

Psalm 19

God's Glory in Creation and the Law

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

¹The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament^[a] 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^[b] goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens^[c] 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.

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.

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;^[d]
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.

Luke 4 - The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

⁷³So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel settled in their towns.

When the seventh month came—the people of Israel being settled in their towns—

Nehemiah 8 ¹all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ²Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishaël, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites,^[a] helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

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Nehemiah 8:1-10, Psalm 19, Luke 4:14-21

Kerra Becker English

Scripture Readings about Scripture Readings

NBC's comedy "The Good Place" is asking all the right questions. In the series Ted Danson plays "Michael" the supernatural architect of a neighborhood in the good place, and Kristen Bell plays the not-so-nice "Eleanor Shellstrop" who ends up in heaven by mistake. Her heavenly soul mate "Chidi Anagonye" played by William Jackson Harper, who was an ethics professor before he died, is trying to help her become a better person in the afterlife so she won't be expelled to the bad place. I find the show very entertaining. Though NBC is having difficulty pulling in the live audience, it's doing very well on Netflix and Hulu as streaming television.

What I like about the show is that it actually follows moral philosophy and theological ethics in designing the episodes, often quoting Aristotle, Kant, and Kierkegaard. What does it mean to be a "good person?" Can a bad person *learn* to be a better person? Can there really be a point system that weighs out your goodness versus your badness and becomes the scale on which you are judged? How have the philosophical minds from previous generations answered those ethical questions, and do those answers suffice for our moral dilemmas today?

I won't say too much more about the show because I don't want to spoil you watching it for yourselves. However, what I find intriguing about it is that it's gaining a wide audience that might be continuing to ask those same age-old questions about living a "good life." How do we know what's morally right? What do we do about it when we know we've done something wrong? Where can we

find a friend, a soulmate, a teacher who can guide us toward increasing our chances for ending up in the good place for real?

I like to think that being part of a religious community is a help in that regard. If it's telling at all, the megachurches and video preachers all seem to have preaching series that are titled things like, "The Blessed Life," or the "Good Life" or anything that begins with the number of steps it takes to get to some sort of self-improvement... Like 6 steps to declutter your soul, or 7 steps to living a purpose-driven life. If there's a plan or if there's a process, we all want to get on board that train, or at least did want to in early January when we were full of good intentions for what goals we had to begin 2019.

But for those of you, like me, who have already felt like any well-intentioned plans have been side-tracked for becoming the better person you want to be, never fear, the Bible can actually help us with that. Moral philosophers and academic theologians aside, scripture itself gives us a few tools for shoring up our good qualities, for at least listening to what God has to say for how human beings might do a better job of getting along and even enjoying it.

Psalm 19 has these incredibly heartfelt things to say about God's law. And I have something to note about what it means to even say "God's law" here. Though this does describe the Torah, all the laws handed to and through Moses, from the 10 commandments that we know to the intricate details we've never needed to know for how to slaughter a sheep, the LAW also means God's guidance, God's teaching. It's the sense that following God's path for your life will make a difference, and as the psalmist says, this guidance will revive your soul, make wise the simple, rejoice the heart, enlighten the eyes, and endure forever. The law of the Lord is true and righteous, and its value is more precious than gold. Perhaps I am beginning to see how these sermon series get put together.

But this love song to the law is not exactly a tribute to the kind of weighty tomes that Kant and Kierkegaard put together. Praise be for that. No, it's an acknowledgment that following God's law can be its own reward. It makes a difference. But our understanding of the law has changed as Christians. We aren't bound by the ritual sacrifice, or the kosher dietary codes, or the Levitical mandates that seem like God's laundry list of do's and don'ts. Nevertheless, we are still bound by God's teaching. We are entrusted with the responsibility to act in such a way that communities are strengthened by our presence. We are morally compelled to do as Jesus commanded us: to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. That part hasn't changed. There is an expectation for religious adherents, Jews and Christians for sure, to be moral agents in their world. Sometimes we get it right. Sometimes we get it wrong. But once you claim a faith tradition that preaches moral responsibility and adherence to God's guidance, others will be watching to see if we practice what is being preached.

Lucky for us, we have two "preaching" texts happening right here in our lectionary readings this morning. Well actually, they aren't even interpretations of the text. They are literally scripture readings about scripture readings. It isn't that Ezra or Jesus are taking the word and expounding on it or interpreting it. They are reading the law, the text, out loud, directly from holy writings to the audiences that have gathered to pay attention. Being hearers of the Word is supposed to inspire us to be do-ers of that same Word. That's the point. Even now, we continue to read our holy book **OUT LOUD** and **IN COMMUNITY** so that we are held accountable to the words we discover in it.

In this section of the book of Nehemiah, a few months after the people had been resettled following Babylonian Exile, Ezra is asked to gather the people in the marketplace for a reading of the law handed down from Moses. The text tells us a lot about what kind of gathering this is. It's in a public place, with **ALL** the community, which includes specifically men and women, people of all

strata of life, both slaves and masters, property owners and those working the fields. And the people are attentive. They are eager to hear their story – having been scattered in Babylon for many years. It was read in Hebrew to people who now spoke Aramaic, so there were interpreters readily available for both word translation and idea translation as to what it all now means. So, remember this, the owners heard about the law's responsibility to leave the corners of their fields for the gleaners, and the gleaners heard it too. Foreigners who were there heard about God requiring welcome for strangers and aliens as did the people who were coming back from another place. Men heard all about the purification rituals for women regarding menstruation, and everyone heard about how priests were supposed to perform their religious function in the temple. Whether one thought that the law applied to them or to someone else, they all heard it ALL just the same. This reading took a while. Nothing was held back. The lectionary reading didn't stop after 20 verses. It kept on going. And as it was concluding, people began to weep. Likely they wept because it had been so long, and perhaps wrongs had been committed, and they had even forgotten that their deepest desire was to please God. But Nehemiah stopped them. No need to mourn or weep – Eat the meat AND the gravy. Drink sweet wine. Then feed those who have none. And remember that the joy of the Lord is your strength.

How about that? The reading of God's law, the teaching of God's guidance, was met with a mixture of sadness and joy. It's worship. It's renewal. It's hope. It's a reminder that the community can come together and be one people.

And then we turn to Jesus opening the Word as the very beginning of his ministry in Luke's gospel. As was his habit, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath to pray and learn. He was handed the scroll of Isaiah which he opened and read and heard profoundly as the call he was meant to undertake, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to

the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of God's favor." The only "preaching" he did was to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The people hear the prophet's call, and Jesus takes on that call in his own earthly work.

It's another scripture reading about scripture reading. The words we use are powerful. The words we hear as God's Word may be life changing. Again, the people who hear are the ones who fulfill the blessing. They HEAR that good news will be told to the poor. They HEAR that the captives will find release. They HEAR that the blind will see. They HEAR that the oppressed will know freedom. When they HEAR, they are called to act, once again, as the community that they were called to be.

Why do we read scripture EVERY time we gather for worship? The words don't always connect with us perfectly. We may need translation, or cultural context, or historical relevance to understand. People often like the singing better, or the words the preacher says make more sense. But we read, every time, so you, the listener will hear it. The hope is that you will hear it over and over again until it's recognizable in your mind and becomes the mantra of your heart. You hear it, so that you will live it. You hear the parts that matter to you, and the parts that are absolutely crucial and amazing good news for people who aren't exactly like you.

In the Ordination questions, remember that we ask ministers, and elders, and deacons, "Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?" Now I don't think you can accept them as anything unless you hear them, likely with some frequency. If you hear them often, you may begin to recognize them as the way that Jesus Christ is meant to be heard and taught. If you hear them often, you may begin to have a really big understanding of what it means to

be a part of the Church universal. And if you hear them often enough, and with a kind and familiar voice speaking them to you, perhaps you will know these words in your heart as specifically God's Word to you. That may make you weep. That may bring you great joy. Probably it will do both.

When the Word of God in scripture touches your life, when the spoken Word sounds in your ears, you will hear tones of love, and forgiveness, and blessing, and peace. You will hear instruction for living the good life, your best life, the life that philosophers study in the light of day and theologians ponder in the dark of night. You will understand remorse for times you missed the mark, and you will be challenged to love your neighbor that much deeper. So be hearers of the word, at church, maybe on a scripture podcast in your car, or read them maybe even sometimes out loud to yourself. Let them be a part of you. Interpreting the Word in preaching is a part of what I do – and I take it seriously – but the job of preaching isn't to entertain you or to either make you feel good or bad about yourself, it's to amplify the Word that comes to us through scripture. The reading, the telling and re-telling, and re-telling is important because the goal is to shape your life to God's teaching, God's guidance, God's law, and to live more fully into the love we know through Jesus Christ. The way to do that is to hear that instruction, often, so we are reminded of who we are and who we want to be. God loves us right now, exactly as we are, and God loves us too much to let us stay that way. The guidance of scripture can call us back, and call us back again and actually allow us to continue to make our way to the kind of morals and values we really want to live by.

Hear the Word. And let it live in you. Amen.