

Sermon: The Artist God**Scripture: Psalm 19****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 7, 2021**

CS Lewis said of Psalm 19, "I take this to be... one of the greatest lyrics in the world." The composer Haydn felt the same and at the end of my sermon I'm going to have us listen to how he set a portion of this Psalm to music in his oratorio called The Creation. But for now let's look a little more closely at these ancient lyrics of praise to the living God and hear what they might be saying to us.

There are 3 parts to this Psalm – it begins with 6 verses of slack-jawed amazement at creation and that remarkable star that 93 million miles away we call the sun, which sustains all the earth, and how it all speaks of God, then there are 4 verses where he speaks of delighting in God's laws or instruction, almost as much as he delights in creation itself, oddly enough, and then there's the final 4 verses when he's compelled to speak of himself in light of such majesty and perfection and cannot help but note his own faults. There's a cone-like movement that the Psalmist invites us through from the wild expanse of the universe to the moral order of the world in which we live to the pin-point of human heart.

We begin with the expanse. Consider for a moment – why is it that we humans can stand before a big pile of rock, a protrusion of geologic plates that jammed together and rose into the air, look up at the snow-capped peak and watch the clouds wreath around the top, we look at a mountain and we are awed, brought to a place of quiet and reverence, if not to tears at times? Why is that? Why in the world, knowing all we know about the chemistry of water and the

operations of tides, why does the broad ocean and the salty breeze and the glittering pathway of light that a rising sun makes over the water touch us so deeply, open up our hearts, send us into a state contemplating our lives, our purpose, our loves? Why does a quiet blanketed world of newly fallen snow in the early morning still something in our souls and then the eventual coming of bird songs and blossoms of warm spring bring a lump to our throats and joy to our hearts? Creation, just in its being what it is, can touch us like a great piece of music or a remarkable piece of art or stunning theatrical performance. Why is that?

The Psalmist has the answer. Because it is. It is a work of art, all we behold, the most incredible art ever created, not in any way just a random collection of atoms that somehow formulated matter as it is, but art created by an artist. THE ARTIST “and the heavens and the firmament and the sun coming forth like a bride” speak of who this artist is. “They proclaim the handiwork of God.” It moves us because it is *intended*, purposeful, it has meaning that we might not grasp but surely meaning. All of this and our place therein is not a “tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing”, but it is a work of art, our fellow creatures, the handiwork of God, we too works of art lovingly made by an Artist God, infinitely valued and valuable, being the selves God made us to be... though sometimes not quite...

The Christian author and speaker Elizabeth Elliot once said that “a clam glorifies God better than we do, because the clam is being everything it was created to be, whereas we are not.” And this is the rub. There is the revelation of the Artist God that comes through the art of creation and speak to who the Creator God is while humans do too... but sometimes don't, right? Sometimes

what is spoken by our lives reveals who God is not and what God has not meant for this artful beautiful world to be. And maybe that's true of the other violent parts of creation too, at least the prophet Isaiah seemed to suggest as much when he spoke of the lion lying with the lamb in the final end to this great story.

And so the Psalmist turns to the 2nd part of Psalm 19 which is how God's law, God's instruction is necessary to speak to the human heart. But interestingly enough the Psalmist speaks equally in awe and amazement of - God's teachings, God's ordinances, laws, commands, for how we should live, the Psalmist says they are perfect, right, radiant, sweet. They are a more intimate word about how to live and where to put our attention and focus and what to turn away from and what to turn towards and who to tend to and who to trust and not to judge and so on and so forth.

The Psalm is written by a Jew obviously so the revelation for Jews comes through the Torah, the written word, but as our interpretative poem reads, we as Christians say that it's not just the written word of scripture that is an intimate revelation of God's law for us but God's instruction came through the human figure of Jesus Christ, the word made flesh who dwelt among us, and he embodied in his life the laws and teachings and instructions of God for how we should be in this world.

Even so CS Lewis wondered about the way the Psalmist relishes in God's instructions and laws and he says, "I can understand talking about God's mercies with such delight and joy, but God's laws and instructions, God's commands? How's that? Surely," he says, "God's statutes and commands would be more aptly compared to something more grim and necessary, like the dentist's forceps, than anything enjoyable or sweet like honey?" He grapples with that for a while and

then says but “But I begin to understand that the Psalmists delight in the law of God, the commands of the Creator is the delight in having touched firmness; like a pedestrian delights in feeling the hard road beneath her feet after a false short cut has long entangled her in muddy fields.”

Ah, there is firmness. Ah, there is order. It’s not just up to me, God’s in this with me and knows me and what I need. If that is not sweet I don’t know what is. Look what happens when even against my judgement I decide to follow the instruction of God to heed the cry of the oppressed, to give over and beyond what I merely owe, to forgive over and over again, to turn the other cheek, ah, perfect, radiant, is living on the firmness that is God’s instruction. It is as sweet as honey to have a solid foundation under my feet when all I’ve felt is the shaky ground of my own formulations and estimations of how to live and who I should be... for the Psalmist says, we don’t even know our own errors, our hidden faults, that lie beyond our plane of vision, that leave us wandering too far from the God of our lives. How to delight in the mystery and majesty of who Jesus is and how he calls us to live, so counter to so much of what this world holds.

But then after 10 verses of being just amazed by this Artist God whose laws are even exquisitely designed to foster and sustain life, the Psalmist honestly and humbly notes the reality of his own errors and faults. It seems like an odd jump but don’t you know that experience of beholding such immense beauty of a star-lit sky or the remoteness of distant horizons from a mountaintop and felt small, like that your tininess is stunning... and we thought we were so big, our problems seemed so immense, our place so critical, this decision so consequential... but not before a mountain or an ocean or a crashing waterfall where the spray lights a rainbow in the sky, we realize how small we are And that’s where the Psalm goes

– he goes to “wow, I am really really small and broken at times, fault-filled.” But it’s not “ooh, I’m so bad and ashamed of myself” as much as it is a more proper estimation of himself before God’s creation and before what God asks of him.

But like so many Psalms, it doesn’t end in the smallness of the human heart, it points the way out by saying “O Lord, God Almighty, you are my rock and You are my redeemer!” Like a falling into the arms of the Artist God by one of his creations in love and there in the inner reaches and the darkness of the human heart the stars begin to shine and the song of creation is heard.... which is what Haydn does in this piece which is called “The Heavens are Telling the Glory of God!” let’s listen to how the human heart can praise the Artist God!

Psalm 19: Song of the Stars

By Sylvia Purdie

The universe shouts your Word!
 What language do stars speak?
 Words of vast emptiness and infinite distance,
 words of brilliant light and constant explosion,
 whirling words, ancient words, alien words.

Around one Word we spin -
 the Sun, light of our world,
 cruising in glory across the sky;
 colours all things, warms all things.

Around God’s Word we gather -
 the Son, light of the world.
 His way finds the lost
 his truth opens blind eyes
 his life conquers death
 his bread feeds our hunger
 his Spirit fills hearts with joy
 his desire burns away greed
 his touch is sweeter than honey.

May our lives shout your Word

in all we say, in all we do
out in the open or hidden in the dark.
May our lives sing your Word

in the secrets of our soul,
in trouble, in shame, in confidence.
Shine brightly, Lord
and hold us in your orbit. Amen.