

“AN AWESOME GOD!”

Psalm 19 September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018

*Photos on the flat screen of the beauty of God’s creation....*

In his first memory of the psalm assigned for this Sunday, Pastor James Limburg recounts this experience. He writes: It was a beautiful September day in Iowa and a group of students had gathered on one of the hills near the college. The event was the regular Sunday evening meeting of the Lutheran Student Association (LSA). The LSA met outside during the fall, taking advantage of the beauty [of the campus] until the weather turned cold. I attended the sessions regularly, partly because the dining hall was closed on Sunday evening and food was available for 50 cents a plate, and also because I knew that a particular freshman woman was a faithful LSA participant.

The speaker for the evening was the college president. I remember him talking about the two books he held in his hand. He read from Psalm 19, “the heavens are telling the glory of God.” The other book, he said, was the book of nature. He paused and pointed at the red, green, and yellow trees surrounding us and at the Oneota River moving through the valley below. Those were the two books: the book of Scripture which used words to tell about God and creation and the book of nature which through its own beauty praised God. Such is my first memory of the psalm assigned for this Sunday.

Psalm 19 falls into three parts. The words of part one (vv. 1-6) recall the story of creation in Genesis 1, declaring that the heavens and the “firmament” (NRSV footnote says “dome”) tell about the glory of God (Genesis 1:6-8). The biblical worldview at that time imagined the earth as flat, covered by a huge, plexi-glas-like dome called the “firmament.” Beneath the flat earth was water, as was obvious every time one dug a well. Above the dome was more water, which accounted for the blue of the skies. Openings in the dome allowed the rain to pour through. When the great flood came “all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened” (Genesis 7:11).

Notice that the heavens and the earth are identified as the “handiwork” of God (NRSV). The Hebrew word for God in Psalm 12:1 is *El* which like “God” in English, is a generic word for a heavenly being, not the special word for the God of the Hebrews (Yahweh or LORD, as in vv. 7-9 and 14). Note also that the heavens and the “dome” are not to be identified as “gods.” Here is neither poly-

theism, naming the heavenly bodies as gods, not pantheism, viewing all that exists as “god” or a part of god. Rather, the God of this psalm is the Creator, distinct from creation, and the earth and the heavens—the universe—are “the work of his hands” (NIV).

Psalm 19:4b-6 refer to the sun. Again, the sun is not a heavenly being, a “god” to be worshipped. No, God has created the sun and put it in its place. In the poet’s imagination the sun emerges each day with the freshness and happiness of a bridegroom on the first day of married life. Joyfully it runs its course, from one edge of the dome to the other, like a perpetually jubilant jogger.

With verse 7, the psalm moves out of metaphor and evolves into a more practical key. The focus is no longer on the world and the heavens (v.4) but on words. The spotlight is no longer on God’s handiwork in space, but on created humans and speech. For the first time the name “Yahweh” (NRSV, LORD) is used for God. The section begins, “The **instruction** (Hebrew, *torah*) of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.” The psalm then fires off a series of six statements referring to God’s instruction as found in Scripture. Here are several words used to designate Scripture or Torah: decrees, precepts, commandment, ordinances. These words will revive life and provide wisdom (v.7) and supply joy and enlightenment (v.8). The biblical expression “fear of the Lord” (v.9) refers to respect and trust in the Lord; the expression occurs frequently in Proverbs (1:7, 1:29, etc.).

In Psalm 19, verses 7-14, the psalmist tells us several things about the word of God. “The Law of the Lord is **perfect**, restoring the soul.” It is perfect which means it is without blemish, and is complete, lacking nothing. Perfection here speaks to wholeness. It has lost nothing and its perfection is the basis within which all of the other characteristics of God’s word is found.

Within God’s word, we find everything we need to know about how God is and who we are. It tells us about the devastating effects of our sins and the perfect sacrifice of our Savior. It tells us all we need to know about eternity and about how we can come to be in fellowship with God. It is complete. We don’t need other testimonies or witnesses as to its truth because it is perfect in and of itself. God’s word is perfect, restoring the soul.

This word “restore,” in the Hebrew can mean to revive, but it can also mean to return, as in repent. In fact, one of the more common uses of this verb is to describe human repentance and obedience to God and His word. In fact, the NKJV says, “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul.”

As God's word is perfect, its effect on the soul who reads it and applies it is that it calls us back into right relationship with God. It restores or returns us to God. It is God's means by which He draws us back into right relationship with Himself. This is a constant necessity in our spiritual life, to be drawn back into fellowship with God when we allow actions or attitudes to draw us away. This is one of the functions of God's word.

Secondly, "The testimony of the Lord is **sure**, making wise the simple." The NIV says that the testimony of the Lord is Trustworthy." We can rely upon it. When all around us there are conflicting messages as to what truth is, God's word does not change. It is sure. It is trustworthy.

The word "Simple," in the Hebrew is more aligned with naïve that it is to our English word "simpleton." It does not speak of one who is incapable to understanding knowledge, nor does it speak to one who is unwilling to receive knowledge, but simply of one who is lacking in knowledge.

The idea here is that for those who are truly looking for answers, who are coming to scripture with an open mind, God will reveal Himself in such a way through His word that it will make them wise. And of course, as Psalm 111:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The word of God is a sure and true witness. It will implant within the open minded reader a knowledge of God's majesty and power and love for us. Then we will grow in our understanding of who He is and how He works. This too is part of our spiritual development. God's word makes us wise, without it we will stumble around in the foolishness of our own thoughts and desires. Next he says that...

"The precepts of the Lord are **right**, rejoicing the heart." A precept is a directive which, if followed, will lead one to the goal of faithful living. It carries with it the idea of orders or directions, like a marked line on a road map, which if followed allow you to go where your God wants you to go.

God's directions, His precepts are always right. They never mislead, they never take you down a dead end, and they are never out of date. They are always right. It is impossible to grow increasingly conformed to the image of Christ without His direction. As the old hymn says:

"He leadeth me, O blessed thought, O words of heavenly comfort fraught. What e'r I do, where e'r I be, still tis God's hand that leadeth me."

These words of Scripture rejoice the heart, or bring joy to the heart, not only because they save you from the heartbreak which invariably comes when we stray from God's word, but because they keep you on the paths of righteousness. God's precepts keep you in right relationship with God.

God's word may seem restrictive, but God never intended to harm us but rather to help us. He did not give us His word to be a burden to us but rather to be a blessing to us. You stop and think about it. If everyone in this world lived in accordance with the precepts of God's world this world would be a wonderful place. There would be no violence, no greed, no war, no murder, no hate, no selfishness and no rebellion. It is precisely because people have chosen to disregard God's word that the world is in such a mess. God's word gives us guidance and leads us into joy.

Not only does this Psalm give us a description of the word of God, it speaks to us about a desire for the word of God. Look at what David says in verse 10: "They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb." Notice that he talks about the desirability or value of God's word, within the context of both wealth and that which is sweet to the taste.

David says that God's word is sweeter than honey or the drippings from the honeycomb. Why? It all has to do with the person who reads it and the Person who wrote it.

The Bible is God's word and if we are in love with God, then His word is precious to us, like gold, and it is sweet to us, like honey. Dr. Calvin Wittman, the pastor of Applewood Baptist Church in Wheat Ridge, Colorado, recounts this story as he reflects on the preciousness and sweetness of the word. He writes: This truth came home to me this week when I went to the mailbox and received a letter from our son Joel, who is still in boot camp. Given his schedule he gets to write about one letter a week and if we get a letter from him it usually comes on Thursday.

This last Thursday I went to the mail box and there was no letter there. But remembering that Monday of last week had been a holiday I thought, perhaps it will come on Friday. Friday morning Diane and I got up and after leaving the house the first place we went was the post office. And there, in our little mail box was a letter from Joel. Now, he is my son. I love him more than my own life. I can promise you that as I read his words, about how God was working in his life,

about how his prayers were being answered and about which one of his friends he wanted us to pray for, those words...that letter, was more precious to me than gold and it was sweeter than anything you could imagine. Why? Well, it all had to do with who wrote it and who received it. It had to do with the relationship between the two. That's how we, as God's children, should love his word.

Saying all of this about reading God's word, let me offer five simple ways you can gain the wisdom and the guidance of the scriptures. Five practical steps to Bible intake are: **Read** it, **reflect** upon it, **remember** it, **recount** it and **respond** to it. Simply put, do it. Don't just be a hearer of the word, be a doer.

In closing I would like to share "Psalm 19: Song of the Stars" written by Silvia Purdie.

The universe shouts your Word!  
What language do stars speak?  
Words of vast emptiness and infinite distance,  
words of brilliant light and constant explosion,  
whirling words, ancient words, alien words.

Around one Word we spin-  
The Sun, light of our world,  
cruising in glory across the sky;  
colours all things, warms all things.

Around God's Word we gather—  
the Son, light of the world.  
his way finds the lost  
his truth opens blind eyes  
his life conquers death  
his bread feeds our hunger

his Spirit fills hearts with joy  
his desire burns away greed  
his touch is sweeter than honey.

May our lives shout your Word  
in all we say, in all we do  
out in the open or hidden in the dark.

May our lives sing your Word  
in the secrets of our soul,  
in trouble, in shame, in confidence.  
Shine brightly, Lord,  
and hold us in your orbit.  
Amen.