

Psalm 19

Psalm 19:4b-13 In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. ⁵ It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. ⁶ It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth.

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. ⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. ⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous. ¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.

¹¹ By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward. ¹² But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults. ¹³ Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

Psalm 19

In 1977, Natan Sharansky, a Soviet Jew, was jailed for advocating free speech and the right to emigrate from the Soviet Union, and for refusing to cooperate with authorities. When he was released in 1986, his one possession was the book of Psalms in Hebrew. It was his source of strength in prison. He memorized the Psalms and chanted them often for comfort and guidance.

Natan was open to God's instruction. He was open to God's power to transform hopeless situations. And emotionally and spiritually, the Psalms were a place to stand. Like Archimedes, he reasoned that *with a place to stand on* he could move the earth. He said the Psalms enabled him to maintain "spiritual independence against the kingdom of lies."

It has been awhile since we've taken a close look at one of the psalms, and we are the poorer for that. Martin Luther said that the Psalms were the Bible in miniature. What's more, C. S. Lewis called Psalm 19 "the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."

This past week I've noticed the change to Daylight Saving Time. It's sunrise when I take our dog Ginger out for her first walk of the day and it's often a beautiful sight. Indeed, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." That's the first line from our call to worship this morning and the first line from Psalm 19. The passage continues, "Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." The psalmist says that nature proclaims the presence and the character of God. If we don't hear the message that creation is proclaiming, then it's because we aren't receptive. We're blind to the beauty and the interwoven fabric of nature. We have ears but do not hear. Too often we are like someone walking by a Rembrandt painting, oblivious to the genius displayed on canvas, because we're busy texting on the phone in our hand.

But if we look at the world around us, we find that the deeper we look, the more beauty and the greater intricacy we find. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, saying, ^{CEB} **Romans 1:20** "Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities--God's eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made." God is revealed not only in Christ, but also, Paul says, in the Creation that bears the imprint of its Maker. We could spend the rest of the morning pointing out that when we destroy nature, foul the air, pollute the waters, and exterminate both animal and plant life, we

are not only scrawling graffiti on God's artwork, we are also defacing the revelation of God in creation.

But there is more to this psalm. When we read Psalm 19, there appears to be an abrupt shift from verse six to verse seven. Stargazers and tree huggers will love verses 1-6, but the Ten Commandments crowd will focus on verses 7-13. Suddenly, it seems, the psalmist shifts from talking about nature to talking about God's law. But maybe the parts of the psalm are more related than they seem at first. Creation discloses much about God, if we will but pay attention. God's law is a personal word, spoken more directly to humanity, which reveals God's vision for how we can live in harmony with God and each other. Just as the sun provides warmth to all that it passes over, so too, the guidance and instruction of God benefits all who receive it. In the first part of this psalm, the word *El* is used for God. *El* is a general term for God, but now the psalmist shifts to use the personal name of God, YHWH. We move from a general view of God in creation, to a more direct and personal message of the Holy One of Israel. And this psalm tells us that just as God brings order and beauty to the heavens and all of creation, God also brings order and beauty to an otherwise chaotic moral universe.

The Hebrew word *torah* is often translated as law. And when we hear the word law we often think of restrictions on our behavior and our freedom. With our general attitude about lawyers, legalism, government rules and regulations, legislators and congressmen we have a pretty negative attitude about law.

Last Wednesday I heard three Highway Patrolmen speak to Rotary. They began by saying that the first thing everybody wants to know is "How much over the speed limit can I go before you give me a ticket?" We viewed our relationship to them in legalistic terms. But they explained that their focus was on protecting us and those around us from our risky behavior – failure to use a seat belt, our driving while impaired by drugs, whether they were illegal or prescription drugs, and our driving while distracted, no matter whether the distraction was texting, Facebook, an unruly child loose, or a dog in our lap. While we might see their job as unwanted imposition, they saw it as protecting us.

We think of the Ten Commandments as being a bunch of "thou shalt nots" that bind us and restrict us. Tex Sample tells a story about a fiery preacher who proclaimed, "Why, if I didn't believe that everything in the Bible was true, I'd take and burn all my Bibles and go out and have me a good time!" For that preacher, the Bible was a burden that restricted him from enjoying life. But Psalm 19 speaks of God's will as refreshing and giving joy.

The Israelites were liberated from slavery by God's great mercy and then received the gift of law at Mt. Sinai. They were empowered and set free to do God's will. We have received a great gift of mercy in Jesus Christ, and we are to be motivated and eager to follow God's ways. But we slip into legalism, using the law as a fence to exclude or judge others, as a weapon of manipulation, or as a prop for our self-righteousness. The cure for an immoral society is the same as the cure for holier-than-thou smugness: to look to God's instructions as a precious, merciful gift, to be treasured and savored.

Last week we considered the concept that the purpose of God's law was education, not legalism. In fact, given our generally negative view of laws and rules we tend to misunderstand Torah. Torah is not really "law" and certainly not a list of laws. It's a template for living in covenant as God's free and faithful people. Verse seven says that Torah revives or refreshes the soul. The verb here isn't a single action, but a continuing process. And Torah means more than law. It means "way" or "path" and it implies movement, a journey. Going somewhere in step with God is a good thing. God's instruction provides a pattern for us to follow. Our progress is slow, it requires energy and dedication. Sometimes we realize that we've wandered off of the path and have to find our way back. But we are on a journey and we can thank God that we've been supplied with directions.

A few years ago, Benjamin McCorquodale sold me a subscription to Wood Magazine as part of a fund raiser for the band. I eagerly look forward to each issue. I'm excited when it arrives. You see, I love working with wood. The smell of sawdust relaxes me. And the magazine brings me instructions – tips on techniques, drawings and material lists and tool reviews, all designed to make a woodworking project stronger, more beautiful, more functional, more satisfying. In the same way, Torah provides instruction, a pattern for our life, directions for our journey.

How do the commands of the law give light to the eyes? Instructions about welcome, hospitality, and mercy reveal neighbors where we saw strangers or enemies.

Do not covet opens our eyes to see the idols of consumerism.

Remember the Sabbath - because we desperately need rest and we need to worship God.

Thou shalt not kill. We fret about whether that means killing under any circumstance, or only murder – and then, murder under what circumstances. Jesus opened up the commandment by saying we are not to get angry. That feels like an impossible load to bear. But Jesus wants us to be set free from our anger, rather than controlled by it. Augustine said that anger directed against another person is like a sword, but it must first pass through our own heart before piercing the other person. Anger consumes and devastates us.

Serving the poor and the oppressed isn't just a good idea that might make you feel good, a nice option if you aren't already too busy. It's in the pattern, it's the path, it's where Jesus is going, if we want to follow. Serving the poor is part of the Torah that revives the soul.

And so we sing, "Be Thou my vision." We sing, "Open my eyes that I may see" because we know that there is a better way to live and God has revealed it to us through the Word written and the Word lived by Christ. Welcome Torah with joy; treasure God's instructions more than pure gold, delight in them more than pecan pie. Join me in reflecting on Torah –

God's instructions	revive the soul
God's stable rules	guide the simple
God's just demands	delight the heart
God's clear commands	sharpen vision
God's faultless pronouncements	stand forever

The third and final section of Psalm 19 is a prayer for God's help - a prayer for the fullest living of Torah. We can't be righteous by Torah alone. Mortals make unintended errors and unconscious mistakes. Only by God's pardon and preservation can we be complete and whole in life under God.

In this prayer, God is called a rock and a redeemer. When God is referred to as a rock in scripture, the connotation is that of foundation or fortress. Some translations use the word strength, which seems appropriate, as well. Redeemer has a specific meaning in Hebrew law and culture. It was the responsibility of the closest kin to buy back (to redeem) relatives who had fallen into slavery. Psalm 19 declares that the God who set the sun on its course is the same God that we can experience as family who redeems and rescues. God is love, as John said. God is experienced not as a cosmic enforcer, but as a forgiving next of kin. Let us pray together the closing prayer of Psalm 19. **Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.**

Torah is more than law.
It is a pattern for living,
directions for walking the path,
a gift that shows us the way to live in harmony
with God, creation, and with our neighbors.