

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
October 8, 2023
Psalm 19 and Luke 17: 11-19

Holly is up in Buena Vista this weekend for a women’s retreat at one of Young Life’s camps. She is enjoying a quiet weekend away, hot tubs and yoga and not having to cook or clean or do dishes. But she commented over the phone, kind of surprised, of how beautiful it is up there right now. The flowers are still going strong even as the leaves are yellow and all the fall hues in the grasses and shrubs. It’s funny how few times we have really enjoyed the fall colors and the turning of the aspens while living in Colorado. Living down here on the front range and having kids in school and fall rhythms taking over – how seldom it is that think of getting up to the mountains till the leaves are gone and the colors start to fade. It takes some intentionality to call our attention to that aspect of nature that happens every year in reliable pattern.

Crooker’s poem calls attention to similar fall patterns that do not last long. They come and go and if we do not pay attention, if we do not train our eyes to its details we may miss out, lose the beauty or significance. Though she seems to be calling attention not just to the brilliant colors of fall, but to the remnants of fall that do not get lauded so easily. “Praise what little there’s left: / the small boats of milkweed pods, husks, hulls, / shells, the architecture of trees.”

Her poem participates in a form or tradition referred to as the praise poem. According to Poets.org, “a praise poem is a poem of tribute or gratitude. To praise means to express admiration, give homage, and/or to proclaim positive attributes. Praise poetry is part of the literary tradition of many cultures.” Such poems may praise or call attention to the divine, or to “people, animals, places, etc.” seeking to “capture the essence of that being praised.” In this poem, Crooker seems to be calling attention to nature and its changes, some seasonal, but perhaps to more permanent and consequential changes as well. “Though darkness gathers, praise our crazy / fallen world; it’s all we have, and it’s never enough.” She seems to express what I find around this time of year, that unless our eyes are called to turn aside to see these things, they may pass without our notice, we may not appreciate their significance.

And I wonder if our attention isn’t trained on many matters, so much so, that the routine ways in which God is present and at work do not catch our eye, do not summon our focus. God is present in discernable ways, active in our lives, and yet we plod along, busy and caught in habitual rhythms, that we do not stop, turn aside

from our normal paths in order to contemplate, to capture the essence or to notice the attributes and actions of the God who loves us and intervenes for us on a regular basis.

There is a dynamic that when we look for something, or become aware of something, we start to see it all around us. Not that it wasn't there before, but it is accentuated now. We start to see it. Like when you start to think of buying a certain car and then you start seeing them everywhere. Your awareness starts to key in on what was there already. Or when we start to worry, we start to hone in on every detail that could go wrong and it fills our senses and our consciousness. Or when you start to plan a party and mind starts to flutter with all the particulars and tasks that have to be done, the list growing in your mind. What if the same is true if we became so focused on cognizant of God, of Christ's loving example and sacrificial and redemptive work.

What if we were to become conscious and aware of God's presence and activity in the world and in our own lives. What if we became cognizant to the point that our awareness starts to key in on God's attributes and actions on our behalf. What if we started to see it everywhere, if we started to practice finding the language to name it. Perhaps it would take over our perceptions, that we would start to God present and at work all over the place, and what effect would such a pattern have on us?

In the ancient world, the worship and praise of the deity were part of supporting, maintaining, constituting. Meaning if we stopped worshipping and praising and offering sacrifices, the god's power or activity would be diminished. I don't think we believe that. God is God no matter what. But our worship and sacrifice and praise do help us participate in God's actions, participate in what God is doing, become more cognizant of it.

Psalm 19 is a psalm of praise, a psalm that calls attention to the things that call attention to God. It is broken up into roughly three stanzas. The first focuses on how the created world calls attention to God.

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

And it draws on the imagery of the sun and how it enlightens the world, cast as a bridegroom coming out from the wedding tent, and running the circuit of the sky from one end to the other.

“In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.”

The created world extols God’s power and greatness. The second stanza focuses on Torah, on the words of the Lord and how they enlighten the eyes, how they draw attention to God’s actions and activities and give us insight into them and our place within that story, that plan, that movement of God.

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;

In the third stanza of the psalm the attention turns to us, the language of Torah shifting to Torah’s effect on our being enlightened and instructed and corrected, all so that we may discover God’s purposes, plans, activities. “Moreover by them is your servant warned; / in keeping them there is great reward.” And the Psalm ends with a prayer, an aspiration. That just like the created world draws light to God, gives glory to God, and just as the law of the Lord enlightens and draws attention to God’s attributes and good intentions, may the “the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart / be acceptable to you, / O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

The word acceptable is translated from *Ratson*, the word meaning beautiful and pleasing, but also can refer to a sacrifice, a sacrifice offered to God, therefore taking on the meaning of fitting, pleasing, acceptable. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be like a sacrifice that gives glory to God, that draws our attention and our consciousness to what God is doing in and around us. In this way, in common fashion, the closing lines of the poem link back to the opening lines.

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
And...

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

Let my voice join in what creation does, in what Torah does.

In our gospel story we hear about Jesus encountering a colony of lepers. “As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’” They call out to Jesus with a plea related to their common ailment and its common implications and debilitations. But when they are healed on their way, we are told only one “when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.”

It didn’t change the fact that all ten were healed, all ten benefited from Jesus’ mercy and compassion, all enjoyed the benefits of Christ. But only one tuned his attention and consciousness and only one filled his senses with the attributes and actions of God, only one found the language of praise. They all were still healed. But what of their perceptions of the world, their way of being in the world. The others were quick to capitalize on the blessings and to move on with their lives, while one took the time to praise, to, like a praise poem, get at the essence, to focus on the attributes and particularities of God’s work, to focus on it to the point that you can’t but see and feel it wherever one turns.

I wonder how often we may be likened to those who have enjoyed God’s work and benefits and keep on rolling, back immersed into life. As opposed to the one that turns back praising God in a loud voice.

Back in my Young Life days, when I would lead informal times of worship with teens or leaders, back when I played my guitar almost every day, we would do this thing where you’d go around the circle. Following the letters of the alphabet, each person would name one attribute of God, then the next starting with the next letter of the alphabet and so on. It is probably a little silly, and yet, it causes your mind to work hard at naming the things that are true of God but that we rarely acknowledge, because we do not take the time to notice and give voice to them, like being so focused on the busyness of things that you do not take time to go take in the aspens.

It may take some work at first. Because we are unpracticed. But once we hone in, once we start to see, once we get the pump primed, the list will probably start growing rapidly, praising God for all the ways he has intervened and blessing and

protected and taught and healed and grown us and the loved ones we have prayed for.

Yes, just as the heavens declare the glory of the Lord, and just as God's word brings light to our eyes, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts do the same.

And all God's people said... Amen.

Poem: PRAISE SONG BY BARBARA CROOKER

Praise the light of late November,
the thin sunlight that goes deep in the bones.
Praise the crows chattering in the oak trees;
though they are clothed in night, they do not
despair. Praise what little there's left:
the small boats of milkweed pods, husks, hulls,
shells, the architecture of trees. Praise the meadow
of dried weeds: yarrow, goldenrod, chicory,
the remains of summer. Praise the blue sky
that hasn't cracked yet. Praise the sun slipping down
behind the beechnuts, praise the quilt of leaves
that covers the grass: Scarlet Oak, Sweet Gum,
Sugar Maple. Though darkness gathers, praise our crazy
fallen world; it's all we have, and it's never enough.

Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?" ¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

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Psalm 19

God’s Glory in Creation and the Law

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

- ¹ The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
- ² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
- ³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
- ⁴ yet 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,

⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;

⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;

⁹ the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.

¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹ Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

¹² But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.

¹³ Keep 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.

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