

Perspective

Psalm 19

October 2, 2011

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
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,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man 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 hidden from its heat.
The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
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.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

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Our second scripture reading is from the Psalms. Instead of a sermon or meditation on this scripture, I am going to lead us in a kind of Bible study. We are going to linger on this scripture to prepare us for the feast we will share in communion.

Along with many others who have written on the subject, Eugene Peterson thinks that the gift of the Psalms is that they give us language to talk to God instead of just about God.

Psalm 19, our second scripture for today, is a prayer written by someone, as the old hymn says, who is lost in their wonder, love, and praise of God. This Psalm addresses three different aspects of God, each that are deserving of our praise: the wonder of the natural world, the gift of God's law in the scripture, and the grace of forgiveness. Together, this triad of praise offers us perspective on how we might address – and think about – this God who is our creator, redeemer, and sustainer; as well as the audience of our worship.

I'd like to ask your help in reading the Psalm - so that it can be our collective prayer. Please find a Bible under your pew - you made need to share - and open to the 19th Psalm. I'll read the odd verses, and ask that you respond with the even verses. We will read the last verse of the Psalm together. Let us listen now for the word of God...

I.

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

A number of years ago, I went on a family trip to Utah. One morning, I woke up early and went for a run. I followed a dirt road about three miles into the wilderness. When I stopped to turn around and run back, I paused and was overwhelmed by a feeling that is hard to describe. It was a mixture of awe and loneliness; a combination of wonder and fear. In the valley of the canyon land, the only human being around for miles, I was surrounded by towering rock faces painted by the morning sun and an impossible expanse of blue sky. Never have I felt so isolated, so insignificant, so acutely aware of my tiny place in the order of things.

It is easy to forget how big God is. We tend to gravitate toward what we can comprehend. We like to boil things down. We like to wrap our arms and our minds around things. And we try to do the same with God.

We craft doctrines and lesson plans and sermons that attempt to describe God in categories we can understand and explain...maybe even in ways that we think we can control.

But when we can get beyond ourselves and our desire to fit God into the field of our vision, and instead recognize that our vision isn't large enough to contain the totality of God's presence, the game changes. That's what this part of the Psalm is about.

Even the creation – in all of its expansive wonder, the heavens, the earth, the seas, the day the night, the sun, the moon, the stars...even creation itself sings praises to God the creator.

For the Psalmist, that is where praise begins. From an expansive place – full of wonder, beyond comprehension, limitless. It is this kind of perspective that is critical for how we experience God¹. It helps us build a framework where we can see that God does not exist within the confines of our terms, but that we exist within the good order of God's terms. Which is what the second part of this Psalm is about...

II.

The second part of the Psalm begins, *The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul...*

In as much as the creation gives us a sense of how majestic and expansive God is, by itself the creation is not sufficient to reveal God's will. For that, we depend on the Law.

Usually, when we hear “the Law” we think about the Ten Commandments. In the prayer of this Psalm, however, the Law describes the total witness of the scripture.

¹ I am helped here by reading a sermon by the Rev. Dr. James Earl Massey called “God and the Self” found on textweek.com.

We live in a culture that puts a high premium on individual freedom. As such, we are programmed to view the Law as a negative; as something that prevents us from experiencing the life that we might have if we were free from restriction and regulation.

The Psalmist has a different view. The Law brings life. It revives the soul, it makes wise the simple, it rejoices the heart, it enlightens the eyes, it brings righteousness. Instead of seeing the scripture's authority as a straightjacket that limits our freedom, the Psalmist sees the scripture as the framework that makes our existence in the midst of God's vast creation come alive!

Think of it from the perspective of a three year old. Three year olds need limits (at least my son did when he was three years old). There are so many choices that if a three year old doesn't have limits, they lose control. They act out. They get frustrated. They don't know what they want, so they cry and kick and scream.

When that happens, many a parent will sit down with their child and wrap them up tightly in their arms; holding them close and in the safety of their embrace until the child gradually calms down, takes a few deep breaths, and refocuses on behaving in the right manner².

That is kind of like how the Psalmist sees the authority of scripture, or the Law; like the arms of God wrapped around us to provide security and direction and clarity in the midst of a world with too many choices.

III.

But when the inevitable happens, and when we resist that direction, the Psalmist offers a third stanza giving thanks that there is something beyond the Law...that there is grace. So the Psalm continues,

Clear me from hidden faults...then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression...

We should never cease to be surprised and grateful for grace...especially the kind of grace that we experience in our faith; the kind of grace described in the scriptures; the kind of grace offered in Jesus Christ. That is, free grace.

² With thanks to my sister, the Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin, who used this illustration in a sermon she preached on the 10 Commandments. Meg will soon get to do this when her daughter turns three years old!

Yet, what I am struck by in this Psalm is the difference between the first stanza and this third one. The same God who is vast enough to elicit the praise of creation is the One who is intimate enough to grant forgiveness and salvation. The same God who - with a word - creates and orders the world and all that is within it...all that ever was in it...all that ever will be in it...that God cares enough to pay attention to each individual creature; to grant significance to every single person; to cleanse us from our wrongdoing; to set our feet on the right path; to grant us grace.

What more can we offer but our praise?

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And so it is from this perspective of addressing God - of being overwhelmed by the wonder of God's presence, God's word, and God's love that we will make our way to this table. Today, we mark the significance of the fact that we share the meal at this table with believers across the face of the earth...in every country, of every race, of every condition. And we are invited to do so by the One who was God's greatest gift - who, with his own life and death, embodied the wide embrace of creation, a perfect expression of the scriptures, and accomplished the redemptive work of our salvation.

We come to this table - and are sent into the world from this table - with the perspective of those who have been invited share a new way of life.

So may the words of our mouths, the meditation of our hearts, and the ways in which we choose to view and live in relationship to the rest of the world be acceptable to the One who issues us that invitation - our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.