

"Panning for Gold."

Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; Mark 8:27-38

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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When I was a teenager our family took a camping trip across the United States. We began in Philadelphia, went through St. Louis, on to Denver, across the Rockies and around the Southwest to LA. The traffic crossing the Mohave Desert wasn't bad at all, especially since we did it at 2:30 in the afternoon!

After our car overheated for the third time, I walked out a little way into the desert. I think I was hoping I might come across some bleached bones protruding from the earth. No bleached bones, though, only a parched preacher's kid, who ran back to the car searching for a water bottle.

We visited Disneyland and headed up the coast, took in Yosemite and Sequoia and also the Big Sur sea coast. (Did I mention this was a long trip?) Up to Vancouver and then across the Queen Anne's highway in Canada, down through Glacier Park and Yosemite, the Black Hills and Mt. Rushmore and then up over the Great Lakes, down past Niagara Falls and then: "home again, home again, jiggety jig."

Along with my fantasy of finding the bleached head of some bison or elk, I also tried to imagine what it must have been like for the prospectors who cast a squinty eye up toward the California mountains and said, "There's gold in them there hills."

They were right of course and the race was on in the mid-1800's to stake a claim and make a fortune prospecting for gold. I wished we had had time to do some panning for gold on that trip.

My guess is it is back-breaking work for only a little return: wading out into the rushing stream, digging up a panful of gravel and then letting the water carry away the loose, light sand and pebbles, leaving the heavier gold bits at the bottom.

But, I'm sure there was whooping and hollering whenever a nugget appeared. And, if it was someone close to you, you'd re-double your efforts to be the next one to yell "Eureka!"

A couple of other observations about Panning:

Panning for gold probably wouldn't work in the Tittabawasee or in the Brandywine River near my hometown. No, you have to be in the right place. It also wouldn't work if you only stood on the shore. You have to put on some waders and get into the stream. And it also won't work if you don't bend over and reach into the icy water with your pan and go through the repeated action of digging, sifting, looking; digging, sifting, looking.

This image of panning for gold seems to be an apt one when we turn our thoughts to this time of the year and the return to our regular schedule of Education, both in the wider community and in the church.

There's a whole river of knowledge out there. And we have work to do, regular work of showing up with fellow prospectors in the stream and engaging in the practice of sifting and discovering and saving and celebrating as we find the "gold" that has value and staying power.

We do this same kind of work each and every day. Not all of it is the holy work of religious education. More often it is the work we do in schoolroom classes or on the job or watching the news or simply taking

note of the world around us and our daily experiences as we seek to gain wisdom and knowledge and learn how to think.

I grew up listening to Simon and Garfunkel. Their song "Kodachrome" might not have even gotten written in this digital age, but the opening line from that song is; "When I think back on all the *stuff* I've learned in High School, it's a wonder I can think at all." Not a very high view of our educational system, to be sure, but still it holds a truth: we receive all kinds of information each and every day and it is always a struggle to separate the wheat from the chaff, the gold from the dross, the things that have lasting importance from those that have meaning, perhaps only for a season, and then fade from view.

Where we stand matters. What we are looking for matters. Our Christian Education and Spiritual Growth is important. We need to be in a place where we can encounter God's Word. As the Psalmist says, "The heavens are telling the glory of God". Yes, all around us is evidence of God's handiwork. We don't have to be particularly "religious" to consider the evidence and come up with many unanswered questions about why things are the way they are. We may even be sold on the idea that there is a divine force in the universe responsible for its order and beauty and intricacy. We may even be moved to worship such a "Force" or "Being".

But, in order for our experience and information-gathering to lead to a confession of faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we need the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. We need the witness of the Holy Spirit and the experience of the church down through the ages. We need a regular immersion in the stream that is God's Word if we are to move beyond some general notion of a Creation to the specific knowledge of the God to whom creation sings in praise

day and night and who is known to us in the person and saving work of Jesus Christ.

As we look at the text from Psalm 19, (a text by the way that C.S. Lewis himself declared to be "the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world" (p. 56 in Reflections on the Psalms), which is high praise indeed), you will note the quick transition the Psalmist makes from observing the glories of nature and the general revelation of God to extolling the teachings of God's Law and the specific revelation it gives.

Here, "Law" is interchangeable with the word "Torah" which means "instruction". It refers to the first five books of the Bible. Much more than simply a book of laws or rules, God's Law is the basis of our knowledge of who God is and who we are as God's people, created in God's image. The Psalmist tells us God's Law is to be desired more "than gold, even much fine gold." It is sweeter than honey.

When you get some of it, you want more. It is a prize. It doesn't wear out. It doesn't spoil. Honey found in the tombs of the Pharaohs of Egypt is still edible after centuries. Gold statues unearthed after years underground still gleam. God's Law stands the test of time and continues to be a source of wisdom and knowledge and truth.

What would it be like if we all desired to dig into God's Word as if it were a treasure trove of pure gold? What if we outdid one another in striving to make sure that the "words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts were acceptable to God"?

Wow! Imagine what kind of a church Chapel Lane would be if we took up the challenge to immerse ourselves in God's Word like some crazy

prospectors who know that the work may be hard, it may be off the beaten path, but: "there's gold in them there words!"

Friends, God has much to teach each of us in this new program year. I urge you to seek out opportunities to wade into the water and start some prospecting for the gold of the Good News of God's love and the message of our redemption won in Christ.

It is never a waste of time or effort and may, in fact, be the thing that gives everything else purpose and meaning.

Let us pray.