

## Waking Up to God

*Psalm 19*

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Whether you know it or not, pastors pray over their sermons in lots of interesting ways.

One pastor I knew put a Christmas bow on his sermon manuscript each Sunday morning as a reminder that this was his gift to God, his offering. And, each Sunday, as he walked into the sanctuary before anyone else arrived, he lifted his sermon up above his head as if he were lifting his gift up to God before setting in the pulpit.

Another pastor I know never writes an ending for his sermons. He does his study and preparation, develops a trajectory for where his sermon is going, but never writes an ending. So on Sunday mornings, he walks into the pulpit with a handful of notes and begins preaching. But because he never writes an ending, when he steps into the pulpit he never knows how it's going to end. That sounds like an absolutely terrifying proposition to someone like me, but he says that this is how he ensures that he's left space for the Holy Spirit to show up each week.

To be fair, I've sat through a couple of his sermons when it seemed like the Holy Spirit was running late! The twelve o'clock hour came and went, and he just kept preaching until, I guess, the Spirit showed up. But by then, the sound of my growling stomach made it nearly impossible to hear the ending.

Other pastors pray these words just before their sermon each and every week:

*"Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart  
be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).*

My friend, Kent Ingram, down the street at First United Methodist Church is one of them. He reads the scripture passage for the day and before he speaks a single word of his sermon, he recites that verse as an audible prayer.

He's not the first pastor I've heard do it, nor will he be the last. Because he's a friend, I asked him about it once. "Kent," I said, "Tell me about the prayer before your sermon – you know, from Psalm 19. Do you do that every week?"

"Oh, Yes," he said. "I started doing it in seminary. A pastor I looked up to did it before me, and I grabbed hold of it and have used it ever since. I think that it's a good reminder that the words that come out of our mouths from the pulpit have power... power to build up and, if we're not careful, power to tear down. So I pray those words each week in hopes that my words will be useful in serving God and God's people."

I admire and appreciate Kent's explanation. You can feel the weight of it, can't you? Standing in a pulpit, looking out over a sanctuary of people, in worship, and hearing the preacher pray, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be

acceptable to you, O LORD” gives the moment a natural heft. It can bring us to attention, I think. It can make us ready to hear a word from God.

There’s only one problem with it: if the *only* time we ever hear this prayer is when it’s recited by preachers just before they preach, then we might be persuaded to think that it’s a prayer *exclusively* for preachers.

But it’s not. It is a prayer for anyone who wants to wake up to the presence of God in their lives.

Psalm 19, as a whole, is an alarm clock that is trying to wake us up to the Divine. It is trying to shake us from our sleep and to wake our hearts to God. C.S. Lewis considered it “the greatest poem in the psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world” because of its call for us to wake up to the wonder of God in the world (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 56)

Where can God be found?

“The *heavens* are telling the glory of God;  
and the *firmament* proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1).

Just look around, it says. *All nature sings, and round us rings the music of the spheres* (Maltbie Babcock, “This is My Father’s World,” 1901). Creation itself testifies to the glory of the Creator.

When can God be found?

“*Day to day* pours forth speech,  
and *night to night* declares knowledge” (Psalm 19:2).

God can be found *every* day and *every* night, if we will but look, if we will but listen.

Why is it that we think that God can only be found within the four walls of the church between 10:30 and 11:30 AM on Sunday mornings?

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, “Somewhere along the line, we bought — or were sold — the idea that God is chiefly interested in religion” (*An Altar in the World*, 6). We have been deceived or have been deceiving ourselves to believe that the presence of God has been constrained only to buildings with stained glass windows.

Don’t you remember the story of Jacob falling asleep in the wilderness between Beersheba and Haran (Gen. 28:10ff)? He laid down in that barren place, right on the dirt, and he pulled a stone under his head as a pillow and drifted off to sleep. That night he dreamt of a ladder reaching from earth up to heaven. He watched as angels of God ascended and descended on it. Then, in his dream, God stood next to him and blessed him.

When Jacob woke up, he was sitting on the same patch of dirt, the same brown sand on which he had fallen asleep. He looked up and the same hills still surrounded him. He looked down, and the rock he'd slept on was still just an ordinary rock. Nothing at all had changed, and yet, somehow, everything was different.

What had happened?

Jacob had been woken up to the presence of God. And guess what? He wasn't in a church building or a temple or a synagogue. He was in the desert. He said, "Surely the LORD is [even] in this place – *and I did not know it!*" And then he took the stone that he'd used as a pillow and he used it to build an altar, right then and there, and he called it Beth-el – "the house of God."

Haven't you ever had the experience of sitting under the stars or at the edge of an ocean or on top of a mountain, taking in the immensity of it all and thinking: "Surely God is in this place – and I did not know it?" If you have, then you know, at least in part, what it means to be awakened to God in creation.

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun refers to such experiences as *visio divina*, or *holy seeing*. When we practice being present to God *in creation*, what we're doing is *praying with our eyes* (*Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 47.)

It's not a terribly difficult concept for us Coloradans to grasp. For nearly seven years now, I have woken up each morning, looked at the peak aglow in the morning sun, and said to myself, "I cannot believe that I get to live *here*." Only someone who has lived in New Jersey understands the full weight of what I mean when I say that...

"I cannot believe that I get to live *here*" is the prayer of gratitude that I pray to God with my eyes every single day.

But as much as Psalm 19 points to creation as a means for catching a glimpse of the Creator, it also says that there is another way to know God, namely, through *scripture*:

"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;  
the *fear* of the LORD is pure, enduring forever;  
the *ordinances* of the LORD are true, and righteous all together" (Ps. 19:7-9).

Far too often we read words like law, commandment, and decrees with a negative understanding. These are the things we can't do, aren't allowed to do, ought not do, if we desire to be good. But *laws*, *decrees*, *precepts*, *commandments*, *ordinances* are all words that point to that great, big Hebrew word, *torah* – which is best understood as *instruction*, and not *prohibition*.

Prohibition is about avoidance. If we can avoid these things we can be good. It's like trying to avoid land mines, trying to avoid sleeping dogs that you ought to let lie. But *instruction* is something different. *Instruction* invites us in. It pours into us. It illumines us. It fill us up.

One is about trying to be good from the outside-in; the other is about becoming good from the inside-out. We can fill our lives up with prohibitions, or we can have our lives filled up by instruction.

Several years ago now the great preacher, Fred Craddock, was buried at a simple service in his church in a small town in Georgia. In that service, Tom Long said this:

"The theologian Karl Barth once spoke of 'The Strange New World within the Bible.' For Fred, though, it was more like 'The Enchanted World within the Bible.' Fred did not so much interpret biblical texts as he *inhabited* them. He hung his cap and coat on the rack, sat down in the big rocking chair in the center of the room, and made himself at home in biblical texts...

This meant that biblical phrases and images were always on the tip of his tongue in the most unexpected and delightful ways, both in sermons and in ordinary conversation. I remember late one spring, when Fred, Barbara Brown Taylor, and I were all leading a preaching workshop together, that we took an evening off and went together to an Atlanta Braves baseball game. Four or five rows in front of us was a group of college-age guys, who started the game in a rowdy mood and grew even louder and more disruptive as the game progressed. About the fifth inning, a group of black-shirted security guards, with earphones plugged in, came scurrying down the steps, stopped at the offending row and pointed at the ring-leader. They then grabbed him by the arms and muscled him unceremoniously out of the stadium. Barbara, Fred, and I sat silently for a moment, thinking about what we had just seen. Then Fred said, 'Must not have had on a wedding garment'" ("Craddock made 'our hearts more hospitable, our imaginations more free,' March 9, 2015).

When we let it, scripture gives us the lens we need to see the world as God does, and it is an invariably richer world in God's eyes – one that is more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey (Psalm 19:10).

But then the psalm makes its third and final movement. Suddenly, the tone shifts. The psalmist stops talking *about* God in the world and stops talking *about* God in scripture. Instead, the psalmists starts talking *to* God:

"Clear me from hidden faults.

Keep back your servant also from proud thoughts;  
do not let them have dominion over me.

Then I shall be blameless,  
and innocent of great transgression" (Psalm 19:12-13).

In nature we can gain some revelation of who God is, and in scripture we can gain some revelation of who God is, but it is only in relationship that we come to know God, ourselves. Robert Cate says it like this: "Reading a letter from home is never as good as sitting in the presence of our loved ones" (*Help in Ages Past, Hope for Years to Come*, 27).

Our God is relational and our experiences with God are trustworthy, too.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells this story:

"A few years ago a friend of mine was walking the Mother Labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral with a group of other pilgrims when she noticed an older man and woman standing near the entrance watching. After about twenty minutes of looking, they walked straight to the center of the labyrinth and bowed their heads in prayer.

Then the woman took off her shoes and handed them to her husband, along with her purse. As he watched, she took the long way out of the labyrinth, following the path this time. She cried on the way. He cried just watching her. When they had pulled themselves together, my friend went up to ask them what had just happened.

They had come to celebrate the end of the woman's treatment for breast cancer, they explained. They had never ever heard of a labyrinth before they walked into the cathedral that day. The woman could not explain why she was drawn to walk it, but when she did her husband decided to hold down the center, giving thanks for her life while she found her way out.

'I began to feel at peace in my body again after being very angry that it had let me down,' the woman explained. Walking, she found herself remembering all the people who had walked with her through her surgery and treatment. 'I now know this is why we came here,' she said" (*An Altar in the World*, 61).

You know, Augustine of Hippo once said, "It is solved by walking."

What is "it?"

You will only learn that when you stop talking *about* God and start talking *to* God instead.

You see, that's why you can't let it be a prayer for preachers only. You can't let us do all of the talking for you. At some point, you have to put down the letter from home, and just go home to be in the presence of God yourself. At some point, you have to stop reading *about* God, and just start talking *to* God.

At some point, *you* have to do the walking.

Amen.