

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 appeared in the lectionary three years ago during the days when my mother-in-law Mildred Speakes was dying. During those days, the psalm's familiar words opened up to me with new clarity and depth because of this real and concrete experience of living and dying, suffering and caring. More than lovely spiritual poetry, Psalm 19 awakened me to the whole of reality and our place in it all. The psalms are meant to be read not only in repose but also, and most fruitfully, in the midst of the challenges and struggles, the tears and the joys that are part of our humanity as God has made us. That is where the psalms came from in the first place.

There are three parts to the psalm. First, the whole creation expresses in eloquent silence its praise of God, the Creator. For the psalmist, it is self-evident that the world in which we live, move, and have our being is the creation of God. When we are open to and in touch with the world around us—the earth, the sky, the universe itself—it speaks to us constantly of God. The creation is not only the source of our physical sustenance, but also our spiritual nourishment. Walking a mountain path, sitting by a still lake, standing at the edge of the ocean's vastness, or simply feeling the sun and wind on our face—in so many ways we experience God, or the Sacred, in nature. This is not nature worship. It is the deep knowledge that we are spiritually as well as physically connected to the creation which is always bearing silent yet clear witness to the Source of Life.

What a blessing that our faith community has as its home this place, these forty acres of mostly-wooded land! About thirty-six of these acres are owned by Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship, purchased over a span of years so that children might always have a place to play, to be in touch with nature. About four acres belong to the Church of the Covenant. Together, LCF and our church community, along with Camp Kum-Ba-Yah, share the joy and responsibility of this small but amazing part of the creation. Each time we are here, we are embraced by the creation. This is why we have worked to establish a retreat ministry here, so that 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 of our belonging to life. The refuge and retreat we want to offer is not a flight from reality but a reconnecting with what is really real.

Hundreds of children come to Camp Kum Ba Yah each summer and from the city's schools throughout the year to learn about and enjoy being in nature. We bring the children of the Festival Center for various kinds of outings. Three years ago we brought them out for Camp Kum Ba Yah's Maple Sugar Madness. They learned about tapping maple trees, played relay games, and ate pancakes out in the woods. Bob Knodel (Festival Center Co-Director Sandy Knodel's husband) and I took five of the boys for a hike through the woods. At one point I looked back and every one of them had the biggest stick they could find resting on their shoulders. Not fighting. Not poking 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.

The great challenge of global environmental restoration and 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. I have been talking with Susie Kitchen, new Executive Director of LCF, about ways we might partner in the care and cultivating of these grounds. Because LCF's small staff is spread so thin with everything that needs to be done, I, and I hope others who feel called to it, will seek ways of providing that care, protection, and cultivation of this piece of the creation God has given into our stewardship.

We need to continue expanding our spirituality. There are particular persons and spiritual leaders that have influenced our community: Elton Trueblood, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the more contemporary ones like Jean Vanier and Nenni Nouwen. These are good. But their views are mostly limited to the personal and interpersonal dimensions of our spiritual lives. We need them, but we also need those who are shaping a new and broader understanding of our spirituality. Our individual lives and our life together need to be opened to and fed by our life within the whole of creation. We need those who are speaking of that: Matthew Fox, Thomas Berry, Elaine Marie Prevallet. There is also our own Don Morrison, and John Withrow. Don has been living a creation spirituality for years, now on his farm out in Concord. And John can open your eyes and ears to the many birds that live in these fields and woods. There are also those who have spoken to us, not exclusively from a religious viewpoint, but a naturalist's, like Henry David Thoreau, or more recently Wendell Berry, and a host of others.

The opening verses of Psalm 19 are a reminder that we know ourselves most fully when we gaze at the 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, touch and taste, with open spirits, we find the creation telling us about God in a way that is beyond both words and doubts. The creation will teach us how to live. Jesus believed that. He told us to learn about living by contemplating 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, without worrying about material things. I want to learn to live more the way our cat Casey lives, for instance. 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, God's pattern for our lives as human beings. The creation knows and lives by the pattern given by God. The creation does not have a problem. But we do. We have such a hard time living out the ways 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 condensed into one two-fold law—love God and love neighbor as yourself. The law in scripture does not mean a code that we obey so we can "get to heaven". It took me years to realize that scripture does not talk mainly about an after-life, but this life and how we are to live it. The law is not something external that we internalize. 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 in scripture has to do with our awakening to and living out of our true nature, our created 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 her sister Nancye, and our niece Sarah who took her spring vacation from law school to care for her dying grandmother—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 world. 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 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 something external, then we never awaken to the truth of our very being, our very nature. If we practice these disciplines, however, as a means of helping 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. 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.

Finally, the psalm closes with some of the most familiar 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 world and our part in it. This prayer becomes a 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 in my spirit. God, my redeemer—the power, the spirit that constantly renews me in forgiveness, mercy, and love.