

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Creation's Gaze and Scripture's Call
Psalm 19
September 12, 2021

CS Lewis said that Ps 19 is the greatest poem in the psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world. The psalm clearly to even a casual reader is easily separated into 3 distinct sections, which lead a lot of people to think this is not the greatest poem in the psalter, but a problem to be solved.

The first section of the psalm, verses 1-6 praise the God of creation, declaring the world around us and above us is always talking about its maker for those who have ears to hear: "the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." The first part of the psalm is flowing, glowing poetry about how creation testifies to God. The structure is loose and free flowing⁸. The name of the deity is God, the Hebrew 'El, which is common in scripture as more or less a generic ancient name for god. Heavens means sky above, clouds, sun, moon, the vast expanse of stars the poet would have seen on dark nights, the experience of sunsets and sunrises, lightning coursing across the stormy sky, the rolling thunder. This testimony of Creation is that all things speak to us of God, even that which we may not expect. In the psalmist's vision, what is above is endless; what is below is trustworthy. These speak to us, not with words or speech, but for those who have ears to hear to the ends of the earth, their speech is heard. What are they saying but, "My God how great thou art."

The second part of the psalm is obviously and notably different. The name of the deity is different here. In English, The LORD, which in Hebrew is Yahweh, the particular name of Israel's God revealed to Moses at the burning bush, the God who freed the slaves from Egypt, the God of the commandments of Sinai, who delivered the people to the promised land, rose up a nation, and made David its first king. The God who sent prophets to speak in His name about justice and injustice, righteousness and unrighteousness. The God who sent Israel into exile and brought them home again. The Father of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, crucified and resurrection. The Giver of the Holy Spirit, and the Maker of the church. This is Yahweh.

The second part of the psalm celebrates the instruction of Yahweh, the law of the Lord is perfect. Every following verse follows the same sentence structure. It is a formal, if imaginative, praise of God's instructions, which make us wise, rejoice the heart, enlighten the eyes, endure forever, are better than gold and sweeter than honey. The instructions of God in scripture are gifts of mercy. When we hold scripture in our hands, and what a miracle that is, we are not to take for granted what a means of grace the scripture really is.

So, we have two main parts of this psalm. A celebration of creation's witness to God El in free-flowing poetry. And a celebration of the scripture's witness to LORD Yahweh in formal poetry. What's going on here? The world around us and scripture in front of us, which is the path to

God? the Colorado rocky mountain high or Lectio Divina? The seashore at sunset or the Epistle to the Romans? The garden in a backyard or the Gospel story of the Garden of Gethsemane?

The two clear differences between the parts of the psalm led scholars, particularly around the middle part of the 20th century to conclude this must be from two different authors from two different eras, pre- and post-exilic, they thought. It must be. The rhythm of the poetry is different. No one who believes in Scripture or who has suffered finds God in nature, and no one who thinks they've met God in nature has found the true Lord of redemption. These must be two different people writing two different psalms that at some point in history were mashed together. That's what they figured.

One notable scholar in 1962, said, "Why these dissimilar psalms were united in one single psalm cannot any longer be established with any degree of certainty." Which is Old Testament scholar-speak for "Inconceivable!" God's Creation and The Word of the Lord, two worlds that can have nothing in common, and certainly beyond our imagination that a person could find God or meaning or their faith in both to write a psalm or to live a life. We've inherited that legacy. It's tearing us apart.

Several years ago, we were hosting Friday School at our house. Friday School is an occasional gathering of undergraduates to talk about faith and things they are learning in college. Often the subject is science. Science and faith. Students in the sciences learn to carefully study the world around them. When they do, sometimes, they learn things that they've been warned by people of faith back home that they should not be learning. At this Friday School we had about 30 undergraduates sitting on chairs and on the floor crammed in our living room and kitchen space. The discussion was on evolutionary cosmology and biblical creation accounts. One student, a young woman, asked a question about how to resolve these two.

Two things happened. First, Dr. Abel, a scientist, said that students should be careful when scientists tell them they know everything and that faith is reduced to a matter of emotions or the heart. They are overplaying their hands, Dr. Abel told them. "We all need to be humble."

Dr. Lisa Baker, the other leader, a medical doctor and professor, leaned forward. Lisa put her face in her hands, elbows on knees, and looked right into the student's eyes, like right into her soul, and said, "It's hard sometimes isn't it. You're feeling the weight of this aren't you?" And just like that this heady discussion about evolutionary cosmology was transformed into a place where souls came out of the shadows.

A tear began to roll down the student's cheek, "Yes, she said. I'm pre-med. And I've been amazed by what I've learned in biology and chemistry about the history of the universe and where we come from and the intricacies of how plants turn sunlight and soil into fruit. And how the human body is knit together. But my pastor at home and my mom say that I'm going to lose my faith here if I study science. I don't want to lose my faith, but I also don't want to lose my mind. What do I do? I'm thinking about dropping out. I don't know what to do."

She was torn apart. In the terms of Old Testament scholarship, she felt like she was being written by two different authors and didn't know if the psalm that was her life could hold together.

The mid 20th century conclusion that this psalm must be torn apart and read as if it was written by two different people makes sense if you consider the backdrop from which this theory came. The theory arose during a time when people committed to the Word of the LORD—scholars, pastors, Christians of all kinds—were turning their backs on creation as a source of God's presence and as a possibility of revelation and grace. I mean, they had the idea that the world was God's creation, but there was no garden dirt under their fingernails; there was less fresh air in their lungs and fewer fresh veggies in their tummies. That changes a person. It changes a society.

That change in culture is written all over the proliferation of mid-century technologies like TVs and cars and highways and sermons. And how we ate and eat. Starting in WWI Americans planted Victory Gardens as a way to grow food in a time of rationing and support the war effort. In the early 1900s, many Americans already had a garden or a small farm and knew how to grow beans and potatoes. About 5 million Victory Gardens were planted. By WWII, that number swelled. During the war, 20 million Americans grew Victory Gardens. Until recently, I'd heard about those but thought they were sort of hobby gardens, more symbolic than functional. But I learned recently that those backyard Victory Gardens produced 40% of America's food. Almost half of our food came from our gardens. What happened to that? What happened to us?

After the War, Americans were done with that. They had known hunger and suffering and many of them had seen awful things. They were now trying to make sense of what it meant to live in an age when humans could do to other humans what humans did in the War and what scientists could perform when they split the atom. They were done with working in the ground, farming, gardening. They were ready to hop in the car, move to the city, and head downtown. They heard that you cannot gain the whole world without losing your soul so they were sure to go to church, but they didn't think too much about what happens in your soul when you turn your back on the earth.

They traded overalls for suits, and boots for high heels. And they traded canning veggies for TV dinners and soup in cans and Jell-O molds and plastic wrap everywhere on everything. Homegrown food was out. Processed food was in. And the industrial convenient food revolution was on, fueled by left over nitrogen from the war now turned to synthetic fertilizers and the need to feed a baby boom. The transformation of the American diet began. Squash and beans and fresh game were out. Corn was in. And the end of the small farm was imminent. And, in the church, Christ and creation were divided as far as the east from the west, soul from body. Christians grew distant from the land and food, so soon anyone who mentioned creation's goodness or praise of God was suspected of *idolatry* or *pantheism* or even worse of being a *sentimental Franciscan*. Not having communion but 4 times a year was in. But celebrating bread

and wine as a mysterious meeting place with the divine that transforms us, as sacrament, was way out.

In the process, we made a world in which 1.5 billion people struggle with obesity while another 1 billion people struggle to find something to eat. And we created a world in which that Baylor premed student was told by her pastor that a Christian couldn't study biology without losing her soul. She was told she faced a fork in the road between two paths: her mind or her soul. But did she really?

Couldn't she have followed the path of a psalmist who could lift his eyes to heaven in one breath, and focus them on scripture in the next? Couldn't she praise God from whom all blessings flow and commit herself to the Word of Lord for all people? Couldn't she pray Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven? Even the psalmist searching for a way to express delight in the Word, compared it to the sweetness of honey from a honeycomb. Now how would he know that? You wouldn't know that unless you'd chewed on scripture and been dangerously close to a hive of bees.

On reading this psalm, CS Lewis imagined that the psalmist "felt 'so close a connection . . . between his first theme and his second that he passed from one to the other without realizing . . . first he thinks of the sky . . . then he thinks of the sun . . . finally of its heat, not of course the mild heats of [Lewis's climate in Oxford, England], but the cloudless, blindingly, tyrannous rays hammering the hills, searching every cranny . . . then at once in v 7 he is talking of something else, which hardly seems to him something else because it is so like the all-piercing, all-detecting sunshine."

We return to Psalm 19 with Lewis and with humility and eagerness and there learn to sing it again as a song of praise that teaches us where we live and teaches us how to live. And leads us to pray, not as many preachers begin their sermons, but with the words at the end of the sermon, "Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer."

What we have also learned is that a spirituality of the land is anything but easy-- unless we just make it a bland, romantic spiritual but not religious thing, which is not Christianity at all. Certainly not the Christianity of Christ who was hung on one of the trees created in and through him. "The spirituality the land [and sky] offers is anything but easy." We meet our ancestors there and their ghosts and their skeletons; and we meet ourselves there, too. I think it's likely that reconnection with the world around us is just where we are most likely to *find* our souls again, our hands in the dirt from which we were fashioned, our feet unshod, unshod on the ground from which we came, our hands cupped to receive the bread of life, the broken body of Christ in our hands, on our lips, in our bodies, remaking our broken lives in his image.

A spirituality wide and deep enough to encompass all the scripture and all the earth "is the spirituality of a God who would, with lightning and earthquakes, sneeze away the bland moralism [that passes for plastic wrapped Christianity], a wildly free, undomesticated divinity,

the same God who demands of Moses from a burning bush, your shoes: for the place on which you are standing is holy ground, and from Job, an accounting: just who do you think you are?" And from Jesus' disciples, a pilgrimage on earth: why do you stand there looking to heaven? He will come and be with you in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth.

(Closing paragraph adapted from Anthony Lusvardi, who spent two years in the peace corps in Kazakhstan before working on the Rosebud Indian reservation in south Dakota.
<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/prayer/nature-is-your-church>)

A God who demands all, in return, gives his own life for us that we may fully, truly live in him.
Thanks be to God.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2021