

### Reflections on Psalm 19

Psalm 19      *The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork...  
The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul...  
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

Psalm 19 is one of the most beloved psalms. Yet I have never paused to reflect more deeply on exactly why this psalm speaks so profoundly to me, to us. This past week I did just that. This may seem odd because we were in the midst of the dying and death of my mother-in-law. For Kaye especially this was an exhausting time. She and her sister Nancye together cared for their mother in the days leading to her death. It was a painful time, especially for Mildred, but also for Kaye and Nancye. We all shared in the deep and mixed emotions that accompany such an experience.

Somehow this very real and concrete experience grounded me as I thought each day about the sublime words of Psalm 19. They were no longer simply lovely spiritual poetry. They opened up my spirit to the whole of reality, the whole of the expanse of life over time and through space. This is the way we need to read the psalms, not only in repose but also in the midst of our engagement with life and death, with all the challenges and struggles, the tears and the joys that are part of our humanity as God has made us.

There are three parts to the psalm. First is the whole creation expressing in eloquent silence its praise of God, the Creator. For the psalmist it is self-evident that the world in which we live and of which we are integrally a part is the creation of God. If we really look at and listen to the world around us—the earth, the sky, the universe itself—it speaks to us constantly of God. The creation is not only a source of physical sustenance for us. It is also our spiritual nourishment. How often have we ourselves said or heard others say that their clearest experience of God is out in nature? Walking a mountain path, sitting by a still lake, or standing at the edge of the ocean's vastness. This is not nature worship. It is the deep knowledge of reality—that we are spiritually as well as physically bound to the creation.

It is remarkable and inexplicable that many so-called conservative Christians today align themselves against movements working to preserve and protect the natural environment and put themselves on the side of political and economic forces engaged in the mindless exploitation of the earth to the point of exhaustion and destruction. One can do so only by ignoring the psalms and much of the rest of scripture. There is in scripture

an explicit and an assumed truth—that we live in an envelope of creation that is constantly telling us of God, giving silent witness to the Source and Power of creation. We ignore that voiceless voice at the peril of our own lives, spiritually as well as physically.

What a blessing that our faith community has as its home this place, these forty acres of mostly-wooded land! Each time we are here, we are enveloped by the creation. This is a large part of why we need to follow God's call to establish a retreat ministry here, so that many people can come to be nourished, nurtured, healed and restored through silence and deep listening, through being present in this place, walking the trails, sitting by the stream or lake, opening their spirits to the voiceless voice of creation telling of God and God's glory. This kind of retreat is not a flight from reality but a coming home to what is really real.

How important it is that about seven hundred children come to Camp Kum Ba Yah each summer, being in the woods and having fun together in the sun and in the rain! This happens at other times, too. Three times we have brought to this place the children of the Festival Center Saturday children's program. The last time was for Camp Kum Ba Yah's Maple Sugar Madness three weeks ago. That day Bob Knodel and I took five of the boys for a hike through the woods. At one point I looked back down the line and every one of them had the largest stick they could possibly carry resting on their shoulders. Not fighting. Not swinging them at each other. Just walking through the woods according to what seems to be some genetic thing about boys and sticks! Their joy was boundless.

How critical it is that we take seriously the care and stewardship of the creation, and for us these forty acres of woods and land! It does not take care of itself. We can't take it for granted. The great challenge of global environmental care calls for us here to be more deeply conscious of, delighting in, and caring for this piece of the creation that is entrusted to us. This psalm's opening verses speak to us of the spiritual danger we are in because of the danger we have put the creation in. Being constantly in touch with the creation is necessary for our spiritual health as well as our physical well-being. Computers and all our other technology are fine. But it is not reality. It is pseudo-reality, what we humans have constructed. There is much good that can be done with our technology. But there is also much harm when we devote ourselves to it, living our lives looking at a computer screen instead of at the surrounding world of nature. When we and our children are deluded into thinking that the "real world" is the world of technology, then we are looking in the wrong place for what is truly nourishing to our souls and healing to our spirits. All of our brave talk of progress in terms of technology is a sham over against our regress with regard to our relationship with the creation.

The opening verses of Psalm 19 are a simple, profound and clear reminder that we know ourselves best when we gaze at the sky and clouds,

or at the night sky, or listen to the wind in the trees or look deeply at a flower or rock or bird. If we look and listen with open and deep spirits, we will find them all telling us about God in a way that is beyond all our doubts. They will teach us how to live. Jesus believed that. He told us to contemplate the flowers in the field and the birds flying in the air [Matt. 6:25ff]. They will teach you how to live without anxiousness and fear, he said. Right now I want to learn to live more the way our inherited cat Casey lives. When she walks into the same room she's walked into hundreds of times before, she looks and sniffs around as though everything has changed, as though everything is new. She knows what's real. Modern physics tells us that nothing is the same from one moment to the next—not the rock, or the tree, or the river, or even our own bodies. I want to learn how to see the world the way Casey the cat sees it—new every day, full of mystery and wonder. That's reality.

The second part of the psalm speaks of the law of God in various terms—law, commandment, precepts. All the terms refer to the same thing—God's pattern for our lives as human beings. Just as the creation around us knows and lives by its own pattern given by God, so are we able to know and live out of the pattern of life God has instilled in us as human beings and a human family. That's what Hebrew scriptures refer to as “the law.” It is not just the written laws, but the law as interpreted by Jesus and put in a nutshell—love God and love neighbor as you love yourself. The law is not meant to be only written laws that we woodenly obey so we can “get to heaven” or something like that. The law is the life-giving pattern of human living that we can and need to grasp inwardly. The modern word would be “internalize.” But that is not a good image either, for that speaks of something outside of us that we need to bring inside. What this psalm speaks of is our true nature as human beings made by God, and our being attentive to that true nature and living out of it. The law is not something foreign to us; it is simply the way God has made us to live.

The law of God that renews and fulfills us, as the psalm says, is a gift. For a time in our lives, the law may feel like something external to us that we strive to obey. If we seek the law as a list of rules and regulations to be obeyed, it all stays external and we never awaken to the deeper reality of living as we are truly made to live. That's why the obsession of some with displaying the Ten Commandments in public places is so off base. There is more concern about forcing people to look at these commandments than with actually understanding what they mean and living accordingly.

If we treat religion as a list of regulations and laws to be woodenly obeyed, we never awaken to our true nature and live out of that nature. What do I mean? Several people gave incredibly loving care to Kaye's mother in the months of her illness and the process of her dying. Hospice nurses, the woman who sat with Mildred day after day, Kaye and Nancye themselves, and our niece Sarah who took her spring vacation from law

school to care for her dying grandma—these people were full of the law of God! And it had nothing to do with obligation or guilt or sticking to the rules or anything external. It had to do with God's law being put within them and being written on their hearts, as God says in Jeremiah 31:33. It had to do with what Jesus was getting at when he said that all the laws are summed up in loving God with our whole being and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. The law of God, the true pattern of our living, was present in those who cared for Mildred and in all who give themselves in countless ways for the sake of others and the earth itself. The law isn't what we DO so much as it is WHO WE ARE. It is the law as love.

I think this says something to us, also, about the disciplines or practices that we commit ourselves to as part of membership here. If we only practice these disciplines of prayer or worship or study or giving or serving as external laws, then we never awaken to the truth of our very being, our very nature. If we practice these disciplines, however, so that we allow them to help us touch our deepest, truest self, then they fade away as disciplines and simply become part of who we are. We no longer try to pray but find that our daily life becomes more prayerful. We no longer try to give a portion of our income to our community and its ministries; we give because it is part of who we are. The challenge of a tithe becomes no challenge, no problem. When we discern our particular gifts and callings, the will of God for our lives is no longer felt as some external expectation; it flows out of our unique and precious lives, out of who we are. Then the law of God, the pattern of life as God made it for us and in us, becomes something that revives our souls, brings forth wisdom, makes our hearts glad, enlightens our eyes, shines like gold and tastes like honey.

The psalm closes with some of the most familiar and loved words in the Bible: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” Let my words be simple, true, and few, coming out of silence, out of a heart that contemplates God and God's love. Like a child's words and a child's wonder. As we become more in touch with the creation into which our lives are intricately woven physically and spiritually, and as the law of God becomes increasingly a matter of living out of our true nature and the pattern of life instilled in us by God, then this prayer becomes a simple way of saying, “May my life be a blessing to me, to the world, and to God.” May my life speak as naturally and clearly of God as the creation itself speaks. God, my rock, or as one translation puts it, my mountain—the steadfast love of God, solid under my feet and my spirit. God, my redeemer—the power, the spirit that constantly renews me in forgiveness, mercy, and love.