

Psalm 19

19:1 The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.

19:2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

19:3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

19:4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens God has set a tent for the sun,

19:5 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

19:6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens and its circuit to the end of them, and nothing is hid from its heat.

19:7 The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;

19:8 the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;

19:9 the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

19:10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

19:11 Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

19:12 But who can detect one's own errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

19:13 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.

19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Sermon: *What's With All the Sunshine?*

In the first part of our lection, the Psalmist tells us that God's creation speaks without words. And it's so true!

In a few weeks, we're gonna host an animal blessing in our labyrinth. If you ever watch this kind of service, I mean really watch and pay attention, you'll notice that puppy dogs, and rabbits, and baby squirrels, and cats in strollers, and even children's favorite lovies and stuffed animals, ALL OF THEM, hear God's creation.

Every blade of grass cries out to them, "Look at me, look at me, hey, look at me, I am glorious, and luxurious, and soooo soft." Energetic dogs will roll in that grass, sniff, and chew, and probably do other things, too! And these puppy dogs will notice the birds chirping, and enjoy the warm sun on their backs, or the dewdrops that lick their fur, and the aroma of the flowers and plants, and they'll chase after sticks and balls,

and they'll greet all their other friends (animals and humans alike) with affectionate, welcoming barks.

And honestly, you don't have to attend an animal blessing to see this happen. Just go to your local park. There's an informal liturgy of worship and praise every day of the week!

It seems to me that animal friends, whether in labyrinth worship, or playing at the park down the street, or even just meandering in their own back yards, evoke a collective "Wow!!!" It's as if they wake up and say, "We live in God's world, and it's singing to us, and buddy, you better believe, we're gonna sing back."

But if animals aren't your thing, let's think even more broadly. The Psalmist reminds us that nature needs no instruction in modeling God's benevolence and generosity. Can you picture the hospitality of a sunrise? Is there any limit to its creativity? Is there any end to its consistency? And even when it's right before us, are there adequate words to express its wonder? The sun, the waters, the sands, the winds, the flying things, and creeping things, and swimming things – they all, collectively, tell of God's glory; they share God's glory; they invite us into God's glory.

The Psalmist tells us that God's creation is a reflection of a loving, beautiful, accepting, creative, boundless, energetic God. And God's creation is a demonstration of every element working in sync – each with its own purpose, each with its own gifts to share. And just like you and me, God's creation praises Her maker with singing and dancing of Her own.

In verse seven, the Psalmist switches gears. And the back half of our lection tells us that like creation, Torah, or the Law of the Lord, has its purpose, too.

We humans, we have all the senses to express God's glory, and yet we need a little help. The Psalmist tells us that God, through the saints before us, gifted us the scriptures, which include the laws and ordinances for living into covenant with our Creator: doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with our God.

I'm paraphrasing about three-quarters of our most important Scriptures, but if we choose to be a covenant people – a people bound in partnership with God, land, and neighbor – if we choose to be a covenant people, I believe it means we are a people determined to do two things: 1) to praise our maker with our whole being and 2) to sew empathy and compassion for others. Today. And tomorrow. And the next day. And the next.

Now friends, I know this has been a tumultuous month, and an even more tumultuous year. Hurricanes and forest fires are flaring up in the Gulf Coast and out West, reminding us of the grim realities of global climate change. We read about yet another senseless mass shooting in a Georgia high school, and we normalize broken bodies and elementary schoolers practicing shelter-in-place drills as the cost of doing business. We dredge further into an election season where our deep desire to hear about substantive policy is ignored in favor of spewing far-flung conspiracies about infanticide and pet abduction. And all of this is to say nothing of the nasty isms and microaggressions that seep into our daily activities.

And I have a feeling some of you might say, “Hey Bob, pardon us, but we’re not really in the mood to hear a sermon about puppy dogs and sunshine and praising God and the importance of prayer. Because quite frankly, we’re not sure it’s the time or the place. And quite frankly, we’re not sure it does a whole lot of good in the face of such palpable and constant evil. We’re gonna do more than pray. We’re gonna post every opinion to our social media channels, and use bumper stickers, and post signs, and write letters, and march, and rally, and vote in new leaders, and finally pass legislation that matters.”

Let me say I applaud your activism. And I applaud your desire to make impactful change. But as you choose this path, please do so because of your faith, and not in spite of it.

I don’t believe that Jesus ever promised an end to evil. Instead, Jesus proclaimed that the presence of God would never be absent, even in the midst of great evil. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

I also don’t believe that Jesus promised a Kin-dom or Kingdom of God that would wash over us like a tsunami. Instead, Jesus proclaimed series upon series of transformative, kingdom, kin-filled moments – a world that would exist as we worked hour by precious hour to make it so.

So on Sundays (or any other day), when we pause to praise our maker, and pray earnestly for the help She offers; when we take time to notice creation working in tandem, it matters. And it matters inherently.

I believe it matters because when we praise our maker, we become just like those puppy dogs who notice all there is to love, and who take time, in every instance, to show that love to all they encounter. And this kind

of empathy is contagious, one relationship at a time. Jesus offered it to a few dozen close friends, and two thousand years later, it's still being paid forward.

And despite living in a county where 1 in 4 children are food insufficient, and where thousands upon thousands seek affordable housing, and where too many older adults lack basic necessities, there are women and men among us, covenant people, who undergirded in covenant living, believe they can change the present. Right now. And they're gonna!

And I believe that if we live as covenant people, our empathy and compassion will become so contagious, that one day soon, the world will be filled with so much love that children will be fed, and older adults will be loved, and homeless families will know what it's like to have shelter. And people will no longer need to find their self-esteem in pointing the barrel of an automatic rifle at others, or in the coffers of wealthy lobbyists, or from the zip code on their ID. But rather, they will find their value from the source that has never been absent: an affirming, loving, seeking, joyful Maker.

But still, maybe this is too rah-rah for you. "Tell me, tell me right now, Bob, why and how my prayers and good thoughts matter, because all the memes on social media tend to suggest otherwise."

Okay, here goes. When we read scriptures, when we engage our Creator both individually and collectively, we become more keenly aware of God's intentions for the world: God, neighbor, and land, all infused with inherent value, all working in collaborative partnership together.

And if we are aware of God's intentions, we are eventually awakened to injustice. Where are the places God's beloved aren't being recognized for their inherent value?

And if we are awake to the needs of our neighbors, if we are empathetic, we soon become affectionate and invested. We understand that their needs are our needs.

And our affection becomes action.

We have just blessed the backpacks of beautiful, wonderful, beloved children of God. We are aware of God's intention for these children – and it is absolute. God's intention is that they will grow, be healthy, ultimately enjoy an arena where they share their unique gifts with their neighbors AND receive the unique gifts of their neighbors, too.

When we are aware of these special children, we are aware of every child. And we are awake to the idea that too many children here in Wake County lack access to healthy meals, school supplies, clothing, housing, and a system of support. And we know that their unmet needs stand in stark contrast to God's intentions.

Aware and awake, we consider how our love and affection for them as God's children might become tangible action. We consider how we might steward our own giftedness and resources to embrace them.

Our prayers, our thoughts, and our praise remind us of who we are. They remind us of what we're called to be and do. And ultimately, they serve as a compass in directing the actions of our lived faith expression.

What's With All the Sunshine?
Bob Stillerman
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, 9/15/2024
Psalm 19



As I mentioned last week – Jesus identifies what things he can do in the micro to affect the macro.

Be aware. Be awake. Be affectionate. Become actionable. Determine your best gifts, and as Buechner reminds us, use those gifts to forge your deep gladness and joy that will meet the world's great need.

Friends, may we praise our Maker and live in the joy of Torah all of our days!

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.