

“Guide Me”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
September 12, 2021

Psalm 19:7-14 and Mark 8:27-36

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

OUTLINE

- A. Problem: we need help. We want answers.
- B. We often turn to the wrong things.
- C. There are many who would guide you, who claim to have the answers. Once, there was even a person who claimed to be able to guide you by channeling the spirit of Barbie. For only three dollars, Barbara Bell, a 44-year-old quilt maker in California, would summon the spirit of Barbie to solve your deepest problems. “Barbie’s messages are offered in love,” she told a reporter. “I appreciate and understand Barbie. She has been forced to be shallow all these years, but underneath she is a deep and profound person.” People would ask, “Dear Barbie, should I take a job as a legal secretary? Dear Barbie, how can I be like you? Dear Barbie, do you see me involved with anyone soon? Even, Dear Barbie, what is the vision of God’s presence?” To find the answers, Bell surrounded herself with a dozen Barbies and commune with the living shared soul of the world’s 700-million Barbie dolls.
- D. Before you judge, is that really any crazier than getting your answers from a politician or a self-help book or a TikTok star or even a pastor?
- E. Many look to Scripture to find simple answers. This is true, this is false. This is good, this is sinful. They want a Barbie doll. They want a roadmap, with clear directions. They want an encyclopedia where they can look up their topic and find everything they need to know, right there in black and white. The problem is that’s not Scripture. If you want an encyclopedia, or worse, a Barbie, you’re either going to be frustrated or you’re going to have to so baldly twist Scripture that it will no longer be this holy text, but a hodgepodge of selected sayings confirming what you already wanted to believe. Scripture is a complex document, full of contradictions, stories told in multiple ways, vying perspectives, mysterious teachings, the full range of human experience, feelings and thoughts; it is more like poetry, more like Shakespeare, than a manual. Truth is there. I believe divine truth is there, a holy text infused with the word of God, inspired by God, for any and all truth must come from the Truth, God. But we must work at it, study it, wrestle with it, argue with it, compare it, pray with it, talk about it. I suggest that Scripture’s most profound help is not in the answers it gives, but in the questions it clarifies, and in the way it teaches to live with the questions. Often, we are asking the wrong questions. For instance, we might ask, “Why did this bad thing happen to me?” Scripture might say the better question would be not “Why you?” but “Why not you?” Should it have happened to someone else? Should someone else be grieving right now? I

think Scripture invites us into the holy ambiguity that is the mystery of God, by helping us ask better, more complex questions. And sometimes it will provide answers, but only when we have lived with the questions. This holy text is a record of questions, of people asking God and God inviting them into the cloud of unknowing, a place of humble submission to a mystery greater than us, characterized by faith and trust and love.

- F. We cannot reduce Scripture, which is precisely what makes it holy. It's not a slogan. It is irreducible, much like God. That is what Scripture teaches us; we never know God, we are in relationship with God. We walk with God, and we walk with Scripture.
- G. In Mark's story today, Peter thinks he knows exactly who Jesus is. He thinks he's got him all figured out. And so when Jesus says something—like how he has to suffer and die—something that doesn't confirm what Peter already believes, Peter lashes out, tries to correct Jesus. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. We are like this, whenever we read or study Scripture, and it challenges us, and rather than accepting the challenge, we dismiss it; we say that can't be right. We make Scripture conform to our understanding, in the same way Peter tries to make Jesus conform to his understanding of what it means to be a Messiah. The story told by Mark invites us into a very different relationship with Jesus and Scripture. It invites humility. Jesus says you must follow me, and this following will not be easy or simple. We must enter Scripture, follow God through its pages, wrestle with it, carry it even when we don't understand it, let it guide us.
- H. For example, I used to think that the Old Testament was this old and wrong understanding of God: an angry, judgmental, violent, sectarian God. And the New Testament was this new and better understanding of God: gracious, loving, forgiving, non-violent, universal. That was a reduction. But as I closely studied Scripture in college and seminary, and after, I came to realize the falseness of this dichotomy. For that gracious, loving God appears abundantly in the Hebrew Bible, and that angry, judging God appears in the New Testament, not only in Paul and Revelation but in Jesus' own teachings. We need these different understandings of God, because human experience is diverse and complex, and so must be our God. We need a God who is relevant to us, not only in the good times, but also when we are hurting, experiencing injustice, enraged.
- I. A Hasidic story tells of a rabbi who told people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One student asked, "Why *on* our hearts, and not *in* them?" The rabbi answered, "Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your hearts, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside." This means that we may for a time, even a long time, read Scripture without it meaning much to us, but if we are diligent and consistent in our reading, the words accumulate within us, and when we need them, when we are hurting or searching or rejoicing, when something breaks open inside of us, they will be there, waiting, ready to sink in; suddenly those words will take on new meaning; they will come alive. Like a seed waiting for the soil to be just right.
- J. What can Scripture offer?

- K. William Faulkner once said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” We read Scripture, in part, as a record of people’s relationship with God. That history continues to shape us today. We are still living the story that begins in Scripture. It’s like picking up a book, and realizing you are in the book, and it’s a story about you, where you’ve been, and where you’re going. We can learn from the past. There are truths written here which we perhaps as a society have forgotten.
- L. We need helping making moral and ethical decisions. These pages contain the voices of people who wrestled with many of these same questions; they have been transmitted and commented upon over thousands of years by even more people who have wrestled with these questions. We have access to a collective mind over millennia in dialogue with God. In Luke, Jesus is asked a moral question: Who is the neighbor I must love? He tells the story of the Good Samaritan.
- M. Within Scripture, we discover that we are not alone. Others too have suffered, grieved, doubted, experienced injustice, shouted at God, felt God’s absence, felt God’s presence, rejoiced, created, loved, failed, sinned, been redeemed, experienced insight, grown. Scripture becomes the friend who sits with us. Scripture is Emmanuel: God with us.
- N. The Psalmist today tells us that the word of God, the wisdom of God, can “revive the soul”; it can enlighten the mind; it can give joy; it can help us make righteous choices; it can clarify errors; it can make us humble.
- O. That has not always been our experience of Scripture. Maybe it has seemed irrelevant, silly, cruel, confusing, or just uninteresting. Maybe you’ve experienced it as a clobber meant to hurt and exclude. Maybe it’s been reduced to a cipher meant only to confirm pre-existing beliefs. But it can be so much more, when we allow it to breathe and live. When we sit, as people once did, around this campfire, and tell its stories again. This year, we’re going to be rediscovering Scripture and its meaning in our lives. God will speak in the flames again.