

## *The Words of My Mouth and the Meditation of My Heart*

### Psalm 19

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C. S. Lewis said about Psalm 19, “I consider this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.” You don’t have to believe that to pay careful attention to it, which is what I am asking you to do this morning. It is a poem about how God speaks—first in creation, and then in the Torah, the Scriptures, and then through us. Once scholars used to think that Psalm 19 was two poems that got mashed together—one about the creation and one about the Torah—but more recently it has become clear that there are themes and words that tie the sections together, and there are three sections rather than two.

The first line of the psalm is familiar: “The heavens are telling the glory of God.” You probably think that some times when you are out under the stars on Block Island. I remember the first night we were on the island at Donna Corey’s house far on the West Side, far from any lights; I looked up and saw the Milky Way and a million stars at once for the first time in many years and I probably gasped audibly. It was the glory of God on display.

I want you to notice something about the poem, though. You’ve noticed that Hebrew poetry doesn’t rhyme—not in translation and not in the original. The thing that makes it poetry is not rhyme but what they call parallelism—setting lines in pairs where the second repeats the theme of the first in different language and with a slight twist. You can see it all the way through this poem, more clearly than in many psalms. In verse 1, the parallel line to the one about the heavens is the one about the firmament. The NIV translates that line as “the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” The Hebrew word usually translated “firmament” is similar to what we think of as sky, the visible part of the atmosphere of earth. But it’s really a word that comes from a different understanding of the world than the scientific one we have. For the Hebrews, the earth was a plate and the firmament was an upside-down bowl sitting on top of the plate, creating a kind of terrarium of safety for us. The dome in the sky was created on the second day, and the sun, moon, and stars were put in place on the fourth. The heavens begin at the “sky” but in their mind went all the way up to where God is. That is not the point of the psalm, just what is taken for granted.

The point is that both the heavens and the firmament are speaking. The heavens are saying “God is glorious,” and the firmament is saying “God made me.” It’s not just the night sky either. It’s 24/7. “Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.” You see how that is parallel, right? The creation is talking to us all the time. But here’s the strange thing, pointed out in verse 3: there is actually no speech, no words, no voice. The heavens are silent. And yet, verse 4 says their voice—which is not really a voice—goes out throughout all the earth, and their words—which are not really words—go out to the end of the world.

The heavens and the sky are talking all the time, but most people never hear it. One of the most famous pieces by Franz Joseph Haydn is “The Heavens Are Telling,” based on this psalm. When I went back and listened to it, I was surprised that there was an emphasis on the fact that what they are telling is not heard. The chorus sings, “In all the lands resounds the word, never unperceived, never understood—never ever, ever, ever understood.” When we look at the creation we perceive God but we do not understand him. That is why, in the logic of this psalm,

we need the Scriptures to tell us about what God is like and what God wants. Yes, it's true that creation is revealing God to us all the time, but the message may not be received. John Calvin wrote

Although the Lord represents both himself and his everlasting kingdom in the mirror of his works with very great clarity, such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull toward so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us (*Institutes* I.V.11).

You know how on Block Island we get so used to beauty that we don't see it unless we stop ourselves; in the same way we get used to God's miraculous works as part of our background so that we stop noticing them.

The second stanza of the first section is a little riff on the sun, maybe using images from pagan poetry about the sun but giving the creator credit for the sun. God has a tent in the heavens where the sun spends the night, in this mythological conception, but in the morning when we see the sun rising above the horizon the psalmist sees the sun as a Jewish bridegroom racing out of his *huppa* to meet his beloved. Or, the sun could be an athlete running a race. Actually the word for "strong man" or "warrior" has another meaning that I prefer. It can mean a messenger in battle, like the messenger running the course from Marathon to Athens carrying the good news that evil has been defeated. The sun is an image of God's love racing toward God's beloved, or an image of God's messenger proclaiming that the victory has already been one. That's what the sky is saying to this poet.

The next section of the psalm, verses 7-11, have to do with the Torah. You can translate that as "the Law," but *torah* means something more like "instruction" and it is the whole of the Scriptures the psalmist had, the books of Moses. We could even update it to say "The Bible of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul." What does this celebration of Torah have to do with the first section of the poem about creation? The connection is God speaking. God speaks in a general way in creation, but he speaks in a specific way in the Scriptures. And you'll notice that the creation only tells us about God, without a name, but the Torah tells us about Yahweh, the Lord who has a name. The Torah revives the soul—or that word can be translated "the Torah cause the soul to repent," which certainly fits with the end of the psalm. There are a variety of synonyms used for Torah or Law: decrees, precepts, commandments, ordinances. Those teachings make the naïve youth wise, make the heart rejoice, and give light to the eyes. Those teachings—the clear speech of God—are more valuable to us than gold and sweeter than honey.

Christians, influenced by a misreading of Paul's letters (I think), think of the Law as a negative thing. Law bad, grace good. But for the psalmist the Torah was a gift of grace. It was love that led God to give his people instruction on how to live and how to stay in a covenant relationship with him and one another. To the Jews then and now, law and grace are inseparable. Christians may be right that the chief use of the law for us is to make us understand that we cannot keep it, that we really have a problem with sin. But there is also a positive use to many things in Torah—which includes, after all, the story of creation and the story of redemption from slavery. And even what is strictly speaking "law" is the thing that guides our conscience and gives moral shape to the universe. It is more valuable than gold—in spite of what our culture thinks—and sweeter than Littlefield honey.

The transition verse is verse 11: Moreover by keeping them is your servant warned. "Your servant" is the psalmist, the "me" of the rest of the psalm. Your commandments warn me, and keeping them brings its reward.

But there is a problem. “None of us know our faults.” We have hidden faults—hidden even from ourselves—and unintentional sins. We sin even without knowing it. Preaching in the 19<sup>th</sup> century before Freud, the great British Baptist Alexander Maclaren said, “Down below every life there lies a dim region of habits and impulses and fleeting emotions, into which it is the rarest thing for a man to go with a candle in hand to see what it is like.” Most of us don’t want to know what’s down there. Most of us don’t want to see our hidden faults. We have hidden them for a reason. And it is possible that we commit sins without even being aware of them; my unintentionally hurtful words last Sunday are a case in point.

Maclaren imagines a listener asking “Well, if I do not know that I am doing wrong, how can it be a sin?” The Torah does make a distinction in the punishment for unintentional sin versus “willful sins,” but “ignorance does not alter the nature of the deed.” One example he gives: a man who, unconsciously to himself, is allowing worldly prosperity to sap his Christian character. That man’s life is like a river next to a mill. A sluice is diverting most of his life to turn the wheels of industry, so that there is only a miserable little trickle coming down the river bed. Is he any less guilty because he does not know? Shouldn’t he have noticed? Shouldn’t he have reflected on what was happening to his life, even if he never really intended it?

[<http://www.apibs.info/sermon/am/19007.htm>]. That our conscience is clear does not make us innocent, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:4 [NIV], because it is the Lord that judges us, not we ourselves. Another translation [NASB] says, “I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.”

So we have no alternative but to cast ourselves on the mercy of the court, on the grace of God. Forgive me. Cleanse me. Keep me from willful sins; please don’t let me do wrong on purpose. Don’t allow sin to control my life. It is in that context that the psalmist says those words that are familiar because preachers use them so often: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

The heavens and the sky are speaking; in fact, the word used in “the words of my mouth” is the same word translated “speech” in verse 1. The Scriptures also are speaking. And now I am speaking. God, make my words acceptable to you—not acceptable to me, or to my audience, but to you. James (3:1-2) says, “Not many of you should be teachers...for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” I hate that verse. But he goes on: “For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect.” I make mistakes in speaking, even when I am in the pulpit. That is why I cast myself on God’s mercy and on yours. I make mistakes I am not even aware of. I ask God to forgive those and to prevent me from saying things that are willfully mean or wrong.

But the prayer to “Let the words of my mouth” does not apply just to preachers. It is for everyone. Before we come to this table, we ask ourselves, “Are the words of my mouth acceptable in God’s sight?” Not the words I speak in church, but the words I speak in the parking lot, at the post office, at the airport diner. Those proverbial conversations at the water cooler—or, as we say in Rhode Island, “at the bubblah”—are they acceptable in God’s sight? Would you say those words if you knew that God was right there watching and listening—which he is? And the words are critical not only because they have great power but because they are an indication of “the meditations of my heart,” my inner thoughts. Are those thoughts about my neighbors acceptable in God’s sight? Or are they unkind thoughts, or thoughts of revenge, or thoughts of how much worse than us are our neighbors are?

Before I came to Harbor Church a minister who had served on the island warned me that Block Island is the gossippiest place on the face of the earth. I don’t think I believed it at the time.

A member recently said to me that around here every sermon every Sunday should be on the subject of gossip. Oh, maybe I should rotate them with sermons on slander and lying and judging others.

But even the sin of gossip can be forgiven. Oh, those things they said about Jesus that got him crucified! But hanging on the cross he said, “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” The truth of the gospel is that God forgives us when we don’t know what we are doing, and even when we know perfectly well and do it anyway. God demonstrates his love for us in this way: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

That is what we celebrate at this table. Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He is our rock—our security, our foundation, our unshakeable one. And he is our redeemer. The Hebrew word “redeemer” means a next of kin who saves us and buys us back. The one who made the heavens and gave the law is also our next of kin who has bought us back from slavery and brought us into his family. Thanks be to God.