

Text: Psalm 19
Title: Singing with the Symphony
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Roger Allen Nelson

I went hiking with two juvenile delinquents.

One was kind of a weasel; the other was good-hearted but made bad choices. Both trafficked in mischief and mayhem, but I enjoyed their company and there was something hopeful and redeemable in both – even the sneaky one.

There are 46 mountains in the Adirondacks that measure over 4000 feet. Climbing all 46 is an upstate New York tradition. We were going to conquer one. In the morning we hiked over hill and dale through birch and pine, my friends chattering and scurrying around like chipmunks – joking, sneaking cigarettes, and trying to bait me with dirty jokes. In the early afternoon the pitch got steeper as we scrambled over big boulders and one substantial escarpment.

Once we were out of the woods the pace quickened – as if some urgency was pulling us to the top. Above the tree line the wind had some bite, the sky was a furious blue and gray, and at the summit, for as far as we could see, there was nothing but mountaintop horizon. Everything felt wild and free and

unplugged,
unclogged,
unfiltered,
disconnected,
off line...

Then we did what seems to happen every time I've climbed a mountain.

Without being told to do so we drifted apart to our own spaces. We stood or sat on rocks. We didn't talk. Without prompting, for fifteen minutes we listened to the symphony of creation. For a few moments this little company of ne'er-do-wells, some four thousand feet up, soaked in the overwhelming goodness of creation – and maybe the overwhelming glory of God.

Dear friends, the psalmist's deep trust is that creation bears witness to God. The skies will sing, the mountains will rumble deep unto deep, the rivers will bubble and blabber along in joyful harmony, and all creation will join in a language that doesn't need translation. John Calvin, in the preface to a French translation of the New Testament, puts it this way:

...the little birds that sing, sing of God; the beasts clamor for him; the elements dread him, the mountains echo him, the fountains and flowing waters cast their glances at him, and the grass and flowers laugh before him. Truly there is no need for long searching...

And in that, Calvin and the psalmist are onto something. There is no need for “long searching” for all around us creation sings unto God. Creation is not a commodity to be consumed but it is a symphony that sings of the glory of God.

Maybe you’ve heard creation singing the mighty power of God. Maybe this year of pandemic has meant more time hiking with your children or sitting in silence. And, maybe you’ve heard that voice with no speech, with no words, with no sound. Thanks be to God....

Ah! But, it’s the second part of Psalm 19 where things get dicey. For, the psalmist abruptly shifts from singing about creation to waxing poetic about the Torah – the law, or instruction, of God.

Now. All good deists and delinquents love the first part of Psalm 19: God is an amorphous-anonymous-transcendent-deity who creates for all a beautiful, complex, and verdant world. And yet, while creation may belt out glory like a Broadway tune, the Creator doesn’t have a face. God’s works are on display in the heavens, but his name is as elusive as trying to count the stars in the night sky. God reveals himself in creation, but in a general generic way.

Early on in “The Institutes of the Christian Religion” John Calvin writes:

...it appears that if men were taught only by nature, they would hold nothing certain or solid or clear cut, but would be so tied to confused principles as to worship an unknown god...

It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path.

Gulp! Calvin suggests that the glory of God in nature is not enough. I am not sure that the psalmist is trying to make the same point, but the psalm does take a dramatic turn after verse six.

Psalm 19 offers two frames for the glory of God: Creation and Torah.

In the same way in which creation declares the glory of God, so too does the Torah. In the same way in which creation bears witness to God, so too does the Law. In the same way that creation can open up in your soul a sense of awe or fear, so too would the Torah.

The dicey part (for a deist) is that this second frame is specific.

The Torah is a God with a name.

The Torah is God with a people and a story.

The Torah is God with a will for humanity.

The Torah is God with a religious tradition.

The Torah is God as specific.

Maybe the point of the psalm is that you need both.

As the sun illumines the Torah, so the Torah illumines the sun.

As creation reflects the face of God, so the Torah reflects the face of God.

There is one song; there are two singers.

There is one God; there are two frames.

You need both.

And again, Calvin is helpful here. He writes that we're like "old or blurry-eyed men" with "weak vision," who can barely read "two words" without glasses. Therefore, we need the "spectacles" of scripture to clear up the confusion and show us God. We need both. In order to make out the glory of God we need creation and scripture. Neither is wholly sufficient....

Pity the one who thinks he will find God with only creation.

Pity the one who thinks he will find God with only the Bible.

Allow me a little aside here...

I think this premise is important. It strikes me that we don't come to know God without nature, reason, experience, history and all manner of things that make us human. The Torah doesn't drop from the sky devoid of finger prints, cultural conditions/limitations, and historical realities.

And therefore, we need all of those tools in order to understand and interpret scripture. We need the gifts of creation in order to know the gifts of scripture. Neither is sufficient unto itself.

And therefore, biblical interpretation is always in flux as we learn more from creation and as we learn more from scripture. That whole process is living, breathing – God breathed. It's not fixed or static. The church has always changed and moved in response to creation, scripture, and Spirit. May the same be true of us: through scripture and creation may we listen to how God calls us to love and serve God and neighbor.

This would seem like a good place for a story, but back to our psalm....

Because, for the psalmist that clarity of vision culminates in an expression of confession and longing. And with that turn, Psalm 19 travels from the highest heights of heaven to a hidden corner of the human heart.

Forgive my hidden faults...

Keep me from willful sin...

May these words and this mediation be pleasing in your sight....

So, dear friends, what song shall we sing?

After a long-cold-Covid-winter, with hints and hopes of spring breaking through, what song shall we sing? When the very dust of which we're made is both the host of life and the receptacle for cancer, virus, and ultimately death, what song shall we sing?

Let me offer two refrains....

One: There is an intrinsic ordering to creation and Torah.

I've listened to Hope's biologists, cancer researchers, doctors, and gardeners sing of the glory of God in creation's ordering. Listen to the infectious joy of Dr. Clay Carlson lecturing about genome sequencing and it's hard not to sing. And, I've listened to Hope's theologians, Bible study leaders, and prayer group servants sing of the glory of a life ordered by scripture. Listen to the delightful lilt in Dr. Yudha Thianto's voice as he talks about the translation of the Psalms into Indonesian and it's hard not to sing.

Scott Hoezee puts it this way:

There is majesty to be perceived in how God laid out the architecture of the cosmos and also in how God laid out the structure of God's Law. The universe coheres. There is a logic to it all. There is purpose in it all as well—neither the physical world nor the spiritual realm are simply a random, booming, buzzing confusion. It's a symphony not a cacophony. It all forms a cosmos and not a chaos.

Thanks be to God.

But that suggest a second refrain....

There is also the reality that we experience creation and scripture as chaos and not as an ordered symphony. There is little coherent logic in the death of a child, or churches that continue to split and fracture because they're fighting over some interpretation of scripture. For whatever the reason, our experience is not always of sweet honeycomb or precious gold, but we know a world that can be cruel, random, booming, buzzing confusion.

So, what song shall we sing?

Let us be those who join the symphony of creation declaring the glory of God. Let us sing with those courageous first buds of spring. Let us tend after creation as if our children's lives depend on us. And let us take our children with us into both the expanse of the wild and the mysteries of mitochondria – trusting that there they will encounter some hint of God. But let us also be those who join in the holy racket of scripture that sings of a creating and redeeming God. Let us put on the spectacles of scripture that we might see rightly. Let listen and learn with humility and with the expectation that God is still speaking through scripture, Spirit, and creation. Amen?

Amen.