

Sermon March 3 2024
Redeemer, Ramsey
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Grace Mercy and Peace from God our Creator and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Forgive me for reading my sermon today. It is touching on some issues that I want to be careful with, and I do it because we have a constellation of scripture passages that work together in a certain way that I believe we need to ponder.

We start with Psalm 19.

Psalm 19 is a good example of the view of the structure of the physical universe at the time of its writing. Take a look at it in your bulletin--

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

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

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

4yet 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,

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

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

Indeed, it was common in Biblical times to see the earth as the immovable center around which the heavens were spread like wallpaper on a ceiling.

--Psalm 104:5 --“God set the earth on its foundation, so that it should never be moved.”

--Joshua 10:13. --“God made the sun to stop in mid-heaven, and it did not hurry to set for about a whole day.”

--Job 26:7 --“God stretches out the north over the void and hangs the earth on nothing.”

--Isaiah 40:22. --“It is God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in.”

Likewise, in our Psalm 19 today, the view is that the earth stands still, and the sun moves from one edge of heaven to the other; it “comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man, it runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.”

This Jewish conception of the structure of the universe did not contradict other well-known views. Aristotle in 350 BC had published his view that the Earth was the immovable center around which the heavenly bodies circulated. The great mathematician of ancient Roman Egypt, Ptolemy, wrote a book in 150 AD that improved on Aristotle, but continued the geocentric model of the universe, that is, that the earth was an unmoving center around which the heavenly bodies moved.

Ptolemy's view was unquestioned for 13 centuries, especially by the church. Then came Nicolaus Copernicus, who in 1543AD, the year he died, published a book asserting heliocentrism. This means the sun is the center of the universe. Other astronomers, like Johannes Kepler and Tycho Brahe, joined the debate in the 16th century. But it was Galileo Galilei who became most controversial for questioning and also disproving the old Ptolemaic, geo-centric world view.

In the early 1600s, Galileo was the first to use a much newer and improved telescope to prove similarities between the earth's moon and that of Jupiter's moons, and about the rotation of Venus around the sun. He recognized sunspots that moved, which could only be explained by the idea that the sun rotated on its own axis. Basically, in Galileo's view, the earth was a planet going around the sun, just like the other planets of our solar system.

Galileo's view became a major threat to the Christian church in Europe. At the time, the church was still the most powerful unifying force in European society, felt that this view contradicted Ptolemy's system that had been in place for centuries, AND that it contradicted the plain reading of the scripture. And hot off the controversy of the Protestant Reformation during the previous century, the Roman church was not in a mood of toleration.

What I want to highlight in this sermon is the nature of Galileo's offence in the view of the church at the time.

The early writings of Galileo up until 1616 caused problems for philosophers, astronomers, and theologians, all of whom were working under the permission of the church. And the church was heavily invested in the Ptolemaic geo-centric model. A movement was started to bring Galileo to trial for heresy. Some activist Dominican Friars took exception to a letter he had written to his patron defending his scientific activities. They felt that Galileo's work was violating rules established by the council of Trent in 1563. In order to check unbridled spirits, "[the Holy Council] decrees that no one relying on his own judgement shall, in matters of faith and morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, distorting the Scriptures in accordance with his own conceptions, presume to interpret them contrary to that sense which the holy mother Church... has held or holds..."

[—*Decree of the Council of Trent (1545–1563)*. Quoted in Langford, 1992.]

The church was already familiar with the threat of Galileo's ideas, so his case was put before the Inquisition in 1616, in Rome. At that time, the group of adjudicators of the Inquisition assigned to the case ruled on Feb 24th that the proposition that the Sun is stationary at the center of the universe is... "foolish and absurd in philosophy, and formally heretical since it explicitly contradicts in many places the sense of Holy Scripture"; the proposition that the Earth moves and is not at the center of the universe "receives the same judgement in philosophy; and ... in regard to theological truth it is at least erroneous in faith."

At a meeting of the cardinals of the Inquisition on the following day, [Pope Paul V](#) instructed the head inquisitor [Cardinal Bellarmine] to deliver this result to Galileo, and to order him to abandon the Copernican opinions; should Galileo resist the decree, stronger action would be taken. On February 26, Galileo was called to Bellarmine's residence and ordered, to abstain completely from teaching or defending this doctrine and opinion or from discussing it... to abandon completely... the opinion that the sun stands still at the center of the world and the earth moves, and henceforth not to hold, teach, or defend it in any way whatever, either orally or in writing.

[The Inquisition's injunction against Galileo, 1616.]

Galileo had run out of protectors who could defend him, and he accepted the ruling unwillingly. Through the following 15 years, although unable to publicly teach or publish his views, he continued to do his own work. It seems that the imposed silence was too much for him and in 1632, he published another book that put the church in a much more unfavorable light. He was again ordered to Rome to stand trial for heresy. In 1633, the Church handed down the following order: “We pronounce, judge, and declare, that you, the said Galileo... have rendered yourself vehemently suspected by this Holy Office of heresy, that is, of having believed and held the doctrine (which is false and contrary to the Holy and Divine Scriptures) that the sun is the center of the world, and that it does not move from east to west, and that the earth does move, and is not the center of the world.”

[<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/galileo-is-accused-of-heresy#>]

He was condemned to house arrest, and not allowed to teach, and he remained under that sentence for 9 more years until his death.

Why am I telling you all of this?

Well, two things are important. First, Christians are members of society, and participants in the history of the world. We are not to run from new science or new discoveries that seem to contradict scripture or the traditions of the faith, but encounter them with a frank openness until their accuracy can be judged by specialists and by their practical use and acceptance by the society we live in. It's usually a difficult process, but important for the integrity of the church's witness in society.

There is another, important level, especially for those of us who take the teaching of the Church seriously. We have in our 1st lesson today the actual text of the 10 commandments, as they were given to Moses on Mt Sinai. This covenant between God and the people has been fundamental to both the Jewish and the Christian understanding of religious ethics that we seek to uphold. They are so important to the faith that Martin Luther included them in his small and large catechisms, with clear explanations of their meaning and significance.

And of course we try to live up to them. But one in particular is difficult for us in our own time as we find ourselves in so many disputes and debates. And that is the 8th commandment, to not bear false witness against your neighbor.

While officials of the church in 17th century Europe badgered, threatened, and condemned Galileo, they also encouraged the defaming of his name, the destruction of his reputation, and a general sense of hostility toward him, at least in intellectual and political circles, that would not be cleared up in the minds of most of the faithful for another 125 years. Finally, in 1758, the church officially changed its position and declared that it was no longer heretical to assert the heliocentric model of the universe. The church in the 1600s was so sure of its judgement that it condemned very smart people to silence. Then, in the 1700's, it had to take back that judgement. [On 31 October 1992, Pope John Paul II expressed regret for how the Galileo affair was handled, and officially conceded that the Earth was not stationary, as the result of a study conducted by the Pontifical Council for Culture.]

Indeed, in hindsight, Paul's claim in our second lesson today, "What about the debaters of our age? Does not God make foolish the wisdom of the world?" alerts us to hold onto beliefs with a certain humility.

As for the commandment, To the question, What does this mean? Luther says in his explanation of the 8th commandment that..."We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."

So now, in our own time, when we face the heartfelt testimony of people who claim to be living an experience (what we might call their "own truth") or lifestyle, which we disagree with or think opposite of the teachings of the bible, or opposite to what looks to be the natural way of things, a good suggestion is that we refrain from rash judgement.

True, there are many things that different people claim are simply natural and therefore acceptable, but we must carefully listen and discern whether their testimony is to something that might one day come to be viewed AS PART OF God's great design, or whether one day it will fall into a more widespread condemnation because it is based in something that is simply self-serving, anti-social, or harmful to our neighbor.

In Psalm 19:7, after witnessing the beauty and majesty of the heavenly bodies, the psalm writer proclaims; "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;" Let us make sure we understand just what the beauty and majesty of the natural world actually entails before we condemn others as unnatural or deranged heretics and outlaws of God's truth.

We must remember that over the last 200 years, science has brought us various understandings of the world we live in that the church had to adjust to.

Darwin first articulating the theory of evolution, resisted by most Christians at the time, but now widely accepted by most Christians.

Likewise Scientific ideas about the beginnings of the universe, the big bang, and the age of the universe. All of these adjustments have entailed being able to interpret scripture and understand traditional church teachings in new ways.

It is also true that there are parts of the church that resist accepting some of these new understandings of what is natural in the world and what is not. There are Christians who deny the theories of evolution or the big bang and think of them as against scripture (there are still some who hold to geo-centrism and even a flat earth!) But most Christian Churches and Christians, including the mainline protestant churches and the Roman Catholic church, accept these ideas now, even though they were challenging at the time they were first “discovered” by science.

Finally, to be more pointed, changing scientific ideas about human sexuality, homosexuality and the gender binary MAY BE other examples that are changing the attitudes of some Christians. After noting the history of the church’s condemnations and then retractions, we should not jump to defensive conclusions, but with humility seek to learn more.

I know these issues are challenging, and I know that we don’t all agree how to handle these new questions that face us. I am only asking here, in this sermon, that we remember humility in our thinking, and avoid hasty judgements that may end up running afoul of the 8th commandment.

But also, it is my hope that in our meditation on the possible interpretations of what is natural in the world, we may come to remember awe. In Psalm 19, the writer asserts that the heavens, the order of the world created by God, speak volumes about the goodness and majesty of God. The more we learn, about how complex and amazingly diverse things really are in the heavens and on earth, the more we come to marvel at the amazing God we have. And not only are we amazed at what God has created, be we come to be amazed over and over at how much God gives of himself to rectify and reconcile all things to himself through the presence of our Lord.

To God be the glory. Amen.