

August 9, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 16 Proverbs 30:5

Dearly Beloved;

Another Sunday, and time to set things aside to concentrate on the presence of God with us. That is what Christian worship is all about: setting the agendas of life to one side, and taking time, making time, dedicating time, to concentrate on our relationship with the One who gave us life, has given us in mid-stream, new life, and who in the fullness of the experience of HIS grace touches us with the power, the joy, and the peace of HIS presence. Our God is known to us, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We have experienced HIM. We have praised HIM with our mouths, celebrated HIS word by using our minds as we read Scripture and listen to its wisdom. When we feel the presence of God, wherever and whenever that occurs, we are experiencing HIS holy presence, HIS Holy Spirit.

Once again I report to you that I am well. I am grateful for you and your commitment to St. Andrew's even though we are unable to meet as we have grown accustomed to doing. The Board of Managers met this past week to review our financial position. Because of your commitment in what can only be described as unusual and challenging times, we are within 1 % of being on target to reach our goals as mandated by the annual meeting, and the budget we adopted. I compliment you for your stewardship. I do so because I know that most of the churches in our Presbytery cannot report a similar reality. That you have enabled us to do this in a time when we cannot "pass the plate" in the midst of worship in our sanctuary is a

singular accomplishment. Barbara and I are well and we praise God for your faithfulness in this matter.

I have not given out personal information but I share with you that in the midst of the time of plague, two people connected to our church family have been diagnosed with serious illness unrelated to the Covid-19 virus. Please remember them in your prayers. When I was ill back in 2015, I was buoyed by the love and support I received from my faith community as we gathered together in worship. I cannot appreciate what it must be like to be isolated and seriously ill. Your prayers will allow me as minister to assure them they are not forgotten by God, nor are they forgotten by the people of St. Andrew's. Lift them up before the Lord.

By the time many of you will be reading this day's message, I will have celebrated the sacrament of baptism on the church grounds (outside) with Megan and Josh May and their new baby. We have not said a great deal about this event because, even though it is outside, the safest thing for all concerned is to keep the number of attendees low. It is not the Presbyterian practice to do "private baptisms" and this celebration has been in the works for some time. I take this opportunity to publicly thank them and their families for being so understanding and co-operative, given the limitations required by the times we are experiencing. And now to the Sermon:

The Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament is in some ways a strange book. Many of the "proverbs" come to us from King Solomon. But there are three other contributors to

the document, and they are named in the course of the text, even as the Book opens with the recognition of the wisdom of Solomon. The verse (yes one single verse) that I am concentrating on this morning is from the part of the collection of proverbs attributed to Agur, who may indeed have simply been a scribe, the person setting ink to paper. Agur was an oracle, according to the text, a wise person, and indeed all of the contributors to Proverbs were known for their wisdom. So, the book of Proverbs is a collection of the sayings of wise guys. (No humour intended.)

Verse 5 of chapter 30 is as follows: “Every word of God is flawless, HE is a shield to those who take refuge in HIM.” It should be noted that the nature of Proverbs is different from the other Books of the Bible. It reads as a collection of fragments. The subject seems to change from verse to verse, or from as few as two verses to as many as eight. It is like reading a collection of short poems. Attention tends to wander because there are no stories as such, and the subject matter is continually changing.

Here is the treasure to be found in Proverbs. It is a collection of wise sayings or insights about real life. This Book of the Bible is as real as it gets. The advice expressed speaks to real life, every day situations. It is without doubt one of the most practical pieces in the Biblical library of documents. It is good advice about and for, life.

So, I share a story. When I was the minister of St. Andrew's, New Liskeard in Northeastern Ontario, I met a man who had been a truck driver. Big transports. He and his family moved to our part of the country as part of a promotion he had received within the company called Manitoulin Transport. His job was to run the New Liskeard terminal for that company. He organized the drivers and the routes they hauled. He was responsible for seeing that the right cargo got to the right customer and that delivery was on time. He was responsible for the maintenance of the tractors, and oversaw the loading and transferring of cargo into the right trailers at the right time.

He, his wife and children came to St. Andrew's as part of the process of "looking for a local church to attend." Frankly, he liked the cut of my cloth and became an active member of the St. Andrew's tribe. I ran a Bible Study Group that met in the large living room of the manse (church owned house provided to the minister). Dave was outspoken and a great participant in our group of a dozen to sixteen participants. I will never forget the night he arrived at the meeting, and as he took his coat off, he said to everyone in the room, in a loud truck driver's drawl, "I've been reading the Book of Proverbs. Man is that good stuff. You could manage a company based on Proverbs." That's what I mean when I say it is a book of wisdom that speaks to real life situations. Dave nailed it.

“Every word of God is flawless.” You knew I was going to do this. How does that read in the King James Version (most accurate word for word translation of the original Hebrew into Shakespearian English). That remains the strength and the weakness of the King James Translation. “Every word of God is pure.” Take a moment to think about that! What does it mean when you buy “pure” honey? Pure stuff? Pure water? You could probably guess I was going to do this too. Grab an Oxford Dictionary and look up the word “pure.” The number one definition is given in two words. “Unmixed, unadulterated.” There follows a number of examples: pure white, pure air, pure alcohol, pure water. In other words, every word of God is the word of God. It has not been mixed with human wisdom. It has not been impregnated with cultural bias. Which are two of the mistakes some modern theologians make when they come to deal with Scripture. In thoroughly modern Millie’s 21st century it is almost assumed that what one has to do with the Bible is isolate the human strain of what is written, and look for the cultural bias that has infiltrated the word of God.

Here is an insight that is really basic when it comes to exploring the foundations of Christian faith. The word of God is flawless in the sense that it is pure word of the Lord. And there is no question that that is one of the reasons the Bible can make us nervous. It does not read like a Clive Cussler novel. It does not read like the philosophy of Plato. There is a not like, human logic, to the Bible. It reflects its wisdom and its faithfulness to us as the matter of a mind that is not like yours

and mine. The mind of God is not like the mind of Morley. Morley's mind can always justify what Morley wants, the satisfaction of appetites and desires. The suppression of whether or not something is "sinful" because it tastes good. That is how Adam swallowed the forbidden fruit. You may recall that when God said to Adam, "What have you done?" He immediately pointed to Eve, and said, "She made me do it."

The word of God is pure word of God.

And...many of us have experienced the sense of desire to rebel against what we read in Scripture, usually, in the name of "I'm not sure I agree with that!" Agur wrote it down because it was a recognized, wise word, "The word of God is pure. Flawless is not a "bad" translation. It is my opinion that pure is better, because of what it says and what it implies. The word of God is not a mixture of things. It is pure word of God. And you know what? What that means is that it is good to understand the word of God, but it also means that what the word of God calls us to, is a matter of faith, belief, trust in God's wisdom and HIS Lordship.

And that leads us to the second part of the verse. "He is a shield to those who take refuge in HIM." I have mentioned that one of the things Barbara and I have been doing during this Covid-19, self-isolating, season is that we have been watching a movie together most evenings. Many of them come from my DVD collection, and more and more we are streaming movies I did not get around to adding to the

collection. Currently we are watching the Marvel Studio's super heroes movies.

Captain America, has a shield. That shield is a real piece of work! Bullets cannot penetrate it. Explosives cannot blow it up. It is one of the best examples of armor I have ever seen on the screen. He protects himself as he battles evil. He protects civilians with it who otherwise would become collateral damage. I use the Captain America shield as a metaphor for what the word of God is saying here. The Lord is armor, a shield of protection, to those who take refuge in HIM. The Lord God is the best protection we can have in a universe that has been invaded by a killer virus, for which there is no magic-bullet medicine, which is why we are self-isolating as they did in times of plague in the middle ages. You have heard me on how that strategy is mirrored and revealed in the Bible.

But there is another insight in the Captain America shield. If you believe the comic books, that shield was the best weapon in World War II, against the Nazis. Captain America has used it to defeat alien invaders from Space bent on destroying the planet Earth and much of its population. My point is that a shield is not simply something to hide behind when you are attacked. It is also a weapon that enables a person to be active in the struggle to save others from harm.

Here is what impresses me about this verse 5 of Proverbs chapter 30. The wise saying says that God's word is pure. But it immediately turns to the real life issue. God is a

protector in the battles of life for those who take refuge in HIM. HE is the real power behind achievements we may make as we battle for and in the midst of life's often terrible trials and temptations. Provided we take refuge in HIM.

And the truth is, we are witnesses to those two facts. Having put our lives in the hands of God, in the hands of the man from Galilee, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, whose presence we have experienced...we have found ourselves protected in life threatening circumstances. Living in the time of Covid-19 is living in life threatening circumstances. We have been protected. And the refuge who is Jesus is the best weapon we have to survive these times. What a marvelous combination of ideas! "The word of God is flawless; HE (God) is a shield to those who take refuge in HIM." That is where you and I are living. And therefore, once again, we have seen it work. We are witnesses. May God bless you and keep you safe. Let us pray;

Lord we bow before you, giving thanks for your word, even when it tests us, even when it judges us, and especially when it strengthens us by leading us to YOU. We thank you for shielding us in a time of sickness and disease such as this year has turned out to be. We thank you for the weapons you have given us to combat Covid-19, even as you shield us. We seek refuge in YOUR presence. We seek refuge in YOU, the one true Lord of Life. Amen