

**Sermon Preached by the Reverend Cameron J. Soulis, Associate Rector
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Third Sunday in Lent, Year B
March 3, 2024**

Exodus 20:1-7; Ps. 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

Psalm 19 *Caeli enarrant*

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork.
- 2 One day tells its tale to another, and one night imparts knowledge to another.
- 3 Although they have no words or language, and their voices are not heard,
- 4 Their sound has gone out into all lands, and their message to the ends of the world.
- 5 In the deep has he set a pavilion for the sun;
 it comes forth like a bridegroom out of his chamber;
 it rejoices like a champion to run its course.
- 6 It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens
 and runs about to the end of it again;
 nothing is hidden from its burning heat.
- 7 The law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul;
 the testimony of the Lord is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent.
- 8 The statutes of the Lord are just and rejoice the heart;
 the commandment of the Lord is clear and gives light to the eyes.
- 9 The fear of the Lord is clean and endures for ever;
 the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
- 10 More to be desired are they than gold, more than much fine gold,
 sweeter far than honey, than honey in the comb.
- 11 By them also is your servant enlightened, and in keeping them there is great reward.
- 12 Who can tell how often he offends? cleanse me from my secret faults.
- 13 Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;
 let them not get dominion over me;
 then shall I be whole and sound, and innocent of a great offense.
- 14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
 be acceptable in your sight,
 O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Each Sunday we say a psalm as part of the appointed readings for the day. How often do you really think about that psalm? I have to admit that I rarely do.

I don't think we are unusual in this. For it seems that in most Episcopal churches, we don't pay much attention to the psalms that are selected for each week. We read or sing them in the liturgy, but then that's about it. Preachers hardly ever mention the psalm in their sermons. Bible studies based on the lectionary tend to focus on one of the other readings appointed for the day. And in the conversations that I've had with folks after a service, it's nearly always the Gospel or the other lessons that someone will ask me about or offer a comment about.

To paraphrase the ionic catchphrase of Rodney Dangerfield, that comedian popular in the 1970s and 80s – “psalms don’t get no respect.”

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Psalms 19, the psalm appointed for today, is one that deserves respect. It is a rich gift. It employs beautiful imagery, memorable metaphors, and elegant phrasing. Well-known composers, like Haydn and Beethoven, have turned to its words for their musical compositions. We have two wonderful hymns in our hymnal that are paraphrases of this psalm (numbers 409 and 431, if you were wondering). And, the Christian writer and apologist of the mid-twentieth century, C.S. Lewis, called Psalm 19 “the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.”¹

So, let us take this opportunity to spend some time considering this beautiful psalm.

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Now, as I stated earlier, we don’t often pay much heed to the psalms in worship. So, I’d like you to have these lovely words in front of you as we examine them.

Please open your bulletin to the page where the psalm is printed. Or get out your prayer book, and turn to page 606. Again, that’s page 606, Psalm 19.

Psalms 19 can be broken into three sections – a portion that speaks of creation, a portion that speaks of *torah*, and a portion that is a prayer. Let’s look at these three sections individually and then think about how they work together.

Let’s begin with the first section, verses 1 to 6.

This first section of the psalm is a hymn-like celebration of God’s glory in creation. It resembles other creation psalms like 8 or 65.

One quality of this section that I particularly love is the word-play around sound, words, and voice. Did you notice?

The heavens *declare*;
one day *tells its tale*;
the night *imparts knowledge*.

Then in the next verse, we are told that the creation has *no words or language*; that *their voices are not heard*.

And yet, the psalmist finally declares, there is a message that creation sends forth; a sound that goes out into all lands and to the ends of the world.

In other words, the universe, by its very existence, sounds forth praise of God and shouts of God’s glory.

Have you ever experienced this yourself?

¹ Original source for quote: C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1986) 83. I read this quote in numerous sources on this psalm, including “Commentary on Psalm 19:7-14” by Rolf Jacobson, *Working Preacher*, 30 Sept 2012.

Have you been in the middle of woods or meadows or wilderness - and in the silence of that magnificent space, felt deeply the presence of God?

Have you had a time when the natural world revealed an aspect of God to you?

I think that is what the psalmist is trying to convey to us here.

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The next section of the psalm is found in verses 7 to 10. Here the focus shifts to the *torah* of the Lord. Although *torah* is often translated into English as “law,” here it does not mean “law” in a legal sense. A better word to get to the sense of *torah* would be “instruction.” The *torah*, especially as it is praised in this psalm, is not so much rules and stipulations, as it is the teaching or instruction about God’s ways.

The form of the poetry shifts in this portion of the psalm, as well. These verses are very precisely constructed in the Hebrew. You may have observed this even as we read it a few minutes ago. In the English translation, the rhythm of the words changes from the first section.

In the Hebrew, each of verses 7 to 9 are composed identically. In the first half of each statement, there is a noun that is a synonym for *torah*; then the formal name of God; then an adjective that names a quality of *torah*.

So, the law of the Lord is perfect;
the testimony of the Lord is sure;
the statutes of the Lord are just;
the commandment of the Lord is clear.

In the second half of each statement, there is a phrase of two Hebrew words that tells of a benefit of *torah* or another quality of it.²

Thus, *torah*:
revives the soul;
gives wisdom to the innocent;
rejoices the heart;
gives light to the eyes;
endures forever.

In this very precise format and with these many synonyms, this section highlights and praises the excellent qualities of *torah*, a gracious gift from God that tells us how to live. The psalmist ends this section with two metaphors that express how wonderful a gift *torah* is. The psalmist tells us that the gifts of *torah* are to be sought-after – that they are even more desirable than the luster and wealth of gold or the sweetest of sweet foods.

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(continued on the next page)

² This information about the Hebrew construction from: Rolf Jacobson, “Commentary on Psalm 19:7-14,” *Working Preacher*, 30 Sept 2012. Also, James L. Mays, *Psalms*, in the Interpretation series, (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 98.

In the final section of the psalm, verses 11 to 14, the focus shifts yet again, this time to the servant who is speaking the psalm. These last verses are a prayer for God's help and forgiveness.

Now, after pondering these three different sections, it would be easy to think that this psalm might have had its origin as two or three separate poems, smushed together at a later time. But note that there is a root metaphor of "speech" underlying the entire psalm.

The psalm begins with creation speech, praising God, moves to torah speech, giving instruction to humanity, and ends with the servant's speech, offering prayer to God. This underlying metaphor makes it a coherent whole.

By writing the poem in this way, with these three voices, the psalmist seems to be asking us to think about creation and the law together, and to make connections between them. The first part of the psalm teaches us that the universe reveals God's presence to us. That the power and glory of God can be known through the wordless and voiceless speech of creation, as paradoxical as that might seem.

The second part of the psalm lauds the speech of *torah*; speech that teaches us who God is and what God wills. Speech in words we can understand and follow. The psalm reminds us that both creation and *torah* reveal aspects of God to us.

And then the third part of the psalm, gives voice to the servant of God – *to us*. The third part begins with a recognition that *torah* enlightens us, as the sun lights the heavens. And just as nothing can be hidden from the burning heat of the sun, the illumination of *torah* allows us to see our sins and offenses. Yet, the servant acknowledges that we humans cannot be righteous through *torah* alone. Despite our best intentions, we imperfect humans have hidden faults, blind spots, inadvertent sins. Thus, the psalm closes with a prayer asking for God's help and forgiveness, and encourages us to pray, with the psalmist.

This final prayer reminds us of our proper place within creation. That although God has given us the gift of *torah*, God's instruction, and that God has given us creation and wonder in its works, we still need God's mercy and forgiveness to live in God's ways.

And thus, Psalm 19 ultimately teaches us that it is only by God's salvation that joy in creation and observance of God's ways are truly possible.

Psalm 19 is a psalm worth knowing. It deserves our respect.

Its poetry entices us and teaches us.

May we be attentive to it.

Amen.