

Psalm 19

When my husband and I vacationed at Orange Beach, a white sands beach on the gulf coast of Alabama, it was my first time staying on the ocean. I had been to various beaches enough times, sure, but I had never actually had the pleasure of staying in a hotel where I could see the ocean from our room. This meant that for the first time in my life I was able to get up while it was still dark and head down to the beach to watch the massive full moon set and then watch the sun rise over the waves.

It was an incredible experience, and I found myself drawn to look up at the sky that week, almost as much as the ocean itself. Shimmery, gold and pink sunlight would edge around the big fluffy white clouds like the gilding along the edges of a Bible.

I remember one particular cloud in which the light broke through the center, forming rays that reached out. It looked like a massive, beautiful eye in the sky. Just like a painting!

It was all lavish, and I thanked God for this artistry. It was much like the beginning of today's Psalm. Psalm 19. The Voice translation renders the first verses of Psalm 19 like this:

The celestial realms announce God's glory;
the skies testify of His hands' great work.

² Each day pours out more of their sayings;
each night, more *to hear and more* to learn.

³ Inaudible words are their manner of speech,
and silence..... their means to convey.

⁴ Yet from here to the ends of the earth, their voices^[a] have gone out;
the whole world can hear what they say

Isn't that beautiful? The poet who wrote this Psalm is saying, look at how the wonder above us tells us about God.

And I saw that clearly on the beach, but it doesn't take a vacation like the one I was on to see the handiwork of God stretch across the sky.

In fact, six months before our trip to the ocean, I was confronted not with the roar of the waves, but the roar of heavy traffic. On one particular morning that summer, I was greeting the dawn, but not with the joy I would feel months later as I rushed out to the beach, instead on this particular morning I was feeling some reluctance..... and even dread.

To make matters worse I was stuck in traffic on my way to a big hospital in the urban core of Kansas City. I was doing my summer internship as a volunteer chaplain to fulfill some requirements for seminary. Being a volunteer chaplain meant I was serving at the hospital a minimum of sixty-five hours a week with at least one overnight on-call each week.

It was hard work where I had to be present and minister in every type of situation, from things like the deaths of gunshot victims to people recovering from complicated surgeries.

And, on this one particular morning, feeling exhausted and a bit sad, I was sitting in my car consumed with thoughts about the many hard weeks I had already had.

Then, I looked up from the red light I was stopped at and saw a magnificent, huge white cloud that looked like it had been skillfully sculpted by hand. Rays of light were streaming out along the sides and formed faint highlights, like someone had woven silver thread throughout this pure white cloud.

I was suddenly in awe of the goodness of God, and I felt somehow that seeing this beauty in the sky had shifted my entire day.

It was just like it says in today's Psalm.

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky displays what his hands have made.

² One day tells a story to the next.

One night shares knowledge with the next

³ without talking,

without words,

without their voices being heard.

⁴ Yet, their sound has gone out into the entire world,
their message to the ends of the earth.

Yes. It was exactly like that.

I was so enthralled by this cloud, that I snapped a few photos. Then the light changed, and I had to concentrate on getting to my exit and driving on the various interstates that would take me to the hospital.

So, I arrived. We had our quick morning meeting, and the chaplains all broke up to head off to our various units.

That meant that Chaplain Brian, another seminarian, and I were off to the ICU for morning rounds with the doctors. Brian had the medical ICU, and I had the surgical ICU. Both were large, busy units full of heart ache for the staff, patients, and loved ones.

On walk over to the ICU, I told Brian about the cloud.

And what do you know! Amazingly, he had seen the exact same cloud and gotten the same sense of God's grace and presence.

I showed him the photo I had taken. Later, I would end up texting this cloud photo to him throughout that summer. It was a powerful reminder, that even as we were stuck in the windowless basement or the frantic ER, that God was with us, and that God's goodness was all around us.

It's amazing how that one beautiful cloud in the sky turned around not only my attitude that day, but my friend Brian's as well.

When we stop to marvel at creation, we can see that God's goodness is written in the sky. The Psalmist captured this for us in Psalm 19. Nature is one of the ways that God speaks to us, but it isn't all fluffy clouds and blue skies.

The natural world in both its beauty and its ugliness gives us a testimony to the reality of God's beautiful salvation and the reality of our own ugly sin.

This idea that the world around us testifies to God has a long tradition. In fact, for centuries some people have referred to the natural world as a book with the aptly named title "The Book of Nature".

The idea here is that creation is a "book" that we can read every day, even though, as the Psalmist says it contains no actual words.

"The Book of Nature" shows us many things, like the beauty of the skies, but it also shows things we don't want to see. Things that are ugly.

In nature, we see the reality of sin, that death and destruction take place everywhere at every moment. We don't have to look far to find this. I can think of hikes I have taken where the scenery was full of vivid wildflowers and vibrant green trees, like the prettiest part of a poem come to life..... only to have that mood sobered by finding an animal dead on the side of the trail.

The natural world, testifies to great and hard theological truths about life and death, and the Psalms as a whole often allude to this or use imagery of creation to tell us something about God. God is speaking to us through these Psalms, and God is speaking to us through the book of nature.

We can't just rely on this book of nature, however.

Psalm 19 also reminds us of how God speaks to us in and by His word. Psalm 19 switches from God's greatness written in the skies to tell us:

The teachings of the Lord are perfect,
reviving the soul.

The decrees of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.

⁸ The commandments of the Lord are right,
bringing joy to the heart.

The commands of the Lord are clear,
giving insight for living.

⁹ Reverence for the Lord is pure,
lasting forever.

The laws of the Lord are true;
each one is fair.

¹⁰ They are more desirable than gold,
even the finest gold.

They are sweeter than honey,
even honey dripping from the comb.

So you see, we don't just read God's word in the white clouds across the sky. We read them in the white pages of our Bibles.

God is so very good to us, that we have been given His voice in nature and in actual words, in the message of the Scriptures. In divine revelation.

The word of God that Psalm 19 refers to is the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, the teaching of God.

From the Torah, we learn in Genesis about how sin enters the world and how death is the consequence of sin. Yet, we also see how God gives life even amidst death, providing for humanity and reaching out in relationship and revelation to people like Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and his brothers, Moses and the Hebrews who God frees from slavery in Egypt.

The teachings of God give us the promise of salvation; a promise fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose again, so that all who believe in Him shall have everlasting life.

And where do we learn about all of this?

We can read about God's actions in the Bible. While we come to church and hear God's word spoken to us, we also have the immense blessing of being able to read it for ourselves at home, on breaks from a job, or at school—or to listen to the words of Scripture in our cars as we take children to school, commute to work, or even on the way to the grocery store.

Just like you feel moved by the amazing sight of pinks and golds streaming through the clouds at sunset and feel God speaking beauty to your soul, so too can you hear God speaking to your soul and into the circumstances of your life as you sit down to read the Bible.

I promise you, God is speaking to you in the Book of Nature and in our holy book, the Bible.

As you go out this week, look up and consider what God is saying to your soul in the artistry of the sky. Look for your own cloud. What has God written to you on it?

And look down this week at the words in your Bible and let God speak to you through his Word.

Because God is speaking to you. All the time.

Amen.

Advent Lutheran Church