

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
"Meaningful Encounters"
Rev. Lou Nyiri
March 3, 2024 (Lent 3)

This morning's message is based upon Psalm 19 and John 2:13-22, let's lean in & listen to God's word for us this day...

Psalm 19 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)
God's Glory in Creation and the Law (To the leader. A Psalm of David.)

- ¹ The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
- ² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
- ³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
- ⁴ 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,
⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
- 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.
- ⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
- ⁸ the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
- ⁹ the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
- ¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
- ¹¹ Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
- ¹² But who can detect one's own errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
- ¹³ Keep back your servant also from the insolent;^[a]
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless
and innocent of great transgression.
- ¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

John 2:13-22 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition) - Jesus Cleanses the Temple

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, with the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Siblings in Christ, This is the word of the Lord. / Thanks be to God

Let us Pray:

Come, O Holy Spirit, come.
Come as the fire and burn,
Come as the wind and cleanse,
Come as the light and reveal,
Convict us, Convert us, Consecrate us...until we are wholly thine.

And now, Lord, my prayer is simply this:
That the words of my mouth
And the words of all our hearts will be found pleasing and acceptable to you, for you are our rock and our redeemer...Amen.

Sermon

Psalm 19 has been called "a rich gift."

From Beethoven's "The Heavens are Telling" to other composers – the words of Psalm 19 have been magnificently incorporated into musical compositions.

Christian writer and apologist C.S. Lewis declared Psalm 19 to be a treasure trove in the Psalter, writing, "I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."

The Psalmist's words are in our scriptural canon one of five creation psalms. / Included in this mix are Psalms 8, 65, 104, and 148.

One commentator has imagined that Psalm 8 could have been composed while contemplating the star-filled night sky – Psalm 19 could be composed in the full light of day when bright sunshine eclipses the starry night sky.

"The heavens are telling the glory of God, ... the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.

One needs look no further than the created order – the cyclic rhythm of day and night – to experience God's creativity and glory.

Day pours forth speech / Night declares knowledge – and yet – there is no speech nor words that can declare God’s handiwork better than taking in the creation around us.

I think of the best meal blessing I’ve ever encountered – it was in a state park – we were on an afternoon fun day amid a weeklong synod sponsored high school youth camp. The director had us pause before mealtime – after a day of swimming, canoeing, volleyball, small group discussions – and simply said, “The heavens are declaring glory of God. Pause before this meal and take in the wonder around you. Soak in the mountain ranges. Look at the colors on the trees. Listen to the wind. See, feel, hear the majesty. Be still and know that God is God. Be thankful.”

After about a 90 second pause he simply began to clap.
Soon the group joined in an applause filled meal grace in response to God’s good grace.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God / the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.”

Lest we think that Psalm 19 simply offers a natural theology based on nature whereby only the creation offers us knowledge of God, we turn the corner in the Psalmist’s thinking at verse 7. The Psalmist begins to reveal how God also addresses a personal word to humanity via God’s *Torah* – God’s *law, teaching, doctrine, instruction*.

God’s *Torah* makes human life possible –
“The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul...” (v. 7)
“The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart...” (v.8)

God’s *Torah* orders human life as well –
“The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever...” (v. 9a)
“The ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether...” (v.9b)

In essence, “The instruction of the LORD is all-encompassing, it restores life.”

The beauty of the Psalmist’s writing is how these words are presented in a cosmic scale.

To speak of *Torah* after highlighting creation’s proclamation of God’s handiwork is to remind God’s people that like the sun in the sky which constantly energizes the earth – God’s *Torah* (instruction, teaching, doctrine) energizes humanity and makes fullness of life possible.

Humanity is understood best in relationship to God.

According to Psalm 19 – God has revealed what God intends for human life through *Torah*.

Living by *Torah* – God’s instruction – constitutes righteousness – life as God intends it.

Yet, the Psalmist is also a realist and understands that just because one knows what is right doesn’t always mean one will do what is right. Just because one knows the instruction doesn’t necessarily mean one will follow the instruction.

Like when a parent tells a child not to touch the stereo system.
Then walks into the room as the child is opening the compact disc player.
Asks the child, “What are you doing?”

And watches as the child closes the open drawer and says directly to the parent, “Nothing.” Then walks nonchalantly out of the room.

In the final verses (11-14), the Psalmist highlights how even God’s personal instruction is not sufficient to ensure human behavior will be in harmony with God and God’s ordering of the world.

“Who can detect one’s own errors? Clear me from hidden faults.” (v.12)
“Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression.” (v.13)

In essence, the Psalmist is reminding us to petition for forgiveness – to be “blameless” and “innocent” is a result of God’s grace.

To be “blameless” is not to be sinless – rather it is to live in dependence upon God.

To depend upon God for forgiveness and for life itself is what opens us up to lean into the one who redeems.

The way the Psalmist lays out this connection between creation and *Torah* is theologically significant.¹

The love that motivated God to create the cosmos and humanity is the same love that motivated God to bear the burden of human disobedience – this is the same love that manifests itself in Israel’s story, the Psalmist’s life, and, as Christians, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

It is **love** lived in relationship.

Which brings us to our John passage – Jesus in the Temple.

This story is part of John’s meta story – describing the community coming to terms with the traumatic act by the Roman Empire to destroy the Second Temple. This story for John’s gathered community is a reconciling of the loss of their worship center and coming to understand what it means for them to believe in Jesus as Messiah – the Anointed One. It is a reminder that God’s presence is not solely found in a building - God’s presence is found in a person and wherever God’s people reside.

Jesus cleansing the temple – is a story found in all four gospels – it’s placement and purpose in John’s gospel is very different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke (the synoptic gospels).

In John’s gospel this Temple event is early in Jesus’ ministry – the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) place it in the final days of Jesus’ ministry during the passion / holy week – just after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

This context is critical in helping us understand John’s theology and purpose for this Temple encounter – this is one of the first embodiments of John 1:14 (think back to Advent and

¹ It is, not surprisingly, the same juxtaposition that characterizes the beginning of the First Testament – the Pentateuch – where the creation story (Genesis) precedes the story of redemption from bondage to revelation and Mt. Sinai (Exodus). It tells the story of a God whose instruction to humanity works toward the fulfillment of God’s creational purposes.

Christmas) “the Word became flesh and ‘tabernacled’ (tented, dwelled, lived) among us” – the purpose is not to discount the temple – it is to see how God is now dwelling in Jesus.

God’s grace and glory – according to John – is no longer contained to a space – it is contained in a person.

It is not rejection of Temple – it is not rejection of Judaism – Jesus is not against the temple – Jesus is Jewish – Jesus is there for Passover –

The criticism John’s Jesus states is, “stop making my father’s house a marketplace.” – It’s not so much a statement against mercantilism because Jesus knew the reality of the moment – the Temple had to be a marketplace otherwise it could not function – the people coming to the Temple were coming on pilgrimage for the Passover – cattle, sheep, doves were required for burnt offerings in the Temple – those coming for Passover would not have been able to bring animals with them.²

Jesus’ interaction in the Temple – in John’s gospel – is not about the selling of merchandise – it’s about God’s people missing the mark – they’re getting the practices of worship right – what they’re missing the mark on is doing the practices of loving neighbor.

It’s a reminder for the church – the Temple – the people of God that we do not exist solely for ourselves – orthodoxy is followed by orthopraxy – as we remind ourselves each week in our closing – we gather to go –worship gives way to our work in this world as God’s good news agents – in the words of Genesis 12 – we are “blessed to be blessings.”

God’s people get it right – the Israelites got it right – Christians get it right – when we remember we are not confined to a place – we are charged to take the good news with us.

It wasn’t the grandeur of Israel’s temple that got the surrounding community’s attention.

Other people had grand buildings.

It was the actions of the people that captured people’s attention – it was what they did when they cared for the other as they followed the instructions of God.

When they attended to the foreigner in their midst.

They cared for the immigrant.

They treated their hired help differently than everybody else.

The temple practices – the church’s practices – are intended to point us to where God is showing up and active in the world.

God shows up through God’s people.

We learned it as children in Sunday school:

Here is the church.

Here is the steeple.

Open the doors and see all the people.

However, the people cannot stay there – the people must go...

² The criticism in Matthew, Mark and Luke is “stop making my father’s house a den of thieves or robbers.”

as God's forgiven and freed people /
as God's sustained and sent people /
as God's empowered and encouraged people /
we are sent into this world to —
Witness more effectively,
Think more clearly,
Feel more deeply,
Listen more insightfully,
Speak more truthfully,
Care more soulfully,
Serve more creatively,
Lend more lavishly,
Encourage more lovingly,
Live more fully,
Teach more eloquently,
Give more generously.
Love more extravagantly.³

Amen and Amen.

³ Wesley Taylor, Tualatin United Methodist Church, Tualatin, Oregon.