

The Heavens, the Word, and the Hearts to Whom They Speak

Psalm 19

Last week, I spoke to the children about the first words God spoke on the first day of creation, “*Let there be light!*”. Which was odd, I reminded them this morning, because there were no sources for physical light, no megawatts and kilowatts or photons until the fourth day when God hung sun and moon, stars and galaxies and planets into the deep dark of space to shine down at us during the twelve hours or so when our side of the planet is facing away from the sun.

And my old seminary teacher, Dr. Kline, argued that on the fourth day God used the dark of outer space to paint us a visible, physical picture of the invisible, spiritual heaven the Bible tells us God created before the six days, before he said anything at all. What Dr. Kline understood that most of us have forgotten is that in the ancient world with no headlights, or streetlights, or skyscrapers all lit up, the night sky played a much more prominent role in peoples’ hearts and minds than they do in our world which is so lit up that Natalie once told me that she could weed in the memorial garden at midnight if she absolutely had to. But what the ancients saw on a clear, dark night fired their imagination in ways that we moderns are too blinded by our own lights to see.

Now there was another kind of light Moses wanted us to think about on the first day of creation. Heart light, mind light, the light that lives in God’s heart as truth. That was the light that, beginning on the second day of creation, brought order and safety and beauty and brilliance to what used to be a dark, wet, howling swirl before God’s Spirit started hovering over it, Moses tells us. So in God’s heart lives a sort of light that makes life make sense, that makes love possible, rules that would define where the tides will flow, and the clouds will fly, and how all the magnificent creatures would swim and fly and crawl and run in all the different spaces God defined for them.

But on the fourth day God filled the night sky with uncountable shining lights, so to teach us that this world was not the only place where magnificent creatures live. But God’s heart light, God’s mind light had already sorted out an invisible heaven that was also filled with brilliant creatures, angels. And just as there is an order to the visible world, a balance of nature with a life cycle, so in the invisible heaven God had set an order for the angels, places for them to fly and shine, tasks for them to do, and characters for them to be. And only then, after he set the heavens, did God do the same thing with us in our physical world. And then God said it was good, very good in fact.

So I asked the kids at VBS a trick question. Where did the trouble start? And they answered much as I think many of us would answer. In the Garden, with the Serpent and the woman, and the man who did exactly what his wife did and then blamed her for the whole thing, but we won't go there!

But the Garden was not where the trouble started. The trouble started in heaven where, we learn in Isaiah 14, and Ezekiel 28 and Revelation 12, some of the angels turned on God and used the brilliance and power God gave them to bring darkness and chaos and violence and swirl back into God's good creation. You didn't think it was an ordinary reptile that hung in a tree and swindled the human race out of our birthright. It was a demonic vision with a soundtrack full of lies.

And what David wants to teach us in our Call to Worship is that on the fourth day what God painted out in the night sky was the whole drama that would take place and some hints about the direction we should head if we want that first day light, the heart light, the mind light that teaches us to think and feel and speak and act after God and not to swirl and slither after some fallen angel. So David sang, *"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork."*

And the ancients got it! From the very beginning of our history, they drew a connection between lights in physical sky and brilliant beings in the spiritual heaven. Sadly, they all too often were tempted to worship what they saw, but at least they weren't night blind to the existence of a spiritual realm with spiritual influences which they would have to choose. Because they had no compasses. They actually had to travel by land and sail by sea, navigating by one or more of the stars above.

Our word for "planet" is drawn from the Greek verb "*planao*" which means to wander, because the ancients quickly noticed that some of the lights they tried to navigate by were wanderers, a little wild and unpredictable. So moving bodies like Mars and Jupiter and Saturn and Neptune became to them gods with wild life stories and strange resumes. But not so for the Jews! They imagined the planets, the wandering lights as untrustworthy pagan demons, and they imagined the more reliable, navigable stars as faithful angels, doing God's bidding and helping human wanderers to find their way.

So the pagans were all into the sun god, Ra, as the source of light and warmth and life, the moon, Luna, as a goddess of madness. But no, said Moses in Genesis one. The sun was there to mark the days and the moon the months and the various stars to indicate how far along we were in which season of the year. That's all they did, they were a picture of a crowded, busy invisible

heaven, but only a picture, Moses teaches. You don't worship them, you use them to tell time and season.

Likewise in our Call to Worship, David sings of God doing for the sun everyday what David would have to do for a prince on his wedding day. David had six wives, so he had a tribe of princes, most of whom didn't amount to much, but on his wedding day each prince was the star of the kingdom, emerging from a special tent dressed like a songbird, all brilliance and colors, and off he would ride with his friends, blowing trumpets and making a general nuisance of themselves till the wedding feast was over and the prince would return to a back room of the palace where he would serve as the undersecretary of teacups, or helmets or horsestirrups or something.

But meanwhile, during the day the king gave him, the prince would ride through the villages and all the farmhands and milkmaids would say to each other, "Haven't we seen a prince today!" And David's point is that the sun is glorious in its place after a fashion, but don't be looking to the physical sun, or any other light in the sky for spiritual guidance. And in the second stanza of Psalm 19, David answers the question this raises, "Where do we turn for heart light, mind light, rhyme and reason and heavenly guidance?". He sings, "*The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul.*"

So the words God inspired his prophets to write beginning with Moses was where David went when he needed guidance from heaven that made life make sense and made love possible. He keeps singing, "*The testimony of the LORD is faithful, making the simple wise; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart.*" And the sense we get from David is that it is engaging with God's word that turns intelligence into wisdom. We can be pretty smart without reading much of God's word, we can make our way in the world, we can make our mark on people. But we won't be wise, we won't know what things weigh, we will hoard what we can't keep and lose what we can't do without.

David sings next, "*...the commandment of the LORD is pure, bringing light to the eyes.*" It turns out that just as there is spiritual light, heart light, mind light, so we have spiritual eyes, or not! Jesus put it this way in the Sermon on the Mount, he said: "*The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be filled with light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be filled with darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*"

The point being that if we are not engaging with God's word, if we won't handle it with our families at home and with each other at church, we will pretty quickly revert to the darkness and chaos and lawlessness that typified us before we ever gave our lives to Christ, if we ever gave

our lives to Christ. I say this because Jesus said these words to an audience that was way more religious than we generally are today.

And he did that because it is possible to get shoulder deep in church and religion without really opening our hearts and opening God's word and letting him speak to us daily as a real living Person. If the Spirit really has landed in our hearts and breathed into us a genuine faith in Christ, it will always lead to a robust curiosity and intense devotion to God's word. Spirit and Word work together.

David sings on, "*The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever.*" I've so often addressed this notion of fear and love for God being intertwined because it is constantly repeated in both the Old and New Testaments. To love someone is to be genuinely afraid of falling afoul of that love. Bernard of Clairvaux was a French monk from the 1100's who was remembered by both Luther and Calvin 400 years later for his brilliant grasp on the wonders of grace. We've often sung his words in the Lenten season:

Bernard sings to the Lord Jesus: "What language shall I borrow to thank Thee dearest friend, for this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end. O make me Thine forever, and should I fainting be, Lord, let me never, never outlive my love for Thee." Bernard knew grace. He counted on grace. But he had read enough from God's Word, about Moses' temper, David's lust, Solomon's worldliness and arrogance and what it cost them all, he had read enough to fear his own sin and the world's deceitfulness.

Now it does say in God's Word that "*Perfect love casts out all fear.*" But John also teaches in that same first letter that we are not without sin, we are nothing like perfect till we see Jesus face to face when "*he appears*" at the second coming to bring us home to the place he prepared for us. Till then, John teaches, sin is very much in play and we need to confess it and seek forgiveness for it.

Otherwise, John taught us, we walk in darkness "*...we lie and do not practice the truth*" he said. So David closes this second stanza singing that God's commandments are true and that we are wrong when we find ourselves at odds with them, he sings, "*...the rules of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.*" God's word is more precious than gold, David sings, sweeter than honey. Honey was a delicacy in those days that ordinary people didn't get to eat. But David knew that being "*warned*" by God's word was worth more than the dainties that found their way to the royal table.

And in the last stanza of Psalm 19, David sings a song not too different than Bernard of Clairvaux. David sings: "*Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from secret sins!*"

Keep back your servant from presumptuous sins, let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless of great transgression.” Like Bernard, David knows that there is a wildness inside us that can defeat our best intentions, defy what we’ve read and what we know from Scripture.

Presumptuous sins are those sins we commit in open defiance of what we know from God’s law. So we grab what God has forbidden, we disrespect what God has called sacred, we harm those whom God called us to love, we cast aside what God called us to do first. They are the sins for which there was a death penalty in Old Testament, idolatry and the occult, Sabbath breaking, disrespect for parents, murder, adultery, homosexuality. And more, it’s a long and scary list.

And many modern Christians have followed Kant and Schliermacher in saying that God was never so severe as all that. Modern liberal theology teaches that in the Old Testament the Israelites were a brutish, nasty people searching for a God of love, that they never found till Jesus appeared on the scene.

So Kant and Schliermacher both held that the events of Old Testament history didn’t necessarily happen, that the particulars of Old Testament ethics don’t necessarily apply, that once Jesus has touched our hearts with love, we can safely follow our hearts past the commandments to a broader, higher plane of living that only our own hearts, guided by Jesus himself, can teach us.

The problem being that Jesus himself said otherwise. Back to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one iota, not a dot will pass away from the Law till all is accomplished.”* It is a complicated thing. Jesus did usher in an era where God’s people may not take up the sword to enforce his justice. No executions today.

Nevertheless, both the apostles of the New Testament and the prophets of the Old teach that there is no such thing as a grace from God that does not bring with it the power to repent from sin and obey God’s commands. One of the great ironies of Psalm 19 is that David ultimately became guilty of just the sort of secret, presumptuous sin he pays so fervently to avoid. He sinned terribly and suffered terrible consequences for the evil he indulged. But he was not executed as his sins deserved, and he was not banished from God’s presence. He did not lose his soul, though his sins clearly warranted that.

We read in 2 Samuel 12 that God arranged for a prophet, Nathan, to march into David’s throne room, point his bony finger right in David’s face and announce David’s secrets to the entire royal

court. At which point David said the three words that saved him and opened the floodgates of God's grace back into his soul and his kingdom, "*I have sinned...*" David said for everyone to hear.

And then, I think, he retired to his own rooms and sang Psalm 51 in which he owned his sins and threw himself on the mercy of a God who is holy and angry and loving and forgiving all in the same moment. God's light is uncompromising truth intertwined with radical, unconditional grace for every soul who will let God be God and let God be right. In the end, David only just held onto the grace that he prayed for in Psalm 19 this morning.