

Message: "Theological Poetry"

Scripture: Psalm 19

¹The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

²Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

³There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

⁴yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

⁵which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

⁷The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;

⁸the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;

⁹the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

¹²But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

¹³Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Yesterday, I stepped out from my home early in the morning and was shocked to hear the sound of a machine gun firing nearby. I had five seconds of panic, which quickly dispersed when I realized it was not a machine gun, but a woodpecker hammering away on our neighbor's chimney vent four doors down the street. Once I understood the reality of it all, I found my shock turn to wonder at the ways of nature and its peculiar experiences that happen all too frequently - and are noticed by those willing to pay a deeper attention.

That phrase struck me as resonant with the method and purpose of our scriptural text from Psalm 19 - but mostly with the overall nature of the various ways we humans try to heighten our comprehension of the world around us. The Psalms are most often thought of as songs sung liturgically during worship; I like what I read about the Psalms recently that said psalms are poems meant to be put to music as a part of worshipping God. The psalms as poetry has always been my understanding of what they were, for long ago we lost the melodies and tunes meant to accompany their reading - and if you read the Psalms as literature, their sense of rhythm and flow, their repetition and sense of meter, their use of metaphor and

simile and grammatical conventions all speak to the manner of the poet. But much more to the point is the purpose of the poetry we find in the Psalms - they invite the listener to pay a deeper attention to reality in which God is ever present.

Take Psalm 19 for instance; it is one of the more popular Psalms in that it proclaims with eloquence and grandeur the omnipresence of God accessible in myriad ways; "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." Beautiful words acknowledging the profound accessibility of the divine, encouraging us to not only be aware of God in the world but to sense God in all things.....poetry does this to our language - combining common terms in uncommon ways to reach a higher plane of understanding and relatability. And many of the psalms are treasured for this reason.

I did something I don't usually do with scripture - in meditating upon the text, I took it upon myself to re-write it in my own words. With the acknowledgement that I am not a poet (as will be obvious when I read what I wrote), I discovered in the process how much these 14 verses covered in terms of our theological understanding of God's nature and the human condition. I went line by line and wound up with a theology behind the poetry I had not seen before. Here's what I wrote, paralleling the psalm:

The Sacredness of the natural world is proclaimed in all things at all times in all ways; yet humans do not hear nor understand; God has created an order of harmony and balance within which all is accounted for and blessed by grace. Those who understand this live into God, and God helps them to further their understanding; this is the pathway to peace and joy in this life. The wisdom of God rises far above anything human devised; it is accessible to those who respect God as the one who sets the bar of virtue and principled living. God sees what we cannot, even in ourselves, the depths of our memory and awareness limited as they are; and God helps us to see the faults we cannot or would not see in ourselves. The protection of God is not from harm but from isolation; God's discernment comes with God's presence; through grace and prayer our attention is sharpened to recognize falsehood and deviousness that would consume us. As we invite God to shape our voice and thoughts, we move closer to righteousness, a gift only offered to those who love God first, and seek in all ways to do God's bidding.

How'd you like that? I know, I know - don't give up your day job, John! The point is, however, how much lay below the surface that can be brought into our awareness as we add creativity to theology, as poetry strives to do. And the psalms are a wonderful example of how thinking can be joined to feeling to create something greater than them both.

I wrote another version of Psalm 19 that I'd like to share with you - and have no fear; this one is very short, perhaps a child's version of the psalm. Think of the text that was read a moment ago, and now listen to this version, and see if it doesn't say the same thing in a different way:

A Simple Version

God is God, we are not.

God provides what we haven't got.

That's it! The psalm carries the distinction between what is sacred and what is profane, but hints at the relationship designed by God to provide beyond our limitations.....and I could go on and on, but I would miss the point of the beauty of simplicity that goes beyond words.

Which leads me to what I want to share with you this morning - the richness of other poets who speak the message of Psalm 19 but using different words and imagery. I chose these poems because of their theological veracity, their ontological significance, their intellectual proximity to profoundness.....no, I didn't choose any of the following poems because of any of those reasons. I chose them because they spoke to me; and I share them with you in the hopes that they speak to you as well, that they speak to you of things that go beyond words, as the psalmist intended.

THE OPENING OF EYES by David Whyte (Anglo-Irish poet)

That day I saw beneath dark clouds
the passing of light over the water
and I heard the voice of the world speak out.
I knew then as I had before
life is no passing memory of what has been,
nor the remaining pages in a great book waiting

to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.

It is the vision of far off things
seen for the silence they hold.

It is the heart after years
of secret conversing
speaking out loud in the clear air.

It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.

It is the man throwing away his shoes
as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.

God's Grandeur by Gerard Manley Hopkins (an English poet and [Jesuit](#) priest)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Source: Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose (Penguin Classics, 1985)

Sweet Mountains- Ye tell me no lie- by Emily Dickinson

Sweet Mountains- Ye tell me no lie-

Never deny Me- Never fly-

Those same unvarying Eyes

Turn on Me-when I fail-or feign,
Or take the Royal names in vain-
Their far-slow-Violet Gaze-

My Strong Madonnas-Cherish still-
The Wayward Nun-beneath the hill-
Whose service-is to You-
Her latest Worship-When the Day
Fades from the Firmament away-
To lift her Brows on You-

Out Of The Corner Of My Eye by Brian Zahnd (pastor of Word of Life Church
in Missouri)

I think I caught a glimpse of truth out of the corner of my eye
A ghost, a whisper, a suspicion, a subtle and subversive rumor
So dangerous that every army would be commanded to march against it
So beautiful that it would drive those who see it to madness
Or sanity

...

I think I caught a glimpse of truth out of the corner of my eye
Have we been so blinded by the bright lights of advertisers lies
That the only true vision is peripheral vision?
In the age of constant commercialization and overblown hype
Does truth shout with a whisper and stand out with subtlety?
I think I caught a glimpse of truth out of the corner of my eye
It terrified me as I fell in love with it
I said,
This explains everything
This changes everything
This challenges everything
This threatens everything
This transforms everything
Dare I speak it?
The truth I caught out of the corner of my eye?

Michael Leach is the former publisher of Orbis Books. He says that "poetry is the best theology. Poetry evokes what is good, beautiful and true. It imagines the unimaginable, describes the indefinable, and unveils what our senses cannot know or our intellect figure out. Poetry is theology leaping out of the file cabinet and into the heart. It is the Word or words that stir our souls." - Michael Leach