

Recipients of God's address

Exodus 20:1–4, 7–9, 12–20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b–14

Matthew 21:33–46

Text: Psalm 19:1, 7, 14

The heavens are telling the glory of God;

The law of the Lord is perfect,

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Introduction

“The heavens are telling the glory of God.” The moment the Psalmist is describing is akin to those times when we get away from the glow of city lights and can see the stars in a cloudless night sky. There is something breathtaking about such a moment—even awe inspiring. Yet the Psalmist doesn't reference this awe directly, only indirectly. What the Psalmist says is that wherever he looks with respect to the earth and sky he hears voices telling, proclaiming, speaking. There are no words, but the message of the voices is unmistakable. “The heavens are telling the glory of God.”

At first sight Psalms 19 appears to consist of two independent poems, one about the heavens, the other about the law of the Lord. The first two sections are different in rhythms and length of line and reading them does appear that two poems have been stuck together. However, there is a theme that runs throughout the three sections of the Psalm rendering it a continuous whole and it is regarding the speech, the voice. In the first, God speaks through the glory of the heavens; in the second, the Lord speaks through his revelation of the Law; in the third, the believer speaks in response. The theme that unites all the parts of the Psalm is that the human is the recipient of God's address and is therefore response-able.

1. Did you know that the sun's gigantic mass is accountable for 99.86% of all the mass in our solar system? The sun weighs billions of kilograms; roughly the weight of 330,060 earths. If the sun was hollow, then it could be filled up with approximately 960,000 spherical earths. However, if the earths were squashed inside the hollow sun with no space wasted then about 1,300,000 would fit inside. Although it only takes the sun's rays 8 minutes and 20 seconds to travel to the earth, it will have already taken millions of years for them to travel from the sun's core to its surface.

Notwithstanding all those facts, the sun is the impeccably perfect size, shape, brightness, age, temperature, and distance for life to exist on earth. If it were any different in these categories—ever so slightly—life as we know it wouldn't exist. “In the heavens God has set a tent for the sun,” writes the Psalmist, “Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hidden from its heat.” In describing the sun in this way, the Psalmist is drilling down on the point he made; “their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” The proclamation of the glory of God is heard everywhere by everyone.

As Jesus taught us, the One he called the Father “makes his sun to shine on the evil and the good.” (Matthew 5:45) It seems to me a fitting Psalm to be read on World Communion Sunday. We humans—all of us—are, according to the Bible, recipients of God’s address.

I invite you to reflect a little more on a point I touched on briefly at the beginning of this sermon. The Psalmist only indirectly speaks about the awe-inspiring nature of our world and universe. Lots of people love the beauty of a sunset and the majesty of nature; it is common among us that the wonders of such things have inspired poet and scribe alike. The Psalmist, however, guides our attention to something else; the Psalmist says that in his observation of such wonders he hears a voice declaring the glory of God.

The Psalmist is a believer; a person of faith which is, biblically speaking, a person in restored relationship with God. Like us who believe, when we observe some wonder of creation, the awe we sense underlines the truth that resonates in our hearts—the heavens are telling the glory of God. The Apostle John tells us that Jesus is that Word of God through whom all things came into being; the One who gave his life for us is also our creator. The heavens are declaring the glory of God and we hear that voice.

People who do not share our faith might say that we believers are imagining that voice—they too feel a sense of awe in the face of the same sunset and see no need to attribute a voice. Permit me a personal story as a parable. Many of you know that my wife Valerie was an interior designer by profession. She designed the decor of our home to be what I would describe as beautiful yet comfortable; home, in its décor, is, for me, a comforting place to be. Her work on our home was an expression of her love for me; indeed, for her too—she liked to be home as well—yet because I knew she loved me this designing work was a labour of that love. So, when I come home the ambiance of the house carries a message—not as directly as hearing her voice—but I hear the message, nonetheless.

Is it possible that the human response of a sense of awe at a glorious sunset or mountaintop vista—an experience that is almost universal—is an echo of a voice calling to us? Could we entertain the idea that what we are actually sensing at those moments is the music of the voices declaring the glory of God? The gospel witness is that we humans—all of us humans—are the recipients of God’s address. Instead of simply admiring the landscape perhaps we should say, “thank you.” When I went home should I have stopped at admiring my wife’s handiwork or should I say to her, “thank you for making our home such a lovely place to be.”

2. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. In the middle section of this Psalm the name for God changes. In the first section the name is the Hebrew word for God ‘el’. This is the word used for God in Genesis 1, “in the beginning God,” albeit in plural form. In the middle section the name for God is now that four-consonant unpronounceable word for God; this is the word we Christians have inserted vowels in and pronounce ‘Yahweh.’ This is the name used to refer to the God who made himself known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God who disclosed his name to Moses as, ‘I am’ or ‘I am that I am.’ Jewish people so revered the name they would not say it—hence the unpronounceable name. When it appeared in the text the word ‘Lord’ was used instead—though everyone knew who was being referred to. “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.”

Here the Psalmist is rejoicing that God has addressed humanity not just with voices of creation—a word that we humans often ignore or downplay—but with a specific word that has been inscripturated. It is a word that is knowable and understandable. The gospel announces that the entire written word bears witness to the living Word of God come among us in Jesus of Nazareth. Recall that Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.” Anyone who taught others to break the least of the commands, said our Lord, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

Note with me the joy the Psalmist finds is God’s particular address in the Law given through Moses. The Psalmist finds that it revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes, endures forever, and is altogether righteous. There is no downside. Yes, “by them is your servant warned;” the fences God puts up on human self-extension are for our good. And at the same time, ‘in keeping them is great reward.’ The Psalmist has found them more desirable than gold, sweeter than honey.

Keep in mind that the Law was given to Israel to guide them in how-to walk-in company with the God who rescued them from slavery in Egypt and claimed them as his own. The Law showed them how-to live-in response to God’s gracious act to rescue them from slavery. The Psalmist is talking about what he finds to be the case in walking in company with God. “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.”

Recall that, biblically speaking, ‘soul’ is what you are as a human being not something you possess. ‘Soul’ in the Bible is not some inner eternal essence as the Greeks thought. In the second creation account in Genesis we are told “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7) The word translated “living being” is the Hebrew word ‘nephesh’ that is often translated ‘soul’ as it is in this Psalm.

The word “revive” as in “reviving the soul” can also mean restore. The Psalmist finds that in walking in company with God this spoken word—the Law—guides him in God’s work of restoring the soul, of reviving his humanity. We might understand this to mean that in company with God your true humanity emerges, you become who you truly are.

We find similar salvation themes in the New Testament. In Christ you are a new creature. Once dead in trespasses and sins we are now made alive in Jesus Christ. Work out this salvation in fear and trembling—live into the new life in him. This is akin to what the Psalmist is talking about—the life he finds in walking with God.

We read today where the Apostle Paul said of his own life as a devout Jew, “as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” He went on to say that he regarded this as loss because of Christ. It is important to note that Paul is not denigrating the Law or the life enjoined in its precepts—he is saying that you can’t achieve your own righteousness before God even by scrupulous law-keeping. Paul knows that Jesus is the one human who kept or ‘fulfilled’ the law in its entirety.

The gospel asserts that Jesus is the Word of God come in the flesh. He is that one Word with whom we have to hear and obey. All the written words of scripture point to this one word, so Paul will say, “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” So too the Psalmist knows that it isn’t the words on the page that revives the soul, but the One whose word it is who revives or restores the human.

3. “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” In the third section of the Psalm the believer speaks in response to God’s address. Biblically speaking the thing that distinguishes the human from the rest of God’s creatures is that the human is the recipient of God’s address and is rendered capable of responding.

Notice that the Psalmist’s response to God’s address is to treat the spoken word, both those that come from our lips and those spoken in rumination of our hearts, with care. “Let them be acceptable to you, O Lord,” prays the Psalmist. This typifies our Hebrew fore parents who had a profound regard for the spoken word reflected in the fact that the Hebrew language does not have an extended vocabulary—words are to be used judiciously given their power. We all know how crushing a critical word spoken in haste or a destructive word spoken in anger can tear us down. We find this particularly so in times of vulnerability because we carry some other heavy burdens in life. The Psalmists prayer guides us to be careful with our words; a readiness to bless others and a cautiousness with respect to pointing out errors.

I also invite you to note the personal nature, the intimacy, exemplified in the Psalmist’s response. The Psalmist speaks to the Lord as “my rock and my redeemer.” If you say to someone in your life that they are your rock, is that not indicative of a relationship of profound trust and intimacy? The word ‘redeemer’ the Psalmist uses here is the word used of a person who bailed you out of financial trouble—bought you back from indenture to creditors. Jesus is said to be our redeemer having saved us from an impossible situation we could never extricate ourselves from.

Psalm 19 is part of a group of psalms that are mostly private prayers, rather than public prayers for assemblies or prayers reflecting on God's care of Israel throughout history. We find repeatedly in these psalms this expression of intimacy, like here where the Psalmist says “my rock and my redeemer. Prayer here in this Psalm is a personal and private matter, an intimate love affair, in which we open ourselves to God's love and God nourishes our relationship to him, drawing us close to himself and revealing himself to us in the silence of our inmost being.

The gospel claim is that God has and is addressing each of us humans personally. Faith—entering into the relationship with the One calling to us—begins by trusting as much of ourselves as we know of ourselves to as much of God as we know of him. A good place to begin is to join the Psalmist in prayer, “O Lord, be my rock and my redeemer.” Amen.