

Life-giving law: Psalm 19

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Sunday's Coming Premium

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Lent carries in its bosom a seductive danger: excessive inwardness. The seduction is this: a season of prayer, repentance and preparation for Good Friday and Easter necessarily involves trips to the heart, but tarry there too long and repentance can stall out as melancholy. The danger is this: self-examination may spawn attempts at self-improvement, with the result that looking at self replaces looking to God, and small measures of merit replace the immeasurable grace of God. One can hardly imagine a more effective shield against this danger than Psalm 19.

Notice the size of this text: it moves from the revelation of God in heavens, sky and sun (vv. 1-6) to the revelation of God in sacred scripture (vv. 7-10) to the mysterious working of God's word in the mind and heart of the believer (vv. 11-14). Notice the mood of this text: the writer is not self-absorbed but is fully engaged in the praise of God, pausing briefly to express the hope that the worship will be accepted. Notice the community involvement: the antiphonal form of most of this psalm makes it clear that a choir and congregation, or at least two groups in a worship assembly, are participating, rather than an individual in private. Note the energy: unlike a pensive reflection, Psalm 19 pulsates with verbs of activity: telling, proclaiming, pouring forth, declaring, going out, running, rising, reviving, making wise, rejoicing, enlightening, enduring. This is not to say that this text breaks or violates the basic orientation of Lent. On the contrary, nothing could be more appropriate than this vigorous contemplation of God.

The psalmist begins by walking outside and reading the face of creation as though it were an open book. Creation awes the observer with its revelation of God. As Paul

would say, “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom. 1:20). Or Luke: “He has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy” (Acts 14:16-17).

Whose heart has not joined the psalmist and Paul and Luke in this chorus of praise to the Creator? Who has not in spring, when the world is a poem of light and color, delighted in the meadows turning somersaults of joy and “butterflies fluttering up from every little buttercup”? Or in dry hot summer, when clouds dark and heavy gather on the hill, soon thundering like a herd of buffalo across the valley, making glad the gardens and sending out the children to splash in the puddles? Or in the autumn with leaves aflame, poised between summer and winter, warm enough but yet prophetic of snow? Or in the winter when trees now shivering naked beg heaven for a blanket and down it comes thick and white, turning even a garbage can into an altar in praise of God? There is no square inch of earth so barren that the observing eye cannot see, in the lower right-hand corner, the signature of the artist. And overhead the stars sing and faith hears faintly the rustle of a wing.

But it is not enough. The great book of nature praises the Creator without words, but its pages have no answers for some fundamental human questions. Whence do we come? Whither do we go? Why are we here? Before these questions the stars can only flicker and the mockingbird forgets its song. We need another book.

The psalmist knows this, and turns his attention to another book, the Law of the Lord (vv. 7-10). It is important to remember that “law” is a Greek translation of Torah, a translation which implies “legal code,” the basis for Paul’s development of his law vs. grace arguments in Galatians and Romans. However, law is but one element of Torah. Torah is the first five books of the scriptures, and includes history, biography, story and poetry as well as law. The Jewish worshiper delights in Torah and reflects on it continually.

The psalmist uses six nouns to try and capture this many-splendored thing: law, decrees, precepts, commandment, fear (reverence) and ordinances. No single verb conveys its activity, so he uses five: reviving, making wise, rejoicing, enlightening, enduring. And seven adjectives: perfect, sure, right, clear, pure, true, righteous. Unlike nature, this book recalls the shadowy beginning of God’s people: slavery, deliverance, wandering, revelation of God’s will for the faithful community, and

bright promise in the land. In this book is nourishment enough and to spare. In this book is the offer of identity, security, discipline and direction. Finer than gold, sweeter than honey is Torah.

Then comes the inescapable thought: the benefits of Torah belong not to the one who reads, and not even to the one who reads and admires, but to the one who follows it. The eye which scanned the heavens and read the book now turns nervously inward (vv. 11-4). Critical self-examination brings two painful revelations: faults that are proud, even arrogant, strutting openly and defiant, in full view of all; and faults buried so deep in the heart that even the transgressor is unaware of them. But God knows. As nothing is hidden from the sun, so nothing is hidden from God.

The worshiper's journey is complete: from the broad reaches of God's creation through the guiding lines of scripture to the disturbing inner recesses of the heart, there remains only the prayer. May the God praised with and without speech find acceptable the words and thoughts of the worshiper. Only then can one join creation and scripture in the endless adoration of God.