

On the Road with Psalm 19: From the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai to Christ

Psalm 19:1-4, 7-8,10,14.

John 1: 1-4, 14,16

Psalm 19 is a psalm of praise for God's World and God's Word. It begins as a song of praise for Creation. The Psalms are full of them—as are our hymn books: “For the Beauty of the Earth”; “When Morning Gilds the Sky”; “All Creatures of Our God and King.” Do you have some favorites?

The psalm then moves to a psalm of praise for God's Word. Celtic Christianity is known to have had two books of revelation, The Book of Creation and the Book of Scripture. The psalmist would approve.

The psalm leads us on and leads us forward as Christians to the fullness of God's self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. How do we know who God is and what God's desire is for us the world? There is the Book of Creation, there is the Book of Scripture, and there is the incarnation of God in Christ. So the title of today's sermon is, “On the Road with Psalm 19: From the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai to Christ.

I

The psalm begins with these familiar words of praise: The heavens are telling the glory of God.” We see the glory of God in the brilliant daytime sky, in

the colors of sunrise and sunset. And we see the glory of God in the starry night sky. Van Gogh's painting *Starry Night*, pulsates with life and light.

The day and the night become in the psalm antiphonal choirs singing back and forth the glory of God:

Day to day takes up the story

and night unto night makes known the message.

The psalmist begins with the Book of Creation. And the psalmist's church is not the church of stone, brick, glass and steel but the "un-roofed" church of God, open to the sky.

How have you experienced the glory of God in nature? In its beauty, a beauty beyond words, without words? In the vastness of the cosmos, the constancy of seasons as the earth circles the sun? As you see the telescope's photographs of deep space?

How about the beauty of fall days? Edna St. Vincent Millay voices my praise:

O world I cannot hold thee close enough,

Thy winds, thy wide open skies!

Thy mists that roll and rise

Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag
And all but cry with colour...Lord, I do fear
Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year.

Where do you see the beauty and grandeur of God? The running streams, the mountain vistas, the wild flowers that announce spring and adorn the summer? We sing song after song of praise to God's world.

But the psalmist says we need more, for it is song without words:
There is no speech, nor are there words,
Their voice is not heard

It goes throughout the world—this revelation of God in nature—a common grace given to all peoples.

We tend to neglect the revelation of God in Creation. John Calvin said that God has given us season passes to the theater of God's creation, but we have given up our seats.

Paul wrote, "Salvation comes by hearing", hearing the word of God, but salvation also comes by *seeing* too, seeing the wonders of God in creation.

But, but we need more than the revelation of God in Creation. It is a song without words, so we need God's Word too. Scripture gives us the words to the song.

II

So the psalmist begins the second stanza of the psalm, a song of praise to the Word of God:

The teaching of the Lord is perfect
reviving the soul.

The decrees of the Lord are sure
making the simple wise.

Most of the Christian translations say “The Law of the Lord is perfect.” But my Jewish Study Bible translates it, “The teaching of the Lord.” There is in the New Testament an antisemitic and anti-Judaism streak. Paul opposes the “law” of the Hebrew scripture to the “grace” of Jesus Christ. But the word Torah means far more than the “Law” of God, the “commands of God.” It means the teaching of God, teachings that help us live fully, freely, happily, healthily. The best translation of the Torah may be “the Way”, the way of God revealed to Israel.

The teachings of God can make us *all* wise. The wisdom of God is given to all, no Ph.D. required. Some of the wisest people I know have no degrees after their names.

Such teaching then becomes our delight:

The precepts of the Lord are right
rejoicing the heart,
the instruction of the Lord is clear
enlightening the eyes.

Therefore, the psalmist says, the words of God are

More to be desired than gold...
sweeter than honey,
and the drippings of honey cone.

I've told you the story that these words bring to mind. The man had been convicted of a white-collar financial crime and sentenced to serve out his term at the last leper colony in the U.S., in Louisiana. He found himself going to the little church in the leper colony with the lepers. His "fall" had led him back to church.

Leprosy can progress to blindness, and it can destroy the nerve endings in the finger tips. One day during worship he saw a leper with his Bible right up against his face. It seemed odd, but then it came clear what the man was doing. He was blind and so couldn't read the Bible. He has lost all feeling in his hands and so could not read the Braille Bible in the pews. He was reading his Braille Bible with his tongue. So earnestly he wanted to read God's Word. The words of God are "sweeter than honey, than the dripping of the honeycomb."

III

God has revealed God's self, God's nature and will in Creation and in Scripture. But more is needed. Creation is the song without the words. The Bible supplies the words, but how do we sing it? Why do we want to sing it? We need the Singer, the Singer who sings the song in us, the one who brings the song to our lips and hearts.

I bet you know where I'm headed. We have the song of Creation, we have the Word of Scripture, and now we have been given the one who sings it in our hearts, sings the song of grace.

John's prologue tells the story:

In the beginning was the Word

And the Word was with God and was God.

All things came into being through the Word,

and without the Word not one thing

came into being....

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us

full of grace and truth....

From his fulness we have all received grace upon grace upon grace.

It is grace that has set our hearts singing, our piano keys ringing, our toes tapping.

IV

And now the promised travelogue—not Rick Steve’s but Steve’s—from the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai to Christ. Many years ago on sabbatical, my family and I traveled to Cairo, Egypt to visit missionary friends, Randall and Nancy Parks.

One morning Randell said, “Let’s go camping in the Sinai Peninsula! We’ll go snorkeling in the Red Sea, then go climb Mt. Sinai. I asked, “Is there a Holiday Inn there?” “Nope”, he said, and he began packing up our gear.

We drove to the Red Sea at a place where the coral reef made it one of the most beautiful places to go snorkeling in the world. I’d never been snorkeling, but there I was, ready or not.

At the water’s edge Randall gave me the beginning instruction on how to wear the mask and breathe under water. We waded out on the reef’s surface until we came to its edge. When I looked down I could see no bottom to the sea, only fathomless depths. To say the least, I was afraid to launch my whole body into the depths. It took three or four tries and about ten minutes, before I let loose of the edge and gave my whole body to the depths.

But when I did, I began to see a world of unimaginable beauty. (There's a sermon in there: overcoming our fear of the depths, thalassophobia, and then encountering the beauty and truth of God.) The shapes and colors of the fish, the colors and textures of the reef and the underwater plant life. Time seemed to stop as I looked and looked and looked.

The ocean depths are full of the glory of God.

Then we set off for Mt. Sinai where we would camp out under the stars before starting to climb the mountain the next morning. That night as I lay in the sleeping bag I saw the night sky as I had never seen it before. I saw the millions of stars as I had never seen them filling the night sky. The sky seemed to pulsate with life and light. Then came shooting stars across the sky, one after another! I didn't want to go to sleep; I didn't want to miss anything. The heavens were telling the glory of God.

The next morning, we began our hike up the high, steep, red craggy mountain of Mt. Sinai. At the top we stood where Moses stood when he received the Ten Commandments. I had followed the psalmist who wrote:

the teaching of the Lord is perfect

reviving the soul

all the way to Mt. Sinai.

Then we made our way down the steep mountain, and we came to one of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world, the monastery of St. Katherine, an Eastern Orthodox monastery. As we walked in, I saw its priceless collection of icons. For Orthodox Christians icons, painted representations of Christ and Mary and the saints, are an important part of their worship, in their homes and in the churches. It is important not only to *hear* the words of Christ, but to *gaze* upon him. “Behold the beauty of the Lord”.

We need a face. We need his face, what Paul called “the glory of God in the face of Christ.” We have seen his face and now, as the Quaker song goes: “How can I keep from singing?” How can we?!

The psalm ends with what could be our morning prayer every day: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

Amen.