

## Reflection – September 19, 2021

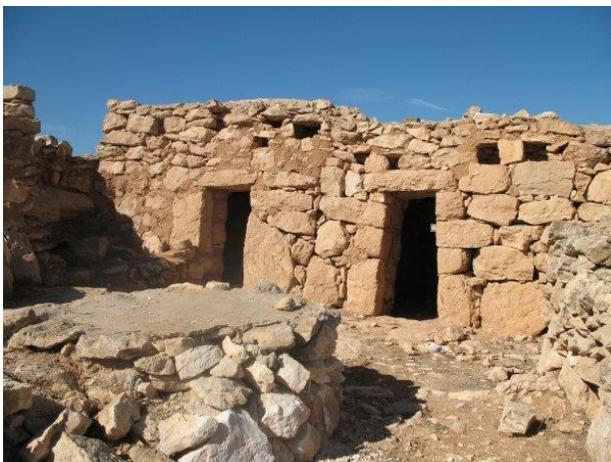
*Welcome and Peace.*

*World week for peace in Palestine and Israel*

*2009 with the Christian Peacemakers*



*Planting wheat with the Bedouins in the Negev Desert.*



*The south Hebron hills near the Village of At-tuwani.*





*Soldiers detaining a boy in Hebron City.*



*Graffiti in the refugee camp in Bethlehem.*



*The Sea of Galilee.*



*The church built over Peter's mother's house in Capernaum.*

## Prayer for Peace with Justice in Israel/Palestine

*(inspired by Psalm 23 and A Moment of Truth: Kairos Palestine, section 3)*

God,  
you are our hope, we shall not let go.  
You help us seek peace, justice, hope, and dignity for Palestinians and Israelis,  
You lead us towards courageous actions.

With United Church partners Middle East Council of Churches, Department of Services to  
Palestinian Refugees, Defense for Children International—Palestine, Sabeel, and Kairos  
Palestine,

we faithfully journey to places of unrest, instability, and fear, to  
advocate for the basic human rights of all people,  
support the peace-builders who are actively resisting  
the dehumanizing forces of violence, and  
better proclaim the gospel of peace for your sake.

Even though there is uncertainty, indifference, and opposition,  
grant us the strength to continually seek  
an end to the occupation,  
so that Israelis and Palestinians can create a better future for themselves.

Even as we dream of a time when Israel/Palestine will be a symbol of hope, peace, and  
reconciliation,  
help us to be mindfully aware of the volatile present.

Draw close to the multitude of injured and grieving people in the Holy Land;  
gather up the hopeless,  
and abide with the physically and emotionally oppressed;  
may your presence and your kin'dom comfort our siblings in their suffering.

God,  
prepare tables of dialogue and opportunities for truth-telling around us.  
Open the hearts of hurting people so that they may witness small signs of hope.

Surely, with your help, we will continue to seek justice and resist evil,  
all the days of our lives,  
until all are able to live abundantly.  
Amen.

### **James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a & Mark 9:30-37**

The summer after I graduated from university, I travelled from BC to Flesherton, Ontario to spend the summer participating in an intentional community focused on simply living, social justice, and spirituality. We did the 100 Mile diet, slept in

tents, dug our own outhouses, planted a garden, cooked over the fire, went to protests, organized a social justice music festival, and took time to connect with the Divine Mystery each day.

One night around the campfire, someone asked me, “who is Jesus to you?” He was a pretty strident agnostic, but he really wanted to understand my relationship with Jesus. That was the memory that came to mind when I listened to Bill’s sermon last week. “Who do you say I am?” I wonder how you would answer that question. I wonder how the answer impacts your life?

Today’s scripture reading is also about those Christological disclosures (what Jesus was teaching about what it means to be the Christ), as well as Discipleship disclosures (what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus?).

In the Gospel text two weeks ago (Mark 7:24-37), he traveled to the region of Tyre and then to the Decapolis. In this week’s text, he is back in his home territory of Galilee, but “he did not want anyone to know it.” There is a lot of speculation in the commentaries about the reason Jesus did not want anyone to know of his presence. We don’t know for sure, but the reason that makes most sense to me is that he had some critical teaching to do with his disciples (Mark 9:30).

Some very important things have happened since Jesus was in Decapolis. Jesus has begun teaching his disciples about what awaits him in Jerusalem and about the cost of following him (Mark 8:27-38). Jesus has been transfigured on a mountain before Peter, James, and John, appearing in dazzling white clothes conversing with Moses and Elijah (Mark 9:2-8). He has cast a demon out of a boy that his disciples were not able to cast out (Mark 9:14-29).

Now, passing through Galilee, Jesus tries to escape notice while he continues teaching his disciples. And oh, do his disciples need teaching! The obtuseness of the disciples in Mark’s Gospel is downright comical (in my head it plays out like a Monty Python sketch where over and over the disciples don’t get it and Jesus has to explain it to them over and over as well), at the same time that it is deadly serious. In spite of all that they have witnessed and heard from Jesus, they still do not seem to have a clue what his mission is about.

Jesus announces once again [~~in a briefer form than in Mark 8:31~~], what is to happen to him in the near future: “The Child of Humanity is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again” (Mark 9:31). Yet the disciples still do not understand, and what is more, they are **afraid** to ask any questions (Mark 9:32). Perhaps they do not *want* to understand this confusing message about a Messiah who suffers and dies. Or perhaps they are afraid to reveal their ignorance. Maybe they remember the rebuke Peter received at Caesarea Philippi and want to avoid similar humiliation. Perhaps the reason the disciples are afraid to ask him questions is their growing sense of dread about what’s to come. What suffering will they be asked to undergo? What advantages will they be asked to give up?

Instead of asking questions of Jesus, the disciples turn to arguing with each other. As they walk along the road to Capernaum, the disciples fall into an argument about “who is the greatest” (Mark 9:34). When they arrive in town, Jesus asks what they were arguing about along the way. They are silent, too embarrassed to admit that they had been arguing with each other about who was the greatest among them. Jesus, of course, knows exactly what they have been discussing, and tries once again to teach them that the reign of God reverses the world’s ideas of “greatness.”

True greatness, Jesus says, is not to be above others, but to be least of all and servant of all. It is not to ascend the social ladder but rather descend it, taking the lowest place. It is not to seek the company of the powerful, but to welcome and care for those without status, such as the child that Jesus embraces and places before his disciples. This was counter cultural then, it’s still counter cultural now.

There are competing visions of “greatness” are at the heart of this interaction (and the James passage touches on it too). Human ideas of greatness that tend to be focused on power and authority, verses divine greatness. James talks about earthy wisdom verses divine wisdom.

And so, Jesus sits them down for yet another heart-to-heart. They resist the “suffering servant” understanding of the Messiah, as compared to a Messiah that vanquishes the Roman Empire (the power of the day) and perhaps take some of that power for themselves. Their argument on the road is rooted in a vision of greatness as marked by the conventional trappings of power and prestige. Associate with the relatively powerful, and thereby gain power.

But true greatness, Jesus says, knows better and acts otherwise. It's as if Jesus says: You have heard it said, "Conquer and be great!" — but I say to you, God will redeem the whole world not with a mighty army but through a suffering servant. You have heard it said, "Be dominant, and get what's yours!" — but I say to you, live your life in gentleness and love, not as a master but as a "servant of all" (Mark 9:35). You have heard it said, "Consort with the powerful, and gain power!" — but I say to you, welcome the powerless, the outsider, the ones whose supposedly low status offers you no promise of conventional gain in return.

In any culture, children are vulnerable; they are dependent on others for their survival and well-being. In the ancient world, their vulnerability was magnified by the fact that they had no legal protection. A child had no status, no rights. A child certainly had nothing to offer anyone in terms of honor or status. But it is precisely these little ones with whom Jesus identifies. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37).

"The first will be last and a servant of all." Today's scriptures have me thinking about the power structures in our own society. Shoal Lake First Nations finally have clean drinking water after a 24 year boil water advisory. Vernon Redsky, chief of Shoal Lake 40 First Nations said, "It's unbelievable and it's also about damn time." According to Indigenous Services Canada 32 First Nations are still facing boil water advisories. How can any place in Canada not have clean drinking water? How can we call ourselves a developed nation? The gospel of Mark is a showdown between human and divine sovereignty. This great disparity in Canada that is illuminated in this issue of drinking water. Who's wisdom and authority are we following — human or divine? How are we being servants?

Along with last week's reading from Mark 8, this week's passage helps clarify what Jesus is all about, and what it means to follow him. In a sense, both of these stories respond to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29). Peter answers, "A conquering deliverer!" — but Jesus counters, "No, a suffering servant." Likewise, the disciples mistake discipleship for an ascent up a ladder of worldly greatness — but Jesus counters, "No, it's a graceful descent into true greatness, that is, into being a servant of all."

This idea of "descending into servanthood" helps clarify the meaning of the cross and resurrection: it's about God saving the world through vulnerability and love, not domination. But this cornerstone idea isn't only about the cross; this is Jesus' mission as a whole, his *modus operandi*. Think of the Incarnation itself, God

coming to dwell among us, born to a poor family in a backwater town. It's a graceful descent into vulnerability for the sake of love. That's what true greatness looks like, as one of the oldest hymns in the Christian treasury puts it: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" ([Phil 2:5-11](#)). This is nothing less than Jesus' signature move. And he calls us, any who would follow him, to make it ours as well.

How might we make it ours?

By intentionally, creatively, courageously acting in ways that counter the conventional view of "greatness." Like our ancient forebears, our lives, too, are largely constructed through class associations, "networking" with the relatively powerful, connected, and well-to-do, and sidestepping the relatively powerless and isolated. How can we imagine and build new networks of relationships? How can we reach out in new directions? After all, Jesus spent most of his time consorting with supposedly "low-status" outsiders, with "sinners" and the "unclean," with the sick, and with children — much to his disciples' chagrin ([Mark 10:13-16](#)). Wouldn't following him mean, well, going where he actually goes, and building relationships like the ones he actually builds?

The good news is that God calls us to true greatness — not the counterfeit greatness of dominance and status, but the genuine greatness of love, generosity, and the dynamic fortitude of faith. God is dismantling the logic of self-centered, grasping domination, and revealing the deeper physics of gracious, courageous, neighborly love that underlies creation.

Jesus' predictions of his passion and resurrection help illuminate this deeper reality: Want to save your life? Lose it! That is, turn away from obsessively focusing on "saving your own life" and turn toward your neighbors in love and generosity. Want to be truly great? Seek to be not "first of all" but "last of all and servant of all," reaching out especially to the lost and left behind, the downtrodden and disinherited. That's where Jesus will be, after all, and the Holy Spirit, too, lifting up and transforming the world from the outside in. Come one, come all: True greatness awaits!

**Sources:**

<https://www.saltproject.org>  
[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

Feasting on the Word Commentary

# The heavens are telling

*The heavens are telling the glory of God.*

—Psalm 19.1

Morning has broken all through Creation;  
God has now spoken, “Let there be light.”  
Each living thing is God's word of mercy;  
all creatures sing and shine with your light.

God, your love flows in every direction,  
filling and blessing every dark place.  
Even the shadows shine with your blessing,  
even the darkness hums with your grace.

Everything moving moves by your Spirit:  
flight of the birds and dance of the stars,  
migrating whales and flow of the river;  
breath of the wind is breath that is ours.

Bless every creature, bright with God's glory;  
bless every feature, fin, fur and wing.  
Each is completing God's wondrous story;  
each is God's greeting; praises they sing.

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