

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk

(Delivered on March 8, 2015)

Text: **Psalm 19** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

The heavens herald your glory, O God, and the skies display your handiwork. Day after day they tell their story, and night after night they reveal the depth of their understanding.

Without speech, without words, without even an audible voice, their cry echoes through all the world, and their message reaches the ends of the earth. For in the heavens the sun has pitched a tent. It comes forth with the grandeur of a wedding procession, with the eagerness of an athlete ready to race. It rises at one end of the sky and travels to the other end, and nothing escapes its warmth.

Your law, YHWH, is perfect; it refreshes the soul. Your rule is to be trusted; it gives wisdom to the naïve. Your purposes, O God, are right; they gladden the heart. Your command is clear; it gives light to the eyes.

Holding you in awe, YHWH, is purifying; it endures. Your decrees are steadfast, and all of them just. They are more precious than gold, than the purest of gold, and sweeter than honey, than honey fresh from the comb. In them your faithful people find instruction; there is great reward in keeping them.

But who can detect one's own failings? Forgive the misdeeds I don't even know about! Keep your faithful one from presumption as well, so that my faults never control me. Then I will be blameless and innocent of a grave error.

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be pleasing in your sight, YHWH, my rock and my redeemer.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"A Part of God's Whole Creation"**

"The Psalms are reminders of how important it is that we see ourselves as a part of God's whole creation," our Seasons of the Spirit told us this week.

"The litany of Psalm 19," they said, "takes us out amongst the stares, to the tops of mountains, across deserts and oceans and rivers – a whirlwind tour through day and night, wondering at the ways in which nature speaks of the glory of God... We are not separate; creation is not a minor act the purpose which is fulfilled in humanity. Creation itself is wonderful and capable of praising the God of creation without our intervention. When we see ourselves in this light, the psalmist insists that life looks different. We are revived by joy and wisdom; we desire those things that are true and righteous."

Today is a day of praising God. In the midst of our Lenten Journey it is always important to rest for a while along the road. To pause in our deep moments of reflection and introspection and take time to remember Who it is that is taking this journey with us and to praise the One who makes all our journeys possible. So today is mostly about the celebration of creation and praising God through song and story.

"Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and you give light through him.... Praise be you, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful." So spoke St. Francis of Assisi.

Within creation, God is ever present and all of creation reminds us of the One who created it all.

“How beautifully the psalmist speaks of creation telling, singing, crying out, proclaiming, bursting with God’s inexpressible goodness and glory,” Rev. Kate Huey wrote in her essay for UCC.org this week. “No words, but much joy, and the warm sun that no one can escape or avoid participates in that joy, running its course like an exuberant runner or an ecstatic bridegroom.”

Like no other book of the Bible, the Psalms provide us with words and ways to sing God’s praises. There is never a situation I encounter as a pastor – especially in times of crisis and illness – that a psalm doesn’t come to my aid. In this season of Lent, it is highly appropriate that we focus on one of the psalms as a way not only to praise God, but to see the work of God in the journey of Jesus.

“The psalms have been the chief resource of Christian prayer and praise from the very first,” John Eaton writes in his indispensable book, “Psalms for Life.” “In the New Testament no other scripture is quoted as often as the psalms, for they were found to be supremely prophetic of Christ and his kingdom. Already in Old Testament times the roots of this understanding were strong, for the ideals and visions expressed in worship in the time of the anointed kings (1000-587 BCE) had come to be seen as foreshadowing the coming of the Messiah, the bringer of the kingdom of God.”

So within the Psalms we find not only the foretelling of Christ, the one we worship and follow, but of the full expansion of the realm of our Creator and the unfolding of the times in which we are living right now.

The much used words of the last verse of Psalm 19, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,” are not referencing any sermon, John Eaton tells us, but are referencing, “the psalm itself - a poetic song and its music. The word translated “meditation” here means rather “resounding music, reverberation. The singer,” he notes, “may have been kneeling with his harp or lyre pressed to his body, and his instrument seemed to express the very music of his heart as he offered his chant to God.”

I love the vision he gives us of the creator of this song praising the creator of this world: “We may imagine the singer waiting already before dawn, waiting in the open court of the temple under Jerusalem’s starry sky. Inspired, he hears beyond ordinary hearing, for he hears hymns of praise and testimony resounding in the heavens, he hears the great elements of the universe praising their Creator, pouring out, like ecstatic prophets, the tale of his creative work. They are teaching and encouraging each other to be centered on God and so fulfill their life and function. Day teaches its following day, night its following night.” Beautiful!

I believe it is within creation that we are most often in touch with God’s wisdom and God’s way for our lives. As our psalm continues, we hear the singer moving from praise for the beauty of creation to the beauty of God’s law. Not exactly a natural progression to most of us, I think.

When’s the last time you sped down the highway and thanked God for the speeding limit? Probably not a bad idea, actually, huh? And, yet, here we are inspired by the psalmist realizing the greatness and goodness, indeed the SWEETNESS of God’s law – like honey drops coming off the honeycomb, in fact.

As we looked at this part of the Psalm for a spell during our LEAP of Faith discussion on Wednesday, I wondered if the beauty of seeing the law in this way has to do with the ways in which the light shines when we live in God’s way and shape our lives by God’s precepts instead of by what WE think is right and wise.

I know there have been times in my life when I’ve been out of step in my relationship with God and with God’s people – knowing what I should do or say, but avoiding it or trying to ignore it. In these times, the world seems dark and my vision cloudy. Stepping up and into what I know God is calling me to do or say, I notice again the extraordinary creation all around me, God’s light shines on my path and opens up the vistas of all there is to experience in this miraculous place. “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength,” Paul so wisely stated in his Corinthian letter included in our lectionary selections for today.

“The psalm says to us: grasp the unity of creation and religion,” John Eaton writes. “See together the joy of starry skies, mountains, seas and the Spirit’s word in the Church. So we shall ponder deeply, to know that the Word of God that carried forth God’s thought and power to effect creation is the same Word who came to us as Jesus Christ, to revive us, gladden our heart, and give light to all our being.”

Let us pause now to revive our hearts as we do some of that deep pondering along our third step in our Soul Journey, which we began on the First Sunday of Lent. If you’ve been here the last couple of Sunday, you know that each Sunday we are journeying together to a different destination to see what there is to receive there and to ask ourselves some of the same questions each time, along with one or two new ones that relate to the day’s theme.

So, please take another little piece of paper and a pen from the pew in front of you, or use your bulletin or your own pen or whatever you want, and let’s take a little time to consider some questions for today as we journey to our third destination we’re calling, “Creatures Great and Small.”

Close your eyes for a moment and journey within to any place where you can observe animals, birds, or fish in their natural habitat. Perhaps you’re sitting in a tree, or next to a waterfall. Maybe you’re crouched in the savannah or standing in a river. Whatever image comes up for you, go with it.

Breathe deeply as you encounter this place where you can observe God’s creatures and let the essence of this place wash over you.

What does it feel like here? What sounds do you hear? Is there a scent in the air? Does the rhythm of your heartbeat and your breathing change as you gaze at these amazing living and breathing creations?

(silence)

In this sacred soul space, I invite you to ponder a few questions and then write down whatever comes to you. Don’t worry if nothing comes to you in this moment, but take these questions with you if you like and see if anything comes to you throughout the week.

First,

What might God have to say about this place?

Second, What insights can I gain from observing these creatures and understanding my relationship to them?

And finally, How would my life be different if I found time to experience God’s creatures this way on a regular basis?

“Wonder and awe do indeed provide a very different path in Lent, unexpected in a season associated with repentance and doing without,” Rev. Huey writes.

“Do we hear the song of creation, the proclamation of the sun and stars? Do we join, at least with our hearts, in the song of praise, wordless but full of power?”

A Harvest of Quirkiness –
Psalm 19 as imagined in Bruce Sanguin’s book, “If Darwin Prayed”

Gracious God,
How can creation sing your praises,
except with the red wings of blackbirds
flashing across blue sky,
and the croak and splash of frogs
playing hide-and-seek in the ponds?
How can firmament proclaim your handiwork,
except in the wagging tail of a puppy,
and the focused attention of a toddler
soaking in the wonder of it all?

How can the heavens proclaim your glory,
except through a morning sun rising upon gold-green grass,
lighting up the face of lovers as Earth spins them
once more into a new day?
Your beauty and goodness, O Immanent One,
requires Earth's diversity and our own wildness,
breaking down – and out of --- the monotony of prescribed patterns,
choosing rather to take our place
in the dancing procession of differences,
the variegated life of Christ finding expression
in this body of the church
and the bodies of our kin-creatures.
Make a harvest. O Holy One,
of our quiriness,
that we might be your radiant presence.
Amen.