

**Sermon preached by Tom Haynes
at St. Elizabeth's, Culver
September 13, 2009
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B (Proper 19)**

Proverbs 1:20-33

Psalm 19

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

There are many different ways that we can be blessed. I am blessed by the Scriptures we have just heard. Let me explain.

You have heard of writer's block. I am guessing most of you have experienced it. You have to write a paper for some class, and the old brain cells won't fire. I am blessed this week because I am having the opposite problem. I have a variety of sermons just begging to be preached on these readings. The problem is narrowing it down to one reasonably focused message.

On Monday morning, I read through the Scriptures and decided I wanted to preach on St. Peter, and the question Jesus asks: “Who do you say that I am?” There is a great sermon here on declaring ourselves and serving as a walking, talking witness to God's grace.

Then I had lunch with Chaplain Wagner at the Academies, and we ended up talking about the James reading. She is preaching on gossip. James tells us “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.” There is a sermon there for sure, and I started thinking about a sermon on unkind words and the power of the tongue for good and evil.

The fact is that I never could get away from the Psalm and kept coming back to Psalm 19. This Psalm is a powerful one for me and one of my favorites. You will notice that I start each sermon with a line from the end of Psalm 19, and I finally settled on a few words for you about the Christian journey through life and how we are called to live.

This is one of those Sundays it is probably good that we do not have one of those modern churches with a video screen, or I would be cuing up a video right now. Someone emailed me a link to something on youtube the other day. This was sent by a friend who warned me to have the sound turned off if I decided to click on it at work. I clicked to see what it was, and it was the helmet cam video of a guy who jumped out of an airplane. His parachute failed. He then got tangled in the rigging, and his backup chute failed as well. This video was about 30 seconds long as I recall, but it was pretty memorable to me. The ground got closer and closer. The camera suddenly went black.

This story has a happier ending than you might be thinking. The person in the video survived the fall. No kidding. I think his orthopedic doctor decided to buy a new lake house after putting the

pieces back together again, but this guy fell from 10,000 feet or something and lived to tell the tale. He has the video to prove it too.

It is not unusual to talk about a life in the faith as a journey. Isaiah talks about the way of the Lord in terms of a highway or a road. I am going to ask you to think about your own Christian journey in these terms for a minute.

Now I am seriously borrowing material here. Bunyan's Pilgrims' Progress talked about the journey to the Celestial City. Dante's Divine Comedy and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales both use these images. These are serious works of literature, and the theme is decidedly Christian. There are also some less Christian uses of this idea as well. The Grateful Dead had an album named "What a long Strange Trip It's Been." Life as a journey is a fairly common idea.

Now I want you to think about the guy in the helmet cam video. This guy took what looked like a shortcut to the end in his life's journey. Then he took a detour back to life.

Suppose you were that guy. What would you be thinking or saying? I am not going to tell you what he was saying in the video, but I can promise that I would be asking Jesus to forgive me for all the stupid things I had done. I would be praying hard. You only have 30 seconds or so after all. There is no time at this point to be striking up a relationship with our Lord. This is where the rubber meets the road as they say. This is time to quickly practice some of what you have preached.

John Buxton has talked in All School about the Tower of Terror, and he tells people at the end of the school year not to do dumb things and to think about consequences of your actions. This sermon could easily have a similar point, because God knows I want all of us to finish our lives well. I pray that none of us finds ourselves like helmet cam guy and that all of us are assumed into heaven with no surprises. I am going somewhere else with all this. Let's come back to the 'life as a journey' idea. I want to talk about starting well.

Some of you have longer roads ahead than others. Some of you will wander around a little, and some of you will take a more scenic route but still go the distance. Some of you have journeys that are about to take you away from Culver until next summer. Some of us are staying right where we are. All of us are on a journey though, and all of us are taking another step in life.

I am going to give you some advice for the trip. I am going to start with some counsel that is all of two words: Read scripture. Having said that, I am going to tell you to pack light and trust God.

This is a delightfully simple and remarkably complex set of instructions. You may have noticed that formal invocations, blessings, and sermons I deliver often start with some piece of scripture. The first faculty meeting of the year starts with a prayer, and I was asked to open the meeting a couple of years ago. I started it with a verse from Psalm 19: "Their sound has gone out into all lands, and their message to the ends of the world." The blessing I gave at the Batten dinner began with "The eyes of all wait upon thee O Lord..." from Psalm 145. The awards ceremony invocation I delivered began with a verse from Proverbs 3. Each sermon I have preached in this church has begun with the phrase from Psalm 19 as well. You can see why Psalm 19 made me

decide to talk about starting things by reading Scripture. I am going to suggest that you won't go wrong if you begin with scripture in all that you do.

If we start with scripture, the Bible tells us time and time again to pack lightly for the trip and not be burdened with the cares and concerns of the world. Last week's sermon was about worldliness and I talked about the "Jesus goggles." You will recall that Jesus told the rich young ruler in Luke 18 to sell his things and give to the poor and he would have treasure in heaven. We have to keep first things first, and too much baggage can keep us from putting God first.

Finally we need to trust God. He has a plan for each of us. This is easy advice to give, but it can be really tough advice to take. We need to believe that God has a plan for each of us. When we think we know what we need, we have to add 'thy will be done' at the end. I pray that God might reveal His plan to you and that you might have the grace to understand it.

Life is a journey, and we are all headed somewhere. There may come a point in our lives where the journey suddenly looks a little shorter than we intended. That guy with no parachute was there. He knows what it looks like. We may have a long and complex path ahead that is not so direct. What you don't want though is to come to a point in your life and think "Where am I going, and why am I in this handbasket?"

I start canonical exams tomorrow. This is another step in my journey to ordination. St. Elizabeth's has an annual meeting coming up, and is making another step too. Each of us is on a pilgrimage, and I pray that you have a simple and direct journey with lots of clear road signs to mark the way.

If you remember only one thing I have said today, please remember the 'read scripture.' If you do that with an open mind, God will remind you to pack light and you will learn to trust Him.

Bless you for your lives of grace.

I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen