

The Word of the Lord
Psalm 19
Pastor Gary Walters

Hear these words from Psalm 19: "The heavens are telling the glory of God. They are a marvelous display of his craftsmanship. Day and night they keep on telling about God. Without a sound or a word, silent in the skies their message reaches out to all the world. The sun lives in the heavens where God has placed it and moves out across the skies as radiant as a bridegroom going to his wedding, or as joyous as an athlete looking forward to the race. The sun crosses the heavens from end to end and nothing can hide from its heat. God's laws are perfect, they protect us, make us wise and give us joy and light. God's laws are pure, eternal, just. They are more desirable than gold. They are sweeter than honey drippings from a comb. For they warn us away from harm and give success to those who obey them. But how can I know the sins that lurk in my heart? Cleanse me lord from hidden faults and keep me from deliberate wrongs. Help me to stop doing them, only then can I be free of guilt and innocent of some great crime. May my spoken words and unspoken thoughts be pleasing even to you oh Lord my rock and my redeemer." The word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

The psalmist is captivated by this idea of God communicating, of proclaiming himself to us, first through creation and then through his word and that proclamation of God or the revealing of God through nature is the subject for a whole other sermon and maybe I will get there someday. But, I want to focus on that word part of it for just a moment. Of course, in the psalmist' case we are talking about the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament; although when he wrote this might depend on how many books there were, but for us it's the first 39 books of the Bible; of course 27 in the New Testament, 66 in all, God revealing himself to us.

What is it about this book that has so captivated the psalmist? Well let me give you a little history. For the Old Testament, the first writings were written in about 1400 BC. That is a long, long time ago! To give you some time perspective, the second set of the great pyramids were being built about then--extremely ancient. The last writings of the Old Testament were written about 450 BC and so in that 950 year period there were, give or take a few, about 50 different men who had some hand in writing it. And of course some of them, like Moses, or David, or Solomon, are named directly or among the prophets. But there were also this whole group of men who grew up, sorry ladies, but in that day and age that was what it was, but this whole group of men who grew up around the scriptures and it was really their task to rewrite these and to protect them and to pass them on, the scribes. They edited and compiled and took from oral tradition and

the different histories and annals of the life of Israel and kind of pulled these things together. So some of what we have is directly from those people I named, but some of it is just the product of all of their bringing that information together. They did their job well.

In fact there is this incredible story about a poor shepherd boy who was taking care of his goats down along the shores of the Dead Sea. His dog got lost. He went back and look for him. Sure enough the boy could hear his dog down in a hole or cave somewhere barking. So the boy went in after him. First he dropped a rock down this hole to see how far it was, to see if it was safe for him to drop down as well. What he heard when that rock hit bottom was crashing pottery. Which, if you are out along the Dead Sea, is a strange thing to hear. The boy wanted his dog so he dropped down, into that hole and rescued his dog. What he found, was an old pot. Inside it had a beautifully preserved leather scroll. So he pulled that scroll out and took it with him. When he saw the scroll he thought "Ah, new shoes."

He got to town where he could ask a shoemaker, to turn this scroll into a pair of shoes. Fortunately our cobbler had a friend who worked at Hebrew University and the cobbler knew enough not to cut up this piece of leather. He took it to his friend who could not believe what he was looking at—an ancient Hebrew script and immediately the professor knew that what he was holding in his hands was extremely valuable. I don't know if the boy ever got his shoes; hopefully he was well compensated for leading the professor back to these caves which contained not just one jar, but jar after jar after jar of scrolls containing various books from the Hebrew Bible.

The scroll that he had found was the second half of the book of Isaiah. Up to that day and age, the oldest texts of the Old Testament were from about 950 AD. That's not very old when you're talking about ancient manuscripts. The Dead Sea Scrolls though, as they came to be called, brought oldest manuscripts back to 150 BC. It took off 1100 years of history off of those texts, in terms of the writing and rewriting and the transmitting of those scrolls. What they found was the scribes had indeed done their job extraordinarily well. In 1100 years there was less than 5% error in those texts, less than 5%. Most of those mistakes were putting a vowel where it shouldn't be or adding or subtracting a pronoun or article, such as "a", "the", "he" and "she." In less than 0.5% of the cases, the changes made any difference in the meaning of the verse and in very few of those did it actually bring into question the overall meaning of what we have in terms of the scriptures. Considering when the scribal traditions started and when some of the youngest Old Testament books were written, they were basically handed straight into the hands of the scribes. So what we have is an extraordinarily accurate account of what happened in the spiritual life of the people of Israel.

Well, that's something about the history of how the Old Testament came to be. But, there is another interesting part that I'd like to point out, between the way that the Christians and the Jews organized the Old Testament. It's not the same. If you pick up an English translation of the Hebrew Bible it's not in the same order as ours. Their last two books of the Bible are Ezra and Nehemiah, which chronologically are the latest, but those two books are about the Israelites coming back from exile and their efforts at restoring the temple worship and rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. They leave off with a challenge and a question. Israel has been given another chance, another opportunity, and the question becomes "What will they do with it?", "How will it go?".

In the Christian Bible, the prophets are the last books of the Old Testament. The prophets talk again, again about a new covenant and a new Messiah. The prophets leaves us with an expectation, they prepare us for what God about to do next. So, this story, this unforgettable story that so captivated the psalmist, it's a little bit hard to get a hold of the spirit or the emotion of the thing so I'd like to tell you another story to get at it.

I heard this story from Tony Campollo, and it's about a young woman named Jessica who lived in Apple Grove, a little rural town. She had a happy childhood there. Her parents were a little overbearing, she thought, and Apple Grove was a little bit backwoods, she thought, but still she was well provided for and it was a safe small town, homey atmosphere. But, she didn't like it. She didn't like it at all. In fact, when she turned 18 she was out of there, that was it. She'd had it with her parents and these small town, backwoods ways. So she turned 18, took all of her savings and left for the city.

She found out that life in the city was not always so easy. Through different circumstances, eventually she ended up on the street. One day when she was panhandling for her next meal and thinking about a place to find shelter for the night, this man came along and said he'd be her "friend." He taught her to do some things that men really like, but in exchange he put her up in a nice apartment, and he bought her nice things, that fancy jewelry and the pretty dresses she had always wanted. Before she knew it she was living the high life and she couldn't believe how good life in the city was and how much fun she was having and how glamorous. She thought how backward and how sheltered and how dumb life in Apple Grove had ever been. She couldn't believe that had been her life.

Occasionally she felt a little guilt over what she was doing, what she had become. But, then she'd see the nice things, the nice dresses, the jewelry, and the high life, and she'd put that aside. Well that went on for a while. In fact once in a while during that time she thought she saw her father, but she had no interest in going back.

But it came to pass that she got sick and that her pretty complexion got rather pasty and those beautiful eyes were now more bloodshot than they were blue and the bags under them were rather pronounced. She started to have a cough and strange bruises showed up on her body and she didn't know what it was and the doctors weren't quite sure either. And her "friend" made a comment that she wasn't taking very good care of herself, which was a problem because it was bad for business. He said, "Take care of it." Well she tried, but like I said, she didn't know what it was and the doctors weren't quite sure and eventually her "friend" took her for a drive and dropped her off back on the street corner where he had picked her up a few years ago. Now she was sick and on the street, broke and penniless.

One night when she was bedding down in an alleyway for the night, she thought she saw her father again walk by at the end of the alley and she thought she heard someone call her name. But after all the things her father had taught her and after she had turned her back on it, there was no way that her father would come after her, it was just wishful thinking. So she scolded herself for it and disregarded it. Besides there was no way she could go back now, after what she had become, after everything that had happened. There was no way she could look her parents in the eye.

Eventually her illness got worse and she just didn't know what to do. She decided that at least she wanted to see Apple Grove one last time. She walked out to the edge of the city where there was a convenience store that was on the highway that went back to Apple Grove. When there was a friendly-looking trucker coming out of the store that looked like he was heading that direction, she asked if she could hop in with him to Apple Grove. He was glad for the company. She got her ride to Apple Grove. She knew she wasn't going to get out because there was no way she could go back, not now. But she just wanted to see it one more time.

Well as they pulled into Apple Grove, she could look out over the edge of town and saw the farm where she had grown up and the house where her parents lived. It was too much. She had to get out and look. She opened the door and hopped down and before she could do anything else her father pulled up from the same road that she had just come down. He'd been in the city, looking for her once again. Their eyes met and she had all the apologies, she wanted to say how sorry she was but before she could say anything her father jumped out and ran around and picked her up. Not just gave her a hug, but picked her up and carried her, very gently, and placed her in the front seat of the family car and took her home. As she started in with all of the apologies, he just said "Honey, you're home, you're mine and I love you."

Well of course that isn't a story just about Jessica. It's the Bible story. The psalmist is

so captivated by this unforgettable story because it communicates the love of God. We are pretty good about knowing the New Testament, but that story of the Old Testament is not always a happy story. On the other hand it's incredible. Because from the first pages we have the story of Adam and Eve and there is one thing they can't do, one thing! and they do it! they eat the forbidden fruit and the rest is history. Israel repeats that cycle a hundred times. Humanity repeats that cycle a hundred times. Yet, God sends his judges, he sends his prophets, he sends his kings, he sends his prophets again and for a time people come back, but then so prone to wander are we. It seems like nothing is going to work until finally God introduces this idea of a new covenant, a new way, a new possibility, and he sends not a servant, but he sends his son—to reveal the depth of his love for us—to wipe away the sickness of the human heart—to throw open the door home.

So how do we respond to that love. With a Yes! Absolutely, with grabbing hold of it with everything we're worth. There are a lot of different ways we do that. It calls us, God is out there seeking us when we're hunkered down in some alley, so often thinking, there is no way back or no way home. We need to hear this story again and again to remind us that as prone we are to wander, that God is out there searching and seeking us.

The first graders are going to read a Bible in a year but I'd like to make that challenge to everybody to read the Bible in a year. It's a bit of work, the Bible in 365 stories probably won't take this long, but it's probably 15 to 20 minutes of reading a day. But I have a little bit of bribery, an incentive, because I want to have a big party next January. We are going to rent a room, or take over at Space Aliens. I will treat, for everybody who can read the Bible in a year, it's a treat on me. Art and I are taking up this challenge and we are offering it to you. For the first through fourth graders, because the second, third, and fourth graders who got these Bibles the last couple of years, didn't get in on this deal so if they read the Bible in 365 Stories they're invited to the party.

For the rest of us if you read the Bible in a year, you're invited to the party because these are unforgettable words, this is an unforgettable story, fantastic words that we need to hear. And I'm going to make it a little easier, actually I'm preaching out of my One Year Bible today because you can go down to the Rainbow Shop and get your own, then it's all laid out for you. Or back on the table there is the Bible broken down into 365 readings and you can just pick up one of those and mark all the right spots and read through the Bible that way. Or, if you're one of those old fashioned "I'm just going to plow straight through it kind of people, you can start at the front and go to the back, again 20 minutes of reading per day, should just about get you there in a year. Or, you can go to the website and there is a link to the One Year Bible. They will put the scriptures up on your screen for you, it's just that simple. The address for the McCabe

website is on the back of your bulletin. So I invite to this journey. Take up this challenge with us, because this is an unforgettable story and it's words we need to hear.

Would you pray with me? "Lord we thank your for your words to us. Help us to immerse ourselves in that message of your love and your grace, and thank you, thank you for coming to us again and again and inviting us home, inviting us to yourself. In Christ's name we pray.