

Christina Litwiller
Salina Mennonite Church
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Scripture: Psalm 19:1-14

Experiencing the Word in Two Languages

There are two announcements in this week's bulletin from the Western District Conference Library. One announces the beginning of curbside pickup two afternoons a week. The other offers a list of books to assist in growing and learning about the issues of racism and white privilege. Last Sunday the library announced a virtual summer story hour and summer reading programs for children and adults. Be sure to check those out if you haven't already.

If you happen to travel to North Newton and stop in the WDC library (when it's open to the public again), you'll find a wide array of children's Bible story books. While all of them tell stories of God's people and of Jesus' life, the writers and illustrators recount and portray them in a wide variety of ways.¹

The Bible itself is similar to that—many different people sharing the stories of how they have known God, how they were changed by Jesus, and how God's Spirit leads them. We continue to read these stories because we can still know God, be changed by Jesus, and be led by the Spirit. We learn the stories together, as a gathered community and church, to help us understand what they meant so long ago, and to be able to tell each other our own stories of God in our lives today.

If you leave the library and travel south about a mile to Faith and Life Bookstore with the goal of purchasing a Bible, you might soon be overwhelmed. The variety of translations, formats, bindings, and supplements seems endless. No matter your age, gender, occupation, or theology, you might be able to find a Bible packaged just for you. A certain amount of variety is good, but the plethora of options illustrates the possible dangers when God's Word is combined with capitalism, competing theologies, and political differences.

Of course, we find those same things in scripture. In our Bible we find the story of the movement of God among the people of God. It includes the width and breadth of human experience – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Many of us probably have our favorite oft-read passages, as well as passages we like to ignore. We know that Scripture can be used—and too often has been used—to justify positions across the political spectrum. It wouldn't be too difficult to find examples of Bible verses being used to support every opinion or belief concerning the current issues in our country – epidemic, racism, policing, protesting, and campaigning.

The spiritual practice of scripture study takes on many forms. The purpose of pursuing this practice matters. Consider four images of “digging deeply.” This could mean reading Scripture like a gardener, expecting to find beauty and life. Or like gold miners, who know exactly what they're looking for, so that's all they see. It could mean digging deeply like an archaeologist, carefully examining all the layers for deeper understanding. Or like trench-diggers, who, feeling threatened by any approach from outside their theological notion, use the Bible to dig themselves into positions they need to defend themselves.

Lest any of us start pointing fingers, I'm fairly certain each one of us has read scripture as a gardener, as a gold miner, as an archaeologist, and as a trench-digger at one time or another. I

¹ This introduction draws from Week 5 Worship Resources written by Alissa Bender, *Leader, Summer 2018*, Vol. 15, No. 4, ©2018 MennoMedia p. 45.

hope, though, that our overall goal when digging into Scripture is to discover that the story of the movement of God among the people of God told in those pages is still being told today.

There's a lot more I could say about what the Bible is and how to read the Bible. I trust that over the past 11 years, you've gotten a good sense of the process I use to read, interpret, and live out the Bible. You're welcome to read a sermon I preached a few years ago. I emailed it out along with this week's at-home worship bulletin.

Right now we'll take a few moments to immerse ourselves in one particular scripture. Psalm 19 is a hymn of praise.² Numerous composers have used this psalm as the basis of oratorios, hymns, and songs. We could easily fill our worship time by letting the rhythm of the words and the music of this psalm speak to our souls.

This is also a teaching psalm. We might call it a bilingual psalm. It shows us that we must become fluent in two languages, the languages of creation and Torah. The speech of creation is visual, a kind of sign language. In very different language the Torah instructs us in the wisdom of the Lord. From the Psalmist we learn that creation and Torah join together in testimony to the Lord God. They speak different languages but have the same intent. One interprets the other yet both point to the same God.”

The language of creation is found in the first six verses. I'm going to read these verses again. Since this language is a visual language, it might enhance your experience if you close your eyes and listen to the words. It sounds like a contradiction, but sometimes you need to close your eyes in order to see better. Of course, you're welcome to keep your eyes open and read the words along with me.

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

This is a hymn to creation; God's glory is proclaimed through nature. Each one of us could describe times when experiencing God's creation caused us to praise God. I've been awed by the grandeur of mountains and oceans and huge redwood trees. I've also been inspired by cornfields, sunshine, and gentle breezes. The creation causes us to praise God, but a more accurate reading of this psalm shows us that creation itself is praising God. The song is in process: the heavens keep on telling, keep on proclaiming the wonder of God's presence in the world. The song began in the beginning when God created heaven and earth. It will continue as

² Background on Psalm 19 comes from James H. Waltner, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Psalms*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 107-109 and Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year B*, Trinity Press International, 1993, pp. 152-153.

³ Psalm 16:1-6, *New Revised Standard Version*.

long as heaven and earth exist. The whole creation testifies to God's greatness and declares the divine handiwork in order that people may hear, praise, and worship. There is joy, order, and power in creation. We join all of creation and worshiping God the creator.

Listen now to verses 7-11:

*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 altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward. ⁴*

Now the psalmist praises the law of God. This is a hymn to the Torah, God's instruction. The testimony of the created world is not enough for the psalmist. The instruction of the Lord gives more complete light than the sun! The Torah inspires the psalmist more than does the sun!

I like lists so I love this passage. Here we find six terms to speak about the Torah. In the NRSV the terms are law, testimony, precepts, commandment, fear, and ordinances. Some terms found in other translations are rules, statutes, decrees, teaching, instruction, and judgments. We might think of these things in a negative way – city ordinances, teachers' rules, unnecessary laws – but the psalmist uses the names for the law as synonyms that build on each other to form a powerful praise statement. We know this because the adjectives used are positive: perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, true, and righteous. Other adjectives that could be used are: trustworthy, steadfast, enduring, fair, honest, and radiant.

The psalmist lists four benefits of the Torah in these verses. One, it revives the soul; it is life-giving and sustaining. Two, it makes wise the simple by providing them with understanding. Simple is not a negative term here. It refers to those who are untutored or inexperienced but are capable of learning. Three, it rejoices the heart, making one glad to know the will and way of the Lord. Four, it enlightens the eyes by providing a perspective within which to view the world and one's own life. (For some of us, the lists in these verses are a thing of beauty.)

The psalmist makes the radical statement that the instruction of the Lord is more desirable than gold or sweet honey. The law of the Lord warns his servants. It forms them, guides them, enlightens them, gives them moral instruction. God's way of life revealed in the written word of Torah is better than anything money can buy.

⁴ Psalm 16:7-11 *New Revised Standard Version*.

The psalm ends with prayer directly addressed to God. It's a petition for pardon and reconsecration. Listen to verses 11-14. Verse 11 is transitional so I included it with the previous section as well as this one.

*Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
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.
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

In light of the Torah – God's instruction, the psalmist sees his own weakness and wants to avoid failing God. We pray too, asking for wisdom to perceive hidden faults – those things we might do without realizing they are wrong. Also asking the Lord to keep us from committing flagrant sins – grave sins such as arrogance or pride that we know are wrong but sometimes dominate us anyway. Psalm 19 ends with a prayer of dedication – dedicating the words of the mouth – the external spoken words – and the meditation of the heart – the internal unspoken thoughts – to God.

We learn from this psalm that creation and Torah join together in testimony to and praise of God. The psalm moves from the outer reaches of the natural world to the inner recesses of the human personality. Creation and Torah, experience and instruction, the external and internal all provide us with direction and help us discover the will of God. We must always be ready to learn through the wordless instruction of creation, through revelation from God, through our experiences, and through study of scripture and traditions handed down to us by God's servants.

May we continue to dig into Scripture to discover the movement of God among the people of God, in ancient times and in our current world. May we find reward and security in the deeper understanding of God this spiritual practice brings. May we be cleared from our hidden faults and prevented from making flagrant errors. May the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts always be acceptable to our Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.