divinity.”

The psalmist writes, “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; more to be desired are they than gold . . .” The confession declares, “God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God’s glory and for our salvation.”

All of the music in today’s worship service was selected to help us glorify and praise God. The music reflects the two ways by which we know God.

“This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres. This is my Father’s world; I rest me in the thought of rocks and trees, of skies and seas, his hand the wonders wrought.”

“All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all. God gave us eyes to see them, and lips that we might tell how great is God Almighty, who has made all things well.”

“Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest, sun, moon, and stars in their courses above join with all nature in manifold witness to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.”

“When I gaze into the night skies and see the work of Your fingers; the moon and stars suspended in space. O Lord, our God, the majesty and glory of Your name transcends the earth and fills the heavens. O Lord, our God, little children praise You perfectly, and so would we. Alleluia!”

The psalmist writes about God’s glory, “There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the earth.” (vv. 3-4) In a few minutes, Karla and Vera are going to play Franz Joseph Haydn’s magnificent piece, “The Heavens Are Telling,” from his oratorio, *Creation*. To mimic the psalmist, “There is no speech, nor are there words” in today’s offertory, just marvelous piano music. Nevertheless, as you listen to Karla and Vera play Haydn’s wonderful music, think about the wonders of creation that speak to you of God’s majesty and glory — a beautiful sunrise or sunset, the vastness of a starry sky, the breathtaking pictures of space, the crash of waves on the beach, the soaring splendor of the mountains — and think about what the psalmist affirms, “The heavens are telling the glory of God.” (We did put the original lyrics to Haydn’s music in the margin of the bulletin.)

In June 1792, Franz Joseph Haydn spent five weeks on vacation in England after a busy schedule of concerts in London. He visited William Herschel, an accomplished oboist, composer, and astronomer, at his observatory in Slough. Herschel had spent

10,000 pounds to build what was, at the time, the largest telescope in existence. Herschel discovered the planet Uranus in 1781 and the satellites of Uranus and Saturn in 1787. He was appointed the private astronomer to the king of England and gave up his formal music career.

When Haydn visited Herschel at his observatory, he was given the chance to look through the telescope. According to the story, Haydn was dumbstruck for twenty minutes because of what he saw and his only comment was, “So high . . . so far.” Some people claim this experience greatly influenced Haydn in his writing of his famous oratorio, *Creation*. Another story tells that Haydn was hugely impressed with a production of Handel’s *Messiah* in London and wanted to write something similar. However, he didn’t know where to begin. As the story goes, the leader of the London orchestra that played Haydn’s symphonies picked up a Bible, gave it to Haydn, and said, “There, take that, and begin at the beginning.”²

Which brings us to the second way we know God — “God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God’s glory and for our salvation.” No matter how beautiful a sunrise or sunset — how impressive the starry night sky — how majestic the soaring mountains — no matter how much these marvels of creation show forth and declare God’s glory, they do not bring us the saving knowledge of God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

Our Choral Call to Worship this morning puts it this way: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. Nothing will I fear as long as you are near.” In our Prayer for Illumination, we asked the God of light, “by the power of your Word, shine on us far enough ahead that we may move into the future that you have prepared for all of us.” From the letter to the Hebrews, Bill read these words about God speaking to us through his powerful word in Jesus Christ: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high . . .” (Hebrews 1:1-3)

At first glance, reading the Bible and hearing God’s Word proclaimed may not strike you as awe-inspiring as beholding a glorious sunrise or sunset or standing out under the brilliant starry sky. And yet, consider the wonder and miracle of being able to hold in your hands and read and hear in your own language the story of God’s amazing majesty, power, and, most of all, love and mercy. We can gaze into the night skies and see the work of God’s fingers and sing God’s praises and give God the glory. When we read and hear God’s Word, we realize our need for God’s grace and mercy in our lives — “Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.” We can gaze into God’s Word and hear the work of God’s amazing grace and love in Jesus Christ and sing God’s praises and give God the glory.

The first question of The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which many of you may have memorized and to this day remember, asks, “What is the chief and highest end of man?” The answer is, “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.” Do you remember the second question? “How doth it appear that there is a God?” The answer to that question is taken, in part, straight from Psalm 19:1-4: “The very light of nature in man, and the works of God, declare that there is a God; but his Word and Spirit only, do sufficiently and effectually reveal him unto men for their salvation.” One biblical commentator has written, “Either the stars, the atoms and the earth are only matter — then we human beings must be understood as coming from matter and consisting of matter — or else the sun and earth are related to God just as we are; they are creatures. In that case the ultimate meaning of their existence is the same as that of humans: existing to the praise of God’s glory.”³

Listen to the grand music this morning and consider the song of the heavens. Hear God’s Word to you, written and proclaimed. Find God’s glory in all of these and lift your voices and lives in thanksgiving and praise.

Frederick Buechner writes this about God’s glory: “Glory is to God what style is to an artist. A painting by Vermeer, a sonnet by Donne, a Mozart aria — each is so rich with the style of the one who made it that to the connoisseur it couldn’t have been made by anybody else, and the effect is staggering. The style of artists brings you as close to the sound of their voices and the light in their eyes as it is possible to get this side of actually shaking hands with them.

“In the words of Psalm 19:1, ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God.’ It is the same thing. To the connoisseur, not just sunsets and starry nights, but dust storms, rain forests, garter snakes, and the human face are all unmistakably the work of a single hand. Glory is the outward manifestation of that hand in its handiwork just as holiness is the inward. To behold God’s glory, to sense God’s style, is the closest you can get to God this side of paradise, just as to read *King Lear* is the closest you can get to Shakespeare. Glory is what God looks like when for the time being all you have to look at him with is a pair of eyes.”⁴

Let us pray: Creator God, we listen as the heavens declare your glory. We seek likewise to sing of your glory. Lord, let your presence be in us, around us, breathing new life into us, so we may do this work you have called us to do. Now let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “Belgic Confession,” Protestant Reformed Churches in America at www.prca.org, “The history of Belgium, Part four,” at www.expatica.com, and “Belgic Confession,” Christian Reformed Church at www.crcna.org.

² “The Night Haydn Saw Stars,” May 9, 1998 at www.telegraph.co.uk.

³James Limburg quotes Professor Claus Westermann in “Commentary on Psalm 19” at www.workingpreacher.org.

⁴Frederick Buechner, originally published in *Wishful Thinking* and later in *Beyond Words* at www.frederickbuechner.com.