

### “The Word of Creation ... The Word of Redemption”

A German poet stood with a friend before a cathedral in France. His friend said, “Tell me, Heinrich, why can’t people build a church like this anymore?” Replied Heinrich, “My dear friend, in those days people had convictions. We moderns have opinions. And it takes more than opinions to build a Gothic cathedral.”

The commandments of God are the foundations upon which to build our human “cathedrals.” We moderns have a difficult time coping with the loss of certainty that is perhaps the most telling feature of postmodern culture. We have replaced “absolutes” with “relativity.” We view world activity as being all relative. As economics, family relationships, and political structures move toward greater and greater complexity and inconstancy, the Church of Jesus Christ must not only avoid being swept up in the same forces as everything else, but provide steady commandments that orient and order life. This can happen when the Church calls its people to the Bible, because within the living Word of God, there contains truth, wisdom, and power. To call people to the Bible refers more than an occasional reading or study. It is a call to focus. In order to value the spiritual quality of life ... in order to value our own spiritual integrity, we must connect our life solidly to the Creator ... the Eternal Source that feeds, nurtures, inspires, and recharges our spiritual nature. I’m speaking here of caring for the soul.

The Hebrews called it *nephesh*, which is a word that denotes the total person ... body, mind and spirit. Friends, we are more than flesh and blood; we are more than the breath we draw. *Nephesh* ... the soul ... is life ... life in the vessel of what we know as a body ... and life eternal ... a life that goes on when this vessel breaks down and decays. *Nephesh* is what God breathed into His creations, and so the soul is very much a piece of God ... a piece that needs revitalized from time to time. How many times have we stated that our life seems disconnected, fragmented, flying apart in a thousand directions?

And as such, we have felt drained, lifeless, or paralyzed. I am convinced that during those times, our soul ... is out of touch ... out of sync with God. In order to get back into sync, we must return to God, and that returning requires our study of the Scriptures, because the Scriptures are the “sign posts” pointing the way. I will admit that scriptural language and imagery can seem archaic! However, God’s Word for generations has spoken, and this is true for us today. The message, the sign posts, lies within the Scriptures. What remains for us is to see and to hear ... to discern for ourselves God’s Word to us in the present. I believe this is exactly with what the writer of Psalm 19 is struggling. It becomes more obvious when we hear Psalm 19 in a contemporary paraphrase:

*Wherever I am, wherever I go, I can sense something of the power of God, The grandeur of the mountains, the vastness of the oceans, the breathtaking wonder of interstellar space: all this proclaims the glory and majesty of God. Even amid the clutter of our cities, built and abused by the hands of people, there are reflections of Divine splendor. Heaven’s silence or earth’s clamor may not be very articulate. Yet God’s voice can be heard. He makes His presence known throughout the world.*

*God has made for us a path we are to walk in. In His will there is order and purpose. He has proclaimed and demonstrated eternal truth through the lips and lives of His children. There are set before the people of God precepts and principles which direct His creatures in the way of peace and joy. He has given meaning to life, goal and objective to this existence. Therein is the answer to our inner need, the fulfillment of our deepest longings. These things are more precious and of greater value than anything we could ever experience or even dare to imagine.*

*This is the course which I must travel. It is not easy; I make so many mistakes. I am plagued with faults and obsessions. O God, forbid that these should destroy me. Set me free from their tenacious hold on me. Encompass me with Your love and grace that these things may not stand between You and me. O God, these are the thoughts that crowd my heart today. Accept them and respond to them and enable me to realize anew the security and serenity of Your loving presence in my life.*

The Psalmist begins his journey by gazing at the heavens and wondering at the mystery of creation. He cannot see God by looking at the sky, but what he does see is the glory of God. Glory for the Psalmist was the outward “clothing” of God. It did not hide or cover God’s being, rather it revealed His actions. As the living God, He is always doing, creating, recreating, and producing order out of the original chaos ... bringing light at each dawn out of the darkness of night. For the Psalmist, when he stands before creation, observes its splendor, he not only sees, but hears the Word of God being shouted at him.

There is a line from a well-known hymn that expresses this thought: “What thought no real voice nor sound Amidst their radiant orbs be found? In reason’s ear they all rejoice, And utter forth a glorious voice, For ever singing, as they shine,

“The hand that made us is divine.” What the Psalmist is proclaiming is that the heavenly bodies are not mere matter, to be understood only as scientific phenomena. They shout to all who have ears to hear that behind them and their movements lies the meaning of the universe.

The Psalmist has a plain but profound message for us this day: “Stop and smell the roses!” Spend time out in God’s creation. Look at its beauty. Wonder at its majesty. Stop turning so much into your self. Stop worrying about a past you can not change or a future you can not predict. You are too busy thinking and your busyness distracts you. The Psalmist further asks us, how many sunsets or sunrises did you see this week ... sunsets or sunrises that you actually made the time to see? The Psalmist raises these questions because the glory of God is shouting at us while we are running ... running ... running to catch up with our lives. The Season of Lent is a time to let go of the many things that don’t matter; a time to be aware that God has a hold of us ... a time to sense God’s presence which is far more important to our spiritual health ... to the health of our soul ... than one more activity ... one more meeting ... one more birthday party!!

Also, the Psalmist knows that just to praise the Word of Creation is not enough, so he dedicates the second half of our lesson to a second poem in praise of the Word of Redemption. Creation is one guide to God. The other is the Law, which leads us on an inward journey. The Law is known by different names: testimony, precepts, commandments, fear, and ordinances. One author writes: “The sun has a path to travel daily; the Law of God, however, is our path, one that has been given to us by God.” Immanuel Kant, the philosopher, puts it this way: *The sky above us and the moral law within us witness to the same God!*

God’s Law is instruction: ... as testimony, it is a witness to God’s will and our duty; ... as precept, it is a collection of specific injunctions; ... as commandment, it is that which expresses the will of the personal God; ... as fear, it is that which enjoins reverence for God; ... and as ordinance, it is a group of divine judgments. One commentator writes regarding this half of Psalm 19: *The Law is flawless, dependable, right, pure, clean, and true. The Law has not yet been made the occasion for legalistic self-righteousness or burdened with the minute interpretations of scribes. The Law refreshes the inner person, makes the simple wise, brings joy to the heart, and sheds light on the way to life. The Law is more desirable than the finest gold and the best honey --- in other words, the Law is better than all the things money can buy.*

Hear the difference between ourselves and the Psalmist? We think the Ten Commandments are to be resisted, denied, fought ... while the Psalmist admires and praises them, because he knows the Law will lead him to self-examination and prayer. The Psalmist looks upon himself as God’s servant who is warned by God’s laws and is rewarded in keeping them. Yet, he realizes that no matter how hard he may try to obey, he sins inadvertently. He also realizes that only God enables him to avoid the more heinous sins. The aim of the Psalmist’s life is to be blameless and free of great transgression. And therefore, he concludes his poem by addressing God as his rock ... who gives him strength and security ... and as his redeemer ... who sets him free from the tyranny of sin.

Yes ... freedom ... freedom from sin ... freedom from alienating / separating ourselves from God. The Law defines the parameters of what sin is and points us away from that potential tyranny ... points us in the direction of real life --- in the direction of *nephesh* ... that which makes for a healthy soul! The Good News that we receive from Jesus Christ proclaims: “I came that people might have life and have it more abundantly.” I believe that in present times many souls, perhaps our own, are starved of *nephesh*. The meaning of one’s own existence is constantly questioned. Therefore, what is the Word that will feed us and what is the Word that will free us?

The Law of God is our bridle --- which we all need --- to discipline us and to lead us back to a right path. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the light reviving the darkened, lifeless soul. When we take the light of Christ into ourselves, there is real hope. We begin to live by grace, rather than under the tyranny of our sins. We begin to hear God, and I mean really hear ... hear such good news as: You are forgiven! ... You are loved! ... You are my child! When we hear and accept such Gospel, our life becomes one of service rather than chore ... joy rather than gloom ... hope rather than despair. Our life then becomes a Gothic cathedral rather than an American motel!

Let the words of your mouth and the meditation of your heart be acceptable in God’s sight; for in God you find your security and serenity ... you find your hope and salvation. Glory be God!! Amen!