

A Sermon for DaySpring
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Incarnational Vision
Psalm 19
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The heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims God's handiwork.

These are the first words of Psalm 19, a prayer that in its first half praises God through creation simply by looking up to see the sky, called the heavens in the psalm: its white clouds full of water, its blue expanse, the sun coursing through each day from horizon to horizon and the moon by night, the stars which decorate the black expanse of a truly dark night. All of this, in the eyes of the psalmist, proclaims the handiwork of the Creator. Does it to us?

To the one who has spiritual eyes and ears, all of this speaks with words that are beyond words we can hear or what we can see. Frederic Buechner said of this psalm, "Glory is what God looks like when for the time being all you have to look at him with is a pair of eyes." There are no words we can hear but they speak nonetheless, bearing witness to the creator of heaven and earth and to us. The words the sky speaks aren't just a whisper, but day to day *pours forth* speech; night to night *reveals* this knowledge. There are no words, but everyone can hear the voice of creation, it goes through the whole earth and to the ends of the world.

We have here before us the prayer of a person who looks at the sky by day and night and is moved to praise God. How do you become a person like that—a person who can look at the sky or the night or the earth around and see God's work and God's goodness and be genuinely moved to praise? I think I'd like to be a person like that. Whether or not I write a psalm, poem, song, book, a prayer-- I'd like to be a person who looks up at the sky and instinctively sees the glory of God on display and who looks around the things of earth and is brought to praise. A person who has ears to hear the glory of God in the song of creation.

The psalmist of 19 wasn't the only one, of course. The prayer of Psalm 145 says, "On the glorious splendor of your majesty and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness. They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness and shall sing of your righteousness." Creation and our response in meditation. God's Glory and our response of praise. God's gift, and our response of worship.

Psalm 148, goes further, calling on the celestial creatures themselves to give praise, "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars; praise him you highest heavens. Let them praise the name of the Lord. For he commanded and they were created."

The psalms are the place in the Bible where the praise of God is collected in poetry. The psalmists are not the only ones, of course.

St. Francis' psalm-prayer, known as the Cantic of the Creatures echoes Psalm 148: "Praise be you, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially Brother Sun, who is the day and through whom you give us light. Praise be to you, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful."

And then there's poet Hopkins, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."

So many human voices have sung the praise of God inspired through creation, which means that so many human ears have had ears to hear creation's own praise. So many human eyes have seen the glory of God in the world around them.

How, on earth, do you become that kind of person, where those kinds of prayers are within you?

Sometimes I think it's easy, the words of praise are right there. Wow! Praise God! Some places, on earth just do that in a person: the rim of the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, a total solar eclipse. That will do its work in you. Those days and those experiences, it comes instinctively to cry out: "How great is our God!" From what I've seen you don't have to leave the state of Texas to find such places. I'd say you don't have to go far, but Texas is a big place.

I met a woman this summer a long way from here who said, "Oh I've been to Waco." "I was in Austin for a meeting and a group of us decided to take a day trip to Waco to go to the... what's it called? The TV show thing." I told her. She paused and admitted, a little sheepishly, "It wasn't really for me. They loved it, but I thought: there has to be more to Waco than this." There is, I insisted. You just have to get off the highway a little further⁸. There are rivers to paddle, and trails to walk. There are trees to climb, and cliffs to admire. There's a lake to explore. There are gardens to enjoy. People to meet. It may not seem like much to someone who lives in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, but to people from some other parts of Texas, or for folks for whom a visit to Cameron Park is like to another world from their neighborhood, it's pretty nice. There's a view in the park called Lover's Leap. The park PR materials promise the view from there to be 'simply stunning'. I don't know about that, but it's nice. Maybe the sign should say, "The view from Lover's Leap is pretty nice." Maybe it is stunning if you don't normally have those kinds of views in front of you. She acknowledged that she didn't see any of that in her experience of Waco, but she said excitedly, "There was a highlight of our trip. On our way to Waco, we stopped at Buccees. It was amazing. I've never seen anything like it!" I'm surprised she didn't say it was "simply stunning."

In my view Texas offers plenty of places to see God's handiwork and, if you're so inclined, to be moved to praise. Top 5 places in Texas that bear witness to glory of God:

5. Standing on the South Rim Trail of the Chisos Mountains in Big Bend.
4. Cresting a hill and bend in the road in the hill country at the peak of wildflower season
3. Standing on the cliff's edge of the blue hole of the Frio River at Laity Lodge deciding whether to jump into the cold water way down there.
2. Early morning, seeing the sun rise over the Gulf from Padre
1. The ferns of Gorman falls at Colorado Bend,
...hopping the roundy rocks at Pedernales...desert beauty in the Guadalupe Mountains... celebrating sunset over Lake Travis...

I know that's more than five, but it's Texas—it's bigger. It's life lived where you are under sun and sky, clouds and rain, stars and moon. All these are wonderful experiences and if you have the opportunity to go, they become part of your personal field guide to the wonders of creation. For each of them and for so much more, thanks be to God.

Yet for all of this and for so much more, it's not the answer to the question: how do you become a person like the psalmist? The psalmist is not a tourist, not an adventurer or an explorer. There's nothing in the psalm that suggests that it responds to a particular experience of transcendence. There's nothing about going somewhere else to a special place. There's no telling of, "There was this one day when I was in such and such a place, you should've been there..." Rather, the heavens are *telling*. The heavens are telling, they continue to tell, over and over again, that which is above you, above me, tells over and over again, though they speak with no words. Yet if you have ears to hear in the ordinary days, and see with spiritual eyes what's right in front of you that's the path to becoming such a person as the psalmist.

And that is not so easy.

It might be natural to human spirituality to see in the world around us evidence of, and the glory of a higher power, to put it blandly, but it's still hard for us. The litany of personal, daily obstacles could go on and on: too busy to notice, too distracted to care, other things on my mind the burdens and hurts and harms of life, the cares for the sufferings of my own and my neighbor... Creation, as it were, becomes the unseen backdrop to the daily dramas of life. Moreover, on a simple level, we don't spend as much time outside as our ancestors: We're more inside people now. Except for play or work if you have to do it, outside is for getting from one inside space to another inside space. We're insulated and air-conditioned from being outside with the sun, moon, stars, and soil. We've gone out from gardens into G-mail, out from shared meals into fast food, out of the sweet burden of the sweat of our brow into the heavy weight of consumer debt for things we don't need, out of participation of the practice of composting into new landfills for all the stuff that we buy and then toss. It's no wonder our theology became an inside theology, too.

Over time, we became a people who don't see the world around us with the same enchanted poetic impulse as our forebearers. They, at least some of them like the psalmist and like Jesus, looked upon the sun, moon, and stars and saw the hand of a good and loving God, not to mention the mountains, rivers, oceans, trees and flowers, the strength and agility of animals, life and even death. All of this runs through scripture and pre-modern poetry. Creation wasn't contained to a park to go visit on vacation; you were part of it, and it--all of it--took part in God who is good, not always safe, as they say. Just like the world around us. Nowadays, we see nature as a resource to be mined or a problem to be solved or a crisis to be endured. When Jesus said, "Consider the lilies of the field," he didn't mean to study the flowers' biochemical processes. He meant look upon them with eyes that see how these little flowers bear witness to God's care by their mere continued existence. Isn't God good? Today, we may know a lot more about a lot of things, but we've unlearned some things, too. Some things that are right in front of us.

We're a little more jaded than they were, perhaps--more educated about the composition of the sun which occupies a universe of billions of other sun-stars each of which has a birth and a life and a death. We understand that the earth moves around the sun with other planets, and we understand something of how we got here to this human life. There are ways that the modern understanding of the cosmic universe and our existence can lead to a feeling of connectedness with all things and the praise of God, but it seems like people don't think about these things, or if they do, they just argue about it. It saps the fun and wonder and mystery of it all away.

But it is fun, and wonderful, and mysterious, and praise-worthy. And psalm-worthy. And, if we have eyes to see, right in front of us, each of us, every day.

If you have eyes to see, spiritual eyes to see, it's in your own backyard. The park near your house. Looking up through the branches of a big ol' live oak tree in the neighborhood. It's on the plate of food that is set before you and all the lives that made that possible. It's knowing something about the amazing abundance of life in each handful of good soil. It's in the eyes of a child.

We might call this incarnational vision. A vision made possible by the incarnation. What do you see when you see Jesus? He asked this question. Do you see or do you really see? He wanted to know. Do you see just a man, or do you see the incarnation of God? Do you see a man who is crushed by Rome? Or do you see the man of God's own choosing, the Messiah--before whose kingdom has no end and for whom the cross is just prelude to the empty tomb? Seeing, really seeing with incarnational vision, is at the heart of faith. It's what we mean when we say I believe who Jesus is. It's what we mean when we say I believe he is resurrected from the dead. If we see with what Ephesians calls the eyes of the heart--open the eyes of my heart is the prayer there.

With an open-eyed heart, we may just see the sun and moon and stars are pouring forth unendingly God's praise. That bread can be more than bread. That a peasant man, made

enemy of Rome, can be God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of the same essence of the Father and that through him all things were made for us and for our salvation. All things.

How do you become a person who experiences the world this way? It's grace. It's all grace. Grace made possible through the most simple things:

Slow Down.

Be still.

Go outside.

Look up.

Give thanks.

Break bread. Share it with someone you love. Share with someone who is hungry.

Be a giver. Cultivate generosity.

Let your spirit be free to say with the words of another psalm-prayer, "My God, how majestic is your name in all the earth."

Amen.