

Sermon June 26 2022

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 19:1-6, 14

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

REFLECTION: “Out Here” The Rev. Brent Damrow

Here’s what I know. It happens all the time. It happens in every breath and in each moment, if we have but eyes to see and ears to hear. And it happened powerfully for me just a couple of days ago.

There we were, our family in this beautiful rustic house perched on top of a mountain in Vermont. Slowly, the clear skies gave way to clouds. It enveloped that mountaintop retreat. Eventually the far distant views of peaks and ridgelines gave way. And then eventually even houses and ski trails and power lines all disappeared, enveloping us in a closeness. There were the first gentle drops of life-giving rain that yielded to stronger torrents, bouncing off the deck, resonating off the metal roof.

For two days, my family had been in an area of Vermont in a town called Jamaica. We had noticed the shallowness of the rivers. We had noticed the desperate dryness of the soil. And so the rain was not only that wonderful invitation to rest that comes on vacations. But it was also a sign of life.

It poured for more than an hour. It poured through dinner. It poured right up to and into Jake’s bedtime. And then as we, both child and parents, settled in to our different bedrooms with giant panoramic glass windows that looked west, suddenly the skies came to life in hue and in texture. Gentle purples catching the final rays of the sun. Clouds exhausted of their rain took on an interesting and unbelievable depth. A pattern I had never seen in a cloud before.

You need to know that sunrises and sunsets are phenomena that I crave. I set aside time to watch them. My sabbath experience is sitting out at the firepit waiting until the sun yields, until the last star has come out. I have never in my life seen a sunset like that one.

In the midst of this 19th Psalm, it hit me. A whole new creation. That sunset was more than a fleeting phenomenon that scientists call scattering, more than simply molecules and small particles in the atmosphere changing the direction of light waves. But a new creation, a new invitation to relationship. It gave John and me a chance to come together, to linger in relationship, cognizant too of our greater relationship with God.

For the truth of Psalm 19 declares that in that moment, like so many that we miss, that the heavens were busy. They were busy declaring the glory of God, the works of creation, the goodness and relationship, as well as the newness of expansiveness.

I don't know how many hundreds or thousands of sunrises and sunsets I've seen. But this new one was fresh. It was testifying, in my mind, to the work that God is still up to and committed to, inviting us once again into new creation with God.

I don't know about you, but at the beginning of the pandemic, I heard so many stories about how creation spoke to people in new ways. I wonder if it was the weight of those moments when so much in the world seemed hard, or whether we were simply forced to slow down enough to notice, to see and to hear. I remember those excited calls from Margo Davis out in New Marlborough about afternoons in her window seat, drawn out from her book time and time again to the beauty and grace of her surroundings. I remember she said, Brent, it literally speaks to me. And Psalm 19 would say of course it does. It has done all your life. I'm glad you noticed. Do we have eyes to see and ears to hear?

I heard from Elizabeth Young who on her walks along the river in Great Barrington, with the world quieting down, how she would hear and see precious little birds. Do you remember what you sang just a little bit ago? "Each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings." She talked to me about how alive it made her in those moments, and how she felt the promise of God. How outward those moments drew her, how able to face the difficulties of the pandemic it made her to be. And Psalm 19 would just smile and nod and say yes, precious daughter, that bird may not be using words, and yet the voice goes out into all the earth. Eyes to see and ears to hear.

I want you to take a moment right now to look at this outdoor sanctuary. Take a moment and look up and around. Maybe Elizabeth has only been here 6 or 7 times. Maybe some of you have been here thousands of times. And yet Psalm 19 makes it clear. There is stuff to learn of God by looking at this. And this is as much a sanctuary as the one inside the church building. Can you hear something? Can you see something? And I imagine that if you did catch a glimpse of something, it brought forth positivity and connection. I wonder if it brought forth wonder or love or all of the above. But I know that if you took time enough to slow down and let this beautiful act of God's creation speak to you, you found something good.

These times are hard and heavy. They threaten fracture, they threaten separation, they threaten isolation, in different but tangibly connected ways to the events of March 2020. I wonder if we can slow down enough to notice, to practice sabbath enough, to remember not just ourselves but the glory of God, the One who creates for goodness and relationship. The One who sets before us moments of expansiveness designed not just for a select few, but a warmth that arises and spreads until nothing is denied its gift.

And we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and mouths to echo the glory of God on constant display out here in the march of days. If we do, it will not make our current problems as a nation or culture disappear. But it will root our lives in something bigger that transcends all of them. It will not necessarily bring us together as one, but it will bring each of us past our own limitations into

the limitlessness of God's grace, mercy and love, in which all things, even unity, are possible. It will not give us the strength to change everything, but will give us the courage to rest in the arms of the One who is always changing everything, starting with our own hearts. Starting with our own minds. And starting with our own lives.

Friends, in this moment, in this place, may you hear God speaking to you new creation right now. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 19: 7-14

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.

REFLECTION: "In Here" The Rev. Brent Damrow

Do you remember what you saw when you gazed upon creation this morning? Do you remember how you felt? Do you remember a moment over the last few weeks when on a walk, or gazing out your window, if you saw something or heard something or smelled something that made you come alive, maybe even start singing? "Then sings my soul, my savior God, to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art!" It happened to me on a hike at Mohawk Trail State Forest, after a nearly vertical climb that left me breathless at moments. I crested the hill to see grand pine trees stretching out in the valley below me, to hear the sounds of bird call, to smell the sweet dank forest floor. And in that moment, without a thought, I burst into song, singing "How Great Thou Art." And right there, Psalm 19 would have said Amen. You should. Of course you should. You should all the time.

I want you to think right now about the law in the Bible. I want you to think about commandments and teachings. I want you to think about Leviticus or Deuteronomy, or Jesus saying, "You have heard it said love your friend. But I tell you love your enemy." I want you to spend a moment letting all those laws, all those decrees, all those thou shalt and thou shalt not rise into your mind's eye.

I don't know what came into your mind. But I'm less confident that when you think of the law, when you think of decrees, when you think of commandments, that you found quite as much positivity or connection as when you heard the sound of that bird. I worry sometimes that focus on things like law and commandment bring up feelings of inadequacy, fear or all of the above, more than wonder or love. And Psalm 19 would whisper gently don't let it. Don't you dare let it.

Instead, in this reading that we just heard, it said in the midst of all those laws and decrees find the refreshment of God's grace poured out for you. Find the joy of the way of life that Christ offers. Find the light of the Holy Spirit crackling in gentle warmth to drive the fear of isolation or shadow away.

Friends, this psalm, like all psalms, is full of truth. This psalm, like all psalms, is about witness and relationship, about our relationship to God and one another. They draw us beyond decrees too small or too simple to imagine the stuff of God. And in this psalm, there is a beautiful both/and, one that connects the innate kind of inspiration and growth that we find in the beauty of nature, the kind that radiates the same openness that comes from getting out there in those great spaces beyond ourselves, the kind that makes us want to sing out spontaneously, to what we should find. Not just when we hike to the top of Monument Mountain, but when we trove the depths of that great book, the Bible. Or when we trove the presence of the Spirit in our heart.

My son Jake is eight. He is going on nine. He is in that stage of life where rules definitely chafe. When decisions that are not exactly what he wants them to be feel burdensome. They are frustrating. They are hard. And I know he will grow out of that way of looking at some of these rules. I know eventually he will realize the beauty and possibility which my husband Jon and I are trying to offer him. How we don't give him that advice or make those decisions to take anything away from him, or to make him smaller in any way. Not to have one more thing to live up to, but rather to discern and discover a life worth living into.

Right now my heart and my mind is in the Ridenour/Kolano household. Right now on that hill up in Great Barrington, there is a beautiful new wonderful member of our church family, Ava Juell Ridenour, who burst onto the scene June 21st at 1:13 pm. Here's what I know. It's the very thing that's in Scriptures, the very thing that's in law, the very thing that's in commandments. It's on full display in the way that that tiny little girl is held, in the way she is cuddled and warmed, in the way she is nourished and comforted, with the new wonders that Megan and Jeremy bring to her with every new breath. And everything is being done for her benefit, and her brother Micah's too. Everything, so that from the moment of her birth, she might find goodness and good relationship, that she might grow into a life worth living. And right now, especially when something in life chafes, when she cries out, Megan and Jeremy rush to her to offer kindness and love. And Psalm 19 would say of course, that's what those laws and decrees do every moment of the day.

I worry, though, that sometimes when it comes to our faith, that we never outgrow that chafing that Jake is in the middle of, that we never outgrow that when we hear words like law or commandment that we want to shrink back rather than dive in. It's one of the reasons I originally left verses 11-13 out of the reading. In verses 11-13 in the psalm are things like warning and fault and willful sin and transgressions. But the more I spent time with the psalms, I remembered the fullness of their truth, that we can trust them, and they testify to God's grace.

I worry sometimes that, when it comes to our faith, we don't dive in, but we hold the Bible at arm's length. We take it all as a representation of something out there or back there, as a depiction of something in it -- in some ways it is -- but we know this: no matter how good a painting is, no matter how good a depiction of a landscape is, no matter how strong the artist's

testimony is, it's not the same as being out there where it was painted. And so Psalm 19 says get out there and see. Psalm 19 would say breathe in all those laws and find the sweetness of the honeycomb. Study this great book and you will find truth, the psalm says. Take what you learn from this book into the expansiveness of God's creation, that together these teachings and these decrees do not become something for us to lord over one another, as if we own religion. But an expansiveness to live into greater truth together. These teachings and these decrees do not lead us to make definitions of who is in or who is out, but expand our vision to include all people as holding equal dignity, especially those that the world holds down. That together these teachings, these decrees, do not tempt us to become masters of others, to take away the freedom of others, but rather, like the apostle Paul, willingly to become slaves, not of any human master, but only to the beauty of the fullness of God's creation.

Psalm 19 commands us in times like this to hold onto both, what is out there in creation and what is in there in the Bible. Not to become better people, but to see and hear the glory of God and to break forth in song. To see and hear the glory of God, not to give up or give in to the enormity of the challenge, but instead to bask in the infiniteness and the vastness of God's love. Not to imagine we have ever arrived, but be like Paul, always open to transformation. And Psalm 19 says of course, that's the way it's always been, just for people like you.

In these times, may we be open to revelation, the kind out here in creation, and the kind in there in the Bible. Not to be further weighed down, but instead to be offered the gift of refreshment, wisdom, joy, light, endurance and sweetness, just like Psalm 19 proclaims the people of faith always have.

That in these times, we may not look for headlines that bring down, but rather to see the ongoing uplifting creation of God all around us, and through it keep for the sake of goodness, for the sake of relationship, for the chance of expansiveness. And you know what Psalm 19 would say? What are you waiting for?

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of all our hearts always be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.