

**1 The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.**

**2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.**

**3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;**

**4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world**

The heavens are telling. The firmament proclaims. Day to day pours forth speech. Night to night declares knowledge.... But then: There is no speech. Their voice is not heard, yet their voice goes out through all the earth.

This is the mystery and magnificence of creation. We have to pause to see or to perceive it. We have to learn to soak it up, but it is there.

I grew up in relative solitude. I often played by myself when the two other kids in my neighborhood were not available. Our home extended down into woods that curved around the six houses in our cul-de-sac, our little neighborhood. I had favorite trees. I remember the furrowed trunks of old maples and silence. And yet I was not alone. Nature has always had a voice or a presence that extended beyond nature to the divine. And I agree with St Paul when he states at the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans:

**“Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20).**

The handiwork of God. The speech. The presence.

Over the past two years through film, through storytelling, through orchestrated gatherings like Bruchac, like Wild and Scenic films, like *deconstructing the driftless...* we have, as a faith community--as a household of faith-- we have been speaking of the handiwork of God; we have been speaking of beauty and of mystery in the created order-- seeing in the biosphere the unfolding of a primal and ineffable speech that is beyond us and that we, as limited participants in that order, dimly sense.

And this--speaking-- what we have done has been out in the open. It has exposed us as a faith community in Iowa County. It has exposed particular individuals in this congregation who have stood at an intersection between faith and science, between church and school, between environmental concern and faith commitment. As your pastor and rector, someone with his own deep concern about how careless we are with the handiwork of G-d--as your rector I want to thank you for that.

We often speak of evangelism in the church. For some of you, this is what evangelism and witness over the past two years has looked like. And I hope and pray that it will continue long after my departure.

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Psalm 19 goes on to speak not only of creation handiwork but of the Law, saying ***The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.*** And then a bit later: ***The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart.*** Heart and soul.... Some would say that these two sections of the Psalm before us this morning are distinctly different, but I would argue that there is a deep connection between perceiving the handiwork of the created order and between the action of presenting oneself before the teachings and precepts of the Lord.

And that connection which I envision this morning is a connection between creation awareness and concern and the life of prayer.

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This past week, I spent Monday through Wednesday noon on retreat at The Dekoven Center in Racine--retreating with about 40 priests from our Diocese of Milwaukee. As I told the vestry yesterday, our Diocese has the second youngest group of clergy in the Episcopal Church and I am one of the old guys...

We spent a lot of time at prayer at Dekoven. Monday evening prayer and compline; Tuesday intergenerational morning prayer and noon devotions and evensong at sunset; Wednesday Eucharist from Rite 1. We were a community at prayer with an afternoon of reading and reflection on Tuesday thrown in for good measure.

I was asked to speak on Tuesday night to a sleepy crowd of priests that settled in after a good meal. One sleepy priest friend joked-- this had better be good. But then, as I began, there was a lot of attention. It continued as I spoke of stewardship of creation, of 275 students watching films at the Opera House, of John Floberg and the four directions prayer here in this church, of rain barrels and an

article appearing in Episcopal News Service utilizing comments from Jane and me and pictures from Beth. I spoke of our committee being joyful and also feeling overwhelmed; of business and organizational sponsors, of Joseph Bruchac and then in the midst of sharing I found myself suddenly back a few months in this faith journey that we are on, back in that time of creation care craziness in April and in September when we were immersed in challenge and opportunity and anxiety all bundled together.

When my forty minutes were over, we all headed off into small group sessions and one of the priests-- Jason--who was seated directly across from me looked at me and insistently said-- *What I heard from you tonight was a form of prayer.*

A form of prayer? Jason was not speaking of eloquence or the lack thereof. He was not speaking of specifics, of content. Nor was he speaking of dramatic delivery. Rather he heard in my voice and in my vulnerability a kind of prayerful insistence that often I have been unaware of. I was honored and dumbfounded by his comment. And I only bring it up because his comment was so striking that it provoked me to think about prayer.

What is prayer? Is it merely a praising and an asking? A cultivation of silence one moment and a unison recital of a psalm at another? We're approaching the confirmation of three students today-- Izzy Bowers and Dylan and Michael Prestegard--and in our last confirmation class, we stole another look at the catechism and found this statement in the Book of Common Prayer about prayer. Check it out. Page 856:

*What is prayer? Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.*

Is that your definition of prayer? Responding to G-d, by thought, responding by deeds-- with or without words. We are at prayer in the strangest places in our lives when we respond to God and to God's spirit.

If we take Jason's comment and the Book of Common Prayer's teaching together, many of us were at prayer when creation care mission outreach captured our attention, our time, our deeds--with or without words. Many of us were at prayer, planning Wild and Scenic, at prayer planning Lessons and Carols, at prayer planning a gift fair. Or was it just willful work? A mixture of both...?

Psalm 19 maintains that we can have a connection between prayer and mindfulness of the commandments of God; a connection between the commandments of God and an awareness of God in creation. But we can find prayer also connected with other purposes.

Consider Jesus. Our text this morning begins: **14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.**

Where and how was Jesus filled with the Spirit? Did it just suddenly arrive? Or wasn't it the product of Jesus' time wandering alone in the hills, Jesus in the midst of solitude, Jesus communing with his holy Father, his Abba? And then--when he was done with his time away-- Jesus' life, his deeds, his acts of mercy, his compassionate healing--all of his actions became a prayerful response to God, a response by thought and by deeds, with or without words. His deeds flowed out of a prayerful intention.

But prayer also extends to community. Today our reading from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 12, speaks of various members -- all parts of the body of Christ.

**But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. 27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it..**

In our prayerful response to God by thought and by deeds, we will respond in different ways. For we are different and diverse. Our talents are different, our gifts are different. And yet, all are needed. All are necessary. And if prayer stretches beyond worship and devotion. If it blends into action and harnesses deeds to its Godly purpose, then who we are and what we are is necessary and needed and important. We owe it to one another to let our lives flow out of prayer.

So let us pray together. Not just in church, but in the expressive life of our community. Let us cultivate prayer with or without words. Let us find those places in our lives where we deeply care about others and reach out to them. In church and outside the walls of this place. Let us respond to God and to the Holy Spirit, with or without words. Let us let prayer get into our bodies and inform our purpose.

*What is prayer? Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.*

**8 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;**

**In the name of God-- Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

## Luke 4:14-21

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

## Commentary on Luke 4:14-21

[David Schnasa Jacobsen](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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This lection reminded me of a book title from a few years back: *Good News is Bad News is Good News*.

Our pericope for this week is certainly about the good news in connection with Jesus as he preaches his first home-town sermon in Nazareth. True enough! But like a lot of good news, there's often a little bad news lurking quietly underneath. Perhaps Luther was not too far off, the gospel is *kakevangelium* before it is *evangelium*.

Given the happy description of Jesus' Galilean ministry in 4:14-15, it takes some work to discern the hidden bad news. But when someone announces that you've been healed, it presupposes you had something you needed to be healed from. If someone says, "you're forgiven," it doesn't make sense unless you needed something to be forgiven for. Good news is bad news is good news.

With the story of Jesus in Luke 4, however, this reality gets even more complicated as the Nazareth synagogue sermon continues. The issue for us is not just about North American middle-class individual good news or bad news, but the ancient world's corporate variety. Jesus shows up in his home town synagogue in good pious fashion: he attends on the Sabbath as was his custom, he had been brought up locally, and ultimately he stands up as a now famous figure to read the text for the day -- this Jesus is a devoted local boy who turned out well (Luke 2:52).

But the words Jesus reads are those of the great prophet, Isaiah. And Isaiah moves quickly from the singular of character to the plural good news of shared public life and justice: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me." But this Spirit is calling the singular anointed one to attend to the plural reality: to preach good news to the poor, release to prisoners, sight for the blind, and relief for those who are downtrodden. The final part is reminiscent of the year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25: "and to proclaim the year of Lord's favor."

All of those plural nouns only bring out the theological complexity of the moment: good news for the poor may mean bad news for the non-poor. Indeed, the jubilee year of the Lord's favor sounds great if you need the redistribution of now alienated ancestral

lands, but if you have amassed someone else's land --not so much. Now we see the same gospel problem at a whole new, corporate level: good news is bad news is good news.

But add to this synagogue scene one final layer of complexity: the word of *Jesus* is where all this news meets today. And the person of Jesus is the very place where Luke stakes his story of the Gospel. It is Jesus who reads this amalgam of Isaianic texts (61:1; 58:6; 61:2), closes the scroll, hands it to the attendant, and sits down -- did you catch that, *sits down*? Jesus sits to teach, to exposit his text, as it were, as a preacher in the midst of the messiness of traditions, a jumble of received practices, and all the local particularities of a Jewish synagogue worship tradition that until 70 CE ran alongside the central Temple rites, but would afterward stand at the center of rabbinic Judaism.

But what Jesus says practically cracks open the traditions with a brazen speech-act: his is a word that does something, "today this text has been fulfilled in your hearing." He's not so much giving information in a lecture as he is announcing an emancipation or proclaiming an amnesty -- the kind of word that changes things. The key term in his announcement is an eschatological word -- today! In his person, in this moment in a Galilean synagogue, in this word a divine future is dawning today.

Yet the trick is this: one has to be open enough to hear this news from Jesus' lips to your ears. And this is precisely what makes good news, bad news, and yet good news. This Jesus who by Spirit and anointing announces the fulfillment of the prophet's dream *today*, is nonetheless always being accepted and rejected, celebrated and vilified in the Lukan narrative. This is all part of Luke's more tragic vision of Jesus' good news.

Luke is no theologian of glory, but in his own way a narrative theologian of the cross.<sup>1</sup> Just as Simeon pointed out in Luke 2:35, Jesus is set for the falling and rising of many. Unfortunately, this justice vision is not ever going to pass by acclamation -- "of course, *everybody* is for justice!" It will rather be both graciously given and practically hard-won. Through this person, Jesus, on this day, in this place of worship. Good news is bad news is good news. O, people of God, may it be so. Let the struggle begin.

I work at a theological seminary where this Lukan text is set in stained glass in a stairwell. It is a beautiful, broken-glass vision of God's messianic purposes for grace and justice in Jesus. We at Boston University School of Theology tend to resonate with that vision because we aspire to be a *schola prophetarum*, a "school for the prophets." Yet if you are a student with a disability or a faculty person of color, you may be all too aware that the vision both graces and challenges the seminary community which professes to place its hope in it. We see the stained-glass vision of Luke 4 through our own prisms of privilege and intersectionality in it every day as we move up and down in this place of theological learning: indeed, good news is bad news *is good news*.

## Notes:

1. My co-author, Dr. Günter Wasserberg, and I treat this in our book, *Preaching Luke-Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).

# Commentary on Luke 4:14-21

[Karoline Lewis](#) | [3 Comments](#)

Last week's text narrated Jesus' first public act in the Gospel of John.

Now back to the Gospel of Luke for the text for the third Sunday after Epiphany: Jesus' first public act in the Gospel of Luke, which is not an act at all but a sermon.

If you could choose the words that might encapsulate who you are, the only words that would communicate the essence of yourself, your life, your commitments, what would they be? When it comes to Luke, these few would be the choice words for Jesus in Luke.

Luke 4:14-21 is essentially Jesus' life, ministry, and purpose in a nutshell.

As a result, this passage has a critical function located here in the church year. First, as a passage read and heard in the season of Epiphany, it has a major role because of what it reveals about who Jesus is, what Jesus will do, and for whom Jesus has come. We might ask the same question of ourselves, as noted above. What would be the words that could sum you up? How much are you willing to reveal about yourself, to the world, to others, even to yourself? I know it's Jesus, but still, these are bold words. You want to know who I am and why I am here? Well, here you go, and no euphemistic, metaphorical, or figurative hermeneutical gymnastics allowed. What if Jesus really means what he says because it says who he is?

Second, this early on in the year of Luke, Jesus' sermon sets forth main themes for the Third Gospel. A preacher might choose to use this Sunday as an "epiphany" of Luke, so to speak, or to suggest that a faith life in the year of Luke will live out, embody, and proclaim these principles. To take Jesus' proclamation seriously will take some intention and a perhaps a little bit of pastoral care. This may be more of an Epiphany than our parishioners bargained for.

## **Real Time, Real Talk**

What's fascinating about how Luke tells this story is that it happens in real time. That is, the time it takes to read the story is the total time of the actual event. Try it. Read it out loud. Better yet, have someone, preferably who has a good "God" voice, read it out loud to you and then picture it in your mind. Why does Luke dedicate this amount of narrative space to the pre-story before Jesus' sermon and even the post-story? What's the point?

Two possible reasons. One: that the words of Jesus are not just important for what they say but also because of their source. The origin of these words is important and deserves the attention it gets. Jesus isn't just making this stuff up. Jesus' situates his ministry in the ongoing promise and commitment of God, to the lowliest of God's servants, to those who fear God from generation to generation, to the hungry, to God's people Israel, to Abraham and Sarah. The promise and prophecy of Isaiah provides the theological trajectory that Jesus will articulate and embody in the Gospel of Luke.

Two: real time represents importance. Jesus' words could have easily, practically, and succinctly been articulated in a summary statement. Yet, Luke gets that a synopsis of the meaning of Jesus is not sufficient. When we are talking about God, an abridged or condensed witness will not work. The whole theological impulse of Luke-Acts explodes any concise, peremptory, or succinct action of God.

Rather, the God of Luke-Acts intentionally and continually invades, initiates, and even invites any and all theological deliberation, exploration, and imagination. Such theological thinking takes time and cannot be straightforwardly encapsulated in convenient statements of theoretical intent. Rather, Jesus' words are a call to real life, real people, real time. This is God in our present and in our reality.

### **Maybe Your Mother Really Does Know What's Best**

The language of Jesus' first sermon should sound familiar. Its tone, topics, and concerns share that in common with his mother, who first gives witness and words to her son's ministry. That is, Mary's words foreshadow the ministry of her very own son. If this could be possible, one fruitful direction for preaching on Jesus' sermon is to allow Mary's Magnificat to echo and reverberate with her son's first words.

Mary's song acknowledges that what God has done, her son will do as well. She connects the dots, between the God that she knows, and has always known, and the God that is orienting her future, through her own son, Jesus. She realizes that God's favor of her will be that which the world will experience because of her son, Jesus.

I wonder if Jesus learned something from his mother in those early years. After all, Luke is the only Gospel to include the 12-year-old Jesus who sends his mother and father into a parental frenzy when he all but disappears and elicits a frantic search for his location. Luke, why include this story and only you? How does that influence our sense of who you think Jesus is, of who we know Jesus to be?

At the risk of over-psychologizing or perhaps, psychologizing in general because it's the Bible, what if Jesus first learned what it means to bring good news to the poor from the stories that his mother told him? About Elizabeth, the mother of his cousin John? About Sarah, his ancestor, who experienced the same shame? What if he watched his mother and listened to her and saw her as someone who not only knew the good news proclaimed to her but embodied its presence in her life? If so, this could be a most unique season of Epiphany.

[Karoline Lewis](#) | [3 Comments](#)

## Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

1 all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. 2 Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. 3 He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

8 So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. 10 Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

## Commentary on Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

[Patricia Tull](#) | [0 Comments](#)

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are as distinct from the earlier books of Samuel and Kings as the times they narrate are different from the ages that preceded them.

Part annals, part lists, part autobiography, part narration, set partly in the beginning of the return from exile and partly in later generations, the two books (which in Hebrew manuscripts are actually one) seem compiled around the subject of Jerusalem's reconstitution under new management, not the kings of Judah, but the absentee landlords of Persia.

The two figures Ezra and Nehemiah are both leaders of the Judean community and representatives of the Persian rulers, who sent them to provide spiritual and political leadership for the struggling Jerusalem community. Ezra and Nehemiah rarely appear together, and there is some speculation that they may have been active at differing times. Nehemiah makes only a cameo appearance in verse 9 here, and the singular verb *vayomer* ("said") suggests that both he and the Levites may have been added secondarily to a verse in which originally only Ezra spoke (see also the beginning of verse 10).

Ezra first appears in Ezra 7, when he sets out from Babylon to Jerusalem during the reign of Artaxerxes of Persia. He is described as "the priest Ezra, the scribe, a scholar of the text of the commandments of the LORD" (7:11). He is sent with money from the emperor and others for offerings in the temple. He comes to teach the law of the Judean God and of the king. Beginning in verse 27, the story is told by Ezra himself. In Ezra 9, in a scene reminiscent of some of the darker texts of the Pentateuch, he receives the disturbing news that the people have intermarried with the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, and all the other "ites" in the land. His reaction shows how deeply steeped he is in the ancient story he has come to convey.

Fortunately, however, what follows, while drastic and unsettling, is at least not the mass murder usually associated in the Pentateuch with these prior inhabitants of Canaan. The book of Ezra ends with the returned exiles painfully dismissing their foreign wives and children, revealing the depth of concern in this community for maintaining identity and boundaries.

The story then turns to Nehemiah, and Ezra does not reappear again until this chapter, Nehemiah 8. Here we see him in a new role that looks both innovative and strangely familiar: reading and expounding upon Scripture. The passage emphasizes that this occasion includes not just the priests, Levites, or even just the men, but all the people, men and women. It also asserts that Ezra read at the request of the people themselves.

They gather on the first day of the seventh month, which today is Rosh Hashanah (the fall new year), which is followed by Yom Kippur and the Festival of Sukkot, or Booths. They gather not at the temple but at the Water Gate, where all are admitted. The location of this gate is uncertain, but its name suggests proximity to the Gihon spring, Jerusalem's only natural water source, on the eastern side of the city (cf. Neh 3:26; 12:37). The Babylonian Talmud (*Sukkah* 4) would later place the Water Gate on the way to the pool of Siloam, and would associate it with a joyous water-drawing ritual during the week of Sukkot (see verses 14-18).

The narrative does not specify which parts of the Torah Ezra read, nor can we know for sure whether it was already in the form that became canonical. In fact, variation between the pentateuchal prescriptions for the festival that follows (Leviticus 23:33-43; Numbers 29:12-38; Deuteronomy 16:13-15) and the festival as described in Nehemiah 8:14-18 may suggest some differences. But more important than the specifics, perhaps, is the practice that Ezra institutes of reading Scripture to others as authoritative directives from God, and interpreting so all understand. The reading evidently continues throughout the week of the festival (verse 18).

For later followers within this tradition, this early glimpse, within Scripture itself, of the faithful reading Scripture, carries a picture-within-a-picture quality. It's like finding an ancestral village or grave, a marker of the place from which we came, an early precedent for scriptural interpretation. Jesus' reading from the prophet Isaiah in this week's Gospel passage echoes Ezra even as it too provides a glimpse of precedent.

The occasion could have been marked by dismay, as it was for King Josiah, when he first heard the words from the law book found in the temple and tore his clothes in mourning, recognizing the nation's neglect of divine commands and fearing God's wrath (2 Kings 22:11-13). Instead, however, when the people begin to weep, Ezra and others tell them instead to rejoice, because "this day is holy to the Lord" (verse 9). Rather than fasting, they are told to feast and share their food, because "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (verse 10).

The grammar of this final assertion is intriguing. Translations and commentators disagree over whether it is more properly rendered, "[your] joy *in* the Lord is your strength," or "the Lord's joy is your strength." Either way, the point of cheerful trust in God is clear. Psalm 19 likewise reflects this position, as the wonders of God's two great creations, the sky that wordlessly pours forth God's glory and the Torah that is sweeter than honey, inspire the psalmist's own grateful commitment.

One October I was visiting an orthodox Jewish friend in New York City. It happened to be the end of the week of Sukkot. Immediately following this week comes Simchat Torah, the "joy of Torah," which marks the conclusion of the yearly cycle of weekly Torah readings with Deut 33 and 34. The following Sabbath, the reading would begin again with Genesis 1. On this evening of Simchat Torah, life in the orthodox Jewish neighborhood became a street party, as young people vigorously danced out their holy merriment, holding Torah scrolls high over their heads, since being entrusted with guidance from above inspires joyful gratitude.

[Patricia Tull](#) | [0 Comments](#)



# 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts.

## Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

[James Boyce](#) | [2 Comments](#)

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Today's reading is a rhetorically linked continuation of the reading of last Sunday. Because of this it will be important to begin by revisiting last week's introductory remarks regarding overall key themes of this Corinthian letter. They provide an essential background perspective for the particular arguments being made here.

### Sealing the Argument

The initial two words ("for" "just as") of today's reading, though small, are especially significant to understanding the argument. The initial "for" is equivalent to an enormous "BECAUSE" that links the reading to 12:1-11 and characterizes this section as an expansion, elucidation, or proof of the preceding assertions. The "just as" indicates that a comparison is being made by way of illustration. The linking "so" of this comparison significantly directs our attention to the figure of Christ as a cryptic code for all that Paul has said about the centrality of the cross and resurrection. The three-fold repetition of the initial "for" (because) at the beginning of verses 12, 13, and 14, underscores the carefully constructed character of the argument that is being made.

The first assertion or "proof" (12:12) picks up last Sunday's notation of the varied gifts of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ and develops them in the crucial extended metaphor of the image of the human body. This metaphor combines two critical assertions that will be developed more fully in verses 14 through 26. The body is one but is constituted of many members; even so, though it has many members, it is still one body. This key understanding of the oneness of the body is accentuated by its assertion both at the

beginning and ending of the sentence. Then comes the sort of add-on “teaser” -- “so it is with Christ” -- which awaits further development in verses 27-31a.

The second assertion (12:13) develops like a ring of concentric circles. In the outer circle is the beginning and ending double reference to the one Spirit of God, who, as the author of the gifts of the community, surrounds and sustains its life. In the next ring comes reference to baptism and to the “drinking” of the Eucharist, the two events that mark the origin and sustenance of this life in community. And in the innermost ring is the “one body” created and sustained by this Spirit and these sacraments of unity, along with an imaginative portrayal of that oneness. Jews or Greeks, slave or free, the potential divisions of the varied origins of this community have been swallowed up and overcome in the oneness of the body and the Spirit.

The third assertion (12:14) simply restates the first as directly and succinctly as possible. The body consists of not just one member but many! It is a common sense offering of wisdom, deriving from observation upon which all can agree, and supported by the tools of rhetorical argument -- arguing from the lesser to the greater, the one and the many, the seen to the unseen, the particular to the universal. This restated conclusion now prepares for the fuller development of the illustration in the imaginative dialog of verses 15 through 21.

#### **A Talking Foot ... and Then Back to a Marvelous New Reality**

Paul now makes effective use of one more rhetorical device in the imaginative conversation of talking body parts. The dialog underscores the absurdity of a body in which each of the parts were to go it alone, ignoring the importance of the body's functioning as a unit or whole.

But then in an important move, “but as it is...” (12:18), Paul both brings us back to reality and develops the argument in a novel and compelling way. The arrangement of the one body with its many members is not simply an accident to be observed but has a divine origin and purpose. Here we meet a distinctive treatment of the body metaphor that is quite different in character and purpose from the elsewhere familiar “Christ as head” and “we as body” image of Ephesians.

Here instead a different point is being made by the focus on the conviction that “God has arranged the members of the body, each one of them, as he chose.” The implications of this conviction are asserted finally in the key culminating insight belonging the gift of oneness of the Christian community: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (12:26).

In order to stress this reality in community, Paul reinforces the three key words, “arrange” (12:24), “suffer,” and “rejoice” (12:26) by incorporating in them a typical and beloved unique Pauline prefix. The Greek preposition *syn* (meaning “with” or “together,” as in the words “symbiosis” or “symphony”) is prefixed to each of these key verbs. It is as if to underscore the assertion that our oneness is a matter of God's design. From creation God has “mixed us all together,” that we might suffer and rejoice together in a mutual harmony.

Now we meet even one more key insight of the body language as Paul develops it for the Corinthians. It would be significant alone to underscore that the body is composed of many parts and each part has an important function. Weight is added in the assertion that all of this is by God's design and the gift of the Spirit. But now this insight is pressed in one further step by reflection on the

interrelation of the weaker and stronger members of the body. Because “God has arranged the body, giving greater honor to the inferior member,” (12:24) we are led to imagine and discover the implications of the members’ mutual “care for one another” (12:25).

### **Bringing the Argument Home**

At some point Paul has to “seal the deal” and bring the argument home. In one final appeal he addresses his hearers and us directly. The first word of verse 27 is a big emphatic YOU! (in the plural not the singular to underscore once again this many-membered body). Now here’s the point, Paul says, and it’s all about YOU: “You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is an important member of that body.” But of course, in light the preceding verses, we are meant to hear that this calls us not to some assertion of privileged status, but rather to the recognition of our responsibility for mutual care for the members of this body.

All of this belongs to God’s purpose from the beginning. At this point the church is in a certain sense no way different from the whole of creation. The “God has appointed” for the church of verse 28 is identical to the verb used in the “God has arranged the members in the body” of verse 18. In a series of rhetorical questions, Paul directs attention to a variety of ministry functions, a list that now takes its place alongside the list of the variety of gifts of the Spirit that have been enumerated in 12:4-11. But now these gifts and ministry functions have been newly interpreted and directed toward the mutual edification of a community, a body of which Christ is also a part, through the mutual care for one another in both the sufferings and the successes of life.

[James Boyce](#) | [2 Comments](#)

Prof of NT emeritus Luther Seminary

## **Psalm 19**

1 The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. 2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. 3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; 4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, 5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. 6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

7 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; 8 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; 9 the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. 10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. 11 Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. 12 But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. 13 Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. 14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

## **Commentary on Psalm 19**

[James Howell](#) | [2 Comments](#)

Some scholars rather rashly declare Psalm 19 to be not one but two distinct Psalms, one on the glory of creation, the second on the goodness of the Torah.

If they were ever two, their joining would be like the happiest marriage you have ever known, or the bonding of hydrogen and oxygen to form the water that quenches your thirst.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God.” We might hear the thundering chords of Haydn’s masterpiece in the backs of our heads. But we do not literally “hear” the heavens. This irony, this paradox, is evident in the Psalm itself. “The heavens are telling... the firmament proclaims... Day to day pours forth speech...” but then verse 3: “There is no speech, nor are their words; their voice is not heard.”

The deaf can hear this glory; the grandeur of the earth shouts in the silence. As Paul put it, “Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20).

How theologically abstruse is it to think a Psalm about the wonder of creation would be distinguishable from a Psalm about the gift of the Torah! It is the Creator who has the right to command. It is the Creator who knows how we and the world in which we live are wired, what will work and what won’t. Creation establishes the trustworthy basis for the words God rendered to Israel about how to live.

Christians naively latch on to Paul’s arguments about being saved by grace, not the works of the law. But Jesus quite clearly cherished and heeded the commandments, and thought we should as well. The Law truly is good -- and a litany of adjectives and metaphors are strung together to persuade any who are hesitant. God’s law is not oppressive or shackling, but “perfect, reviving the soul, making wise, rejoicing the heart, enlightening the eyes, clean, enduring, true.”

And then the astonishing, culture-overturning image: “More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold.” Gold is what investors rush to in times of crisis; gold is what we believe will purchase the good life and heady security. But the Law is even better -- and as Tolkien’s wise old Gandalf would remind us, “All that glitters is not gold.”

Shifting from the visual, tangible image of gold, the Psalmist appeals to our more pleasurable senses of taste and smell: “Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb” (or as Robert Alter translated this, “the quintessence of bees”). Honey is awfully sweet! Perhaps we recall Ezekiel’s notion of eating a scroll of God’s words.

The most memorable moment in Psalm 19 might be that often-quoted verse 14: “Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight.” This is not a quickie prayer for the preacher. All of us need to consider our words and thoughts. Do Christians have a peculiar manner of talking? When we chat at the water cooler, interact at work, converse at a party: are the “words of my

mouth acceptable to you, O Lord”? God doesn't demand that we exhibit some pious, sugary, lilted niceness -- but how do we talk in a way that pleases God and makes sense given our faith?

Talk is cheap. From TV we learn decadent talk. From politics we learn vicious talk. As Christians, we do not babble away like everybody else. Words tear down, they belittle but we want to use our words to build up, to encourage; to say things that are excellent, that are helpful to others. Our distinctive Christian speech involves knowing when to shut up, when to refuse to pass along a rumor. Bonhoeffer suggested that “Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words.” The brother of Jesus warned that “the tongue is a fire” (James 3:6).

We always tell the truth; although there are truths we keep to ourselves, for some brands of honesty are vicious. We express our values through words, so to talk fawningly over the bogus anti-values of our culture hardly pleases God. If someone listened to you talk over a year or two, what would they conclude really matters to you? Would they get a sense that God is in your life? Or that you are kind? Compassionate? Virtuous (without being smug)? What is the tone of my talk? And is my talk (over many years) becoming more or less acceptable to God? And encouraging to others?

Do Christians have a peculiar way of thinking? What's going on inside my head? And why? How do I react to what I see? What am I feeling inside? Is there a way of thinking, responding, feeling that is pleasing to God? And a better fit for the person God (who gave me the brain I'm using) made me to be? Thomas Merton says, “What good does it do to say a few formal prayers to Him and then turn away and give all my mind and will to things, desiring what falls far short of Him? The mind that is the prisoner of conventional ideas, and the will that is the captive of its own desire, cannot accept truth and supernatural desire.”

Here's how Paul frames our distinctive way of thinking: “But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). How do we get this mind of Christ? How do we think God's thoughts? How do we value what God values? Shudder over what mortifies God? Delight in what God enjoys? Press passionately for what makes God smile?

To gravitate toward the mind of Christ, imagine a great street-sweeper invading your head, a bit ruthless, pummeling all the clutter of accumulated thought, little pet notions that are not of God, little conventional messages that may be appealing, frightening or ugly, but do not square well with the way of Christ. Just as the road is clear and the dust settles, a bookmobile ambles in, with the most enthusiastic salesman ever leaning out the window, giving away God's ideas in the Bible, the verbiage we use in worship, the gathered wisdom of the saints who have thought God's thoughts before us.

The heavens are telling God's glory, and so can we, as our words and thoughts are pleasing to God.

[James Howell](#) | [2 Comments](#)

Thoughts

## **PSALM 19**

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**5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.**

**6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.**

**7 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;**

**8 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;**

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