

June 10, 2012

The National Presbyterian Church

Tuning In or Tuning Out

Psalm 19

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Over the summer our sermons are focusing on God's message that comes to us through the book of Psalms, one of the books that we find in the pages of Holy Scripture. Indeed if you don't know your way around the Bible this is one of the easiest books to find. It's right there in the middle. Close the book, open it up in the middle and you will find the book of Psalms. This is a book composed of 150 hymns and poems and prayers that come from the faith of ancient Israel – a book that Jesus knew well.

Over 20 times in the gospels the Psalms are quoted and some of those quotations are on the lips of Jesus and one of them in particular is at a staggering moment when Jesus is being crucified: when Jesus is in enormous unbelievable pain he quotes from the book of Psalms as he hangs upon the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It sounds like the cry of a person in so much pain that he has lost his faith and mind – but it's actually a deliberate quotation of scripture, from Psalm 22. It's a cry of desolation, to be sure. But in the context of Psalm 22 it's also the cry of one who remains faithful to God, even in the midst of despair. So here is Jesus remembering scripture while he's hanging on a cross and remembering the book of Psalms in particular.

Well, this is the book that we are looking at, a book with which Jesus was familiar.

We're only looking at the Psalms for a few weeks so I have to make a selection from the 150 Psalms, and I've chosen ones that are representative of others, but which also are ones that have impacted my life the most. One of those is Psalm 8 that we looked at together last Sunday. Psalm 8 speaks of God as our creator, as our infinitely majestic creator who nevertheless looks down upon us and keeps us in his mind, keeps us in heart. This should be an amazing thought to us, that the God of the universe should remember us. We seek for significance in all kinds of different ways in life. But especially we seek to be significant to some other people, people who notice us, or who we wish would notice us. When they do, then life is worth living! Well the truth is that God, the most "significant other" of all, constantly notices us, and thinks that we are significant. And this attention from God is what ultimately gives meaning and significance to our lives: Almighty God remembers us, keeps us in mind, never

forgets us, cannot get us out of His mind. This is what we looked at last Sunday as we looked at Psalm 8.

We move on this Sunday to the passage we read a moment or two ago in Psalm 19 which tells us something more about the majesty of our creator God: that this God not only keeps us in mind but this God has a passion to relate to us. A passion to enter into a relationship with us – a passion to speak to us in a language that we can understand: to communicate with you and me.

We might think that this intensely personal aspect of God is passé, that we can take it for granted when we refer to the idea of ‘God.’ But actually these days you really can’t take it for granted at all. There are all kinds of images of God out there. One of the images which circulates around a great deal and has for the last 30 years is the image of God as “the god of Star Wars” – you know, “May the Force be with you!” (To which the liturgical response, by the way, should always be, “and also with you”!). May the Force be with you? This is an impersonal view of God. Mere force, not personality.

Well the God of the psalmist is certainly the Force! No question about it. But this force is personal, infinitely personal, intimate, relational, a force who wants to love us, know us, enter into an intimate relationship with us, and to do so through very ordinary means that may seem to be trivial, but which are critical for every relationship: the ‘ordinary means’ of speaking and listening. Speaking and listening. Indeed we were made and shaped, for this very purpose, with this particular faculty – to be able to listen for God and to speak to God; made on purpose to be able to listen for God and to speak to God, hear his voice, his word, to have his ear, and to know his presence. And on the flip side, when we lose contact with this communicative god, the Psalmist says in our Psalm, Psalm 19, we lose out: we lose our vision, our joy, our wisdom, our sense of wealth and well-being. Indeed we’re in danger of losing our very soul itself.

A few years ago I had one of those awful experiences of losing contact with someone that I loved at just the wrong moment. It was my younger daughter. She was visiting a friend in Atlanta. She had driven down there. She was on Interstate 85 when her car battery died. Now I didn’t know that it was her car battery: all I knew was that she had called her dad on her cell phone and said there’s something wrong with the car. Well no sooner had she said that, than her cell phone died. So her car battery dies and then her cell phone battery dies. But we parents don’t know that either. We think she’s going to call back in a minute but nothing happens. There is just this silence and more silence and we have no clue what’s going on.

We finally think of calling our son and saying “Do you have any way of getting in touch with her?” We know she’s going to visit her friend Barbara but we don’t know Barbara’s last name. So we are really in a pickle. But our son knows what to do. He gets on Facebook and after a while (I don’t know how he does it) he finds Barbara and manages, by the next morning to get back in touch with her. We phone her, through her

friend, and express our relief, and acts as if there's no problem! We'd been anxious, upset, about to lose it, and she's just thinking everything is normal. So what's happened, we ask? Well the battery died. I got it fixed, everything's fine!

And despite the confusion, everything's fine with us. Indeed, there's an enormous sense of relief. Can you feel it? That moment of relief when you've been out of touch and suddenly you're back in contact again. The sense of just hearing that voice . . . I'm sure there's a voice for each of us. I wonder what voice it is for you? That voice that when you hear it, puts you at peace.

As Facebook and LinkedIn and all the other social networking programs know well, we were made to stay in touch. All they are doing is hooking into the way that God has made us. They have found this out. We were made for staying in touch, for relationship, to listen and to speak with one another. So, naturally, when communication breaks down our whole lives are discombobulated.

And what is true on a human level is true on a human and divine level as well. God, amazingly, God longs to stay in touch with us and has made us and called us to stay in touch with God – to speak to Him and to listen for His voice. To speak to God and to listen.

Some people say they no longer speak to God. They no longer pray because they say prayer doesn't work. They tend to think of prayer as asking things from God. But prayer is not first of all about asking, even though there are many prayers of asking in the Bible. Prayer is first of all about relating. It's about conversation.

What is the purpose of conversation? To ask something of somebody else? I don't think so. Not as the first purpose at least. We feel "used" if somebody just speaks to us to ask something of us. No! The purpose of conversation is to relate, to enter a relationship in which there may well be asking, but only as a very secondary part. It's to bring us into a relationship with God.

- And God says to us speak to me. Speak to me that you might know me, that we might enter into a relationship.
- And listen for my voice because I will speak to you.

As Jesus said, remember Matthew 4, "*We do not live by bread alone* [DR: he's quoting the book of Deuteronomy here], *but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*" And the miracle is that there is such a word that you and I can hear that comes from the mouth of God. God speaks. Our infinitely majestic God is a relational God who listens to us and who speaks to us.

This is what the Psalmist says in Psalm 19, and that God speaks in two primary ways: God has written two books. Princeton Theologian, Diogenes Allen (see his book, *Christian Belief in a Post-Modern World*)¹, puts it like this: God has written two books he says – (1) The book of nature or creation and (2) the book of scripture. And through those two books God longs to speak to us and challenges us to listen.

The Book of Nature. The opening verses of Psalm 19 speak about the book of nature, the book of creation. This is how the Psalm begins.

The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament [DR: that's the dome of the sky] proclaims His handiwork [DR: announces to all who will listen to the One who made it].

Day to day pours forth speech [DR: speech that's overflowing from God]. And night-to-night declares knowledge. There is no speech nor their words, their voices not heard. But their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.

Isn't this an amazing thought – that God designed the universe on purpose (in its enormity, in its beauty and its majesty and its mystery and its complexity and in its simplicity), God designed the universe to be a vehicle of His presence and of His word to you and me? God stands over it, and beyond it, and yet through it, like a director of a movie proclaims himself to you and me, speaks to us. The universe is like God's trumpet or herald grab our attention, the attention of every single human being, no matter what language we speak, no matter where we are in the world! Through the heavens that God has made God is pouring out his word upon us.

Donald Miller in his book *Blue Like Jazz*² describes meeting and hearing God in creation after hiking through the Grand Canyon. He says he was in pain caused by the hike and I probably would be too. He was in pain caused by the hike and at the end of the day he simply began to talk to God. He says

Beneath the billion stars and beside the river I called out to God softly.

There's something quite beautiful about the Grand Canyon at night. There is something beautiful about a billion stars held steady by a God who knows what He is doing. They hang there like notes on a page of music free form verse, silent mysteries swirling in the blue like jazz.

And as I lay there it occurred to me that God is up there somewhere. Of course I'd always known He was. But this time I felt Him. I realized it the way a person realizes they are hungry or thirsty. The knowledge of God seeped out of my brain and into my heart. I imagined him looking down on this earth half angry because his beloved mankind had cheated on Him and committed adultery and yet hopelessly in love with us, drunk with love for us, for earth and for her people.

He tuned in. God is always there. Always out there. Fuzzy sometimes. BUT Donald Miller finally tuned in, and in tuning in he heard a voice he hadn't heard before – a powerful, transforming word from God's handiwork, God's creation, available to every single one of us, every single human being if we'd only stop and listen, stand still, and make time.

The tragedy of course though it is that all too often we don't. We just don't stop long enough in our busy rushing world. Winston Churchill once put it like this, truthfully and humorously: He said, "men stumble on the truth from time to time, then they pick themselves up and keep on going."

Men stumble on the truth from time to time then they pick themselves up and keep on going. But that's the truth, isn't it? It's true of all of us, isn't it? We catch a glimpse of something and then we don't linger long enough with it for it to infect and infuse our lives. We hear the voice of God in the heavens or in the canyons, in the winter or in the summertime, up in the mountains or down at the beach and the ocean, we hear the call of God, we hear the love of God, then we return to the business and busyness of life and squelch the voice. We have a myriad of obligations and duties and activities. And worse than that I think we squelch not only the voice but we squelch this sense that God is bursting, bursting at the seams to pour out a word upon us to each of us, for all of us, to you and me, in order to give us life, the best life, eternal life, abundant life the scripture says – to give us a word by which we will truly live.

The Book of Scripture. But even then, even then when we've failed to listen, even then, the God who speaks doesn't give up but gives us another word, the scripture, what God says in another form, another chance to hear Him, to know Him, to be blessed by Him. This time he speaks (Psalm 19 reminds us) in letters on a page in a book (or on an iPad these days), in what Diogenes Allen calls "the book of scripture."

The Psalmist calls the Scripture "the Law." But the word for "Law" in Hebrew is the word "Torah," which means far more than laws or rules and regulations (though it includes those things). To a faithful Jew, God's Law or Torah included all kinds of verbal written stories, instructions and teaching. All of these were part of the Psalmist's Bible.

Indeed, the first five books of the Jewish Bible (and our Bible), called the books of Moses or the Pentateuch, are sometimes also called "the Law."

But even then, those books included not just rules and regulations but all kinds of stories and instruction and teaching.

So the Psalmist speaks not only of the heavens speaking, pouring out the word of God, but speaks also of this book that God has given him which has influenced and impacted his life in all kinds of ways repeatedly.

So there's this strange transition if you look at the Psalm when you come to Verse 7, out of the blue we move from "the heavens declaring the glory of God" to "the Law of the Lord, which is perfect." But what is it perfect for? What does it do? How does it fulfill God's purpose in communicating with us?

- The Law of the Lord is perfect, says the Psalmist, in that it revives the soul! Need some reviving? Read about it in the book.
- The decrees of the Lord are sure making wise and simple. Need to be smarter or wiser? Read about it in the book.
- The precepts of the Lord are right rejoicing the heart. Lost your joy in life? Find it in the book.
- He says the commandment of the Lord is clear enlightening the eyes? Need new vision and direction? Read about it in the book.

- The fear of the Lord is pure enduring forever. Feel that life is not stable, transitory, passing? Need endurance? Read about it in the book.
- The ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. Need direction, a right path to follow? Read about it in the book.
- More to be desired he says are they than gold. Not feeling particularly wealthy? Well this is where you gain your sense of wealth says the Psalmist. From this book, this treasure that God has given to us.
- Sweeter also than honey. Can't get no satisfaction? You get it through the book that God has given to us.

This is the opinion of the Psalmist in Psalm 19 and not merely the opinion of the Psalmist but of our Lord Jesus.

Jesus and The Book of Scripture. Remember, Jesus is the one who know the Psalms and quotes from them while he hangs upon the cross! And not only on the cross, but at other critical moments in his life. This book of Scripture is in his head and it has moved down to his heart as well. So he uses it, for example, our Lord Jesus does, (1) to set the direction for his life and (2) to keep him on course when he strays.

When you read the fourth chapter of Matthew's gospel (a few words of which I read a few moments ago), or when you read the fourth chapter of Luke's gospel, you find our Lord Jesus Christ setting the direction for his life from the pages of Holy Scripture. You might think that as the Son of God it was all automatic that somehow the word of God just filled him. But what we find in the book itself is that Jesus learned to hear the voice of God from what he read in scripture, our Old Testament.

- (1) So he comes to his hometown of Nazareth on the Sabbath day. He attends worship, which was his weekly custom (as in the fourth of the Ten Commandments). And he is asked to read the scripture and reads from the book of the Prophet Isaiah which speaks about the Messiah. And the passage says this about the Messiah that he has been anointed to preach good news to the poor and release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. And Jesus puts the scroll back, sits down and he turns to the crowd he says this day this word has been fulfilled in your hearing. That is, he says "This is about ME!" He sets his direction, all that he is about to do from this word in Isaiah. He says this is the course I will take.
- (2) And when the devil comes along to throw him off his course (earlier in the same chapter) how does he thwart the temptation of the evil one to make his life ineffective? Well, by quoting scripture! Three times in Luke 4 and in Matthew 4 Jesus says to the devil "***it is written, it is written, it is written***"!
 - It is written: One does not live by bread alone.
 - It is written. Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

- It is written. You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.

It is written. The book that Jesus had in hand and his heart is the book of scripture and by it God His father spoke to Him as he longs to speak to you and me.

But unfortunately just as we rarely make time to hear God's voice speaking in creation, all the evidence is that **people in our society, and we in the church as well, are barely making the time that is necessary to hear God's word in scripture.** The overwhelming evidence is that our society and our churches are being overwhelmed with what people call Biblical ignorance.

It been 50 years ago now since Christian faith has been taught in our schools (I say this, let me emphasize) not to make a political statement, but to make a statement about the Church. Fifty years since we lost the teaching of Biblical faith in our schools, BUT we in our churches have done little or nothing to pick up the slack, to make up for the loss of that teaching and bridge that gap in the way that we ought. For years, we relied upon the state, 'somebody else,' to do our job, to communicate the word that God has given to us, but this assistance is now long gone. And worse, because we have lost the foundation, we are no longer capable of using the scripture faithfully to wrestle with the questions of our age. It is not only not in our hearts, but it is not in our heads and we are unable to use it wisely as Jesus did. The evidence is overwhelming.

You can go to scholars like Steven Prothero at Boston University and Randall Balmer at Columbia University to hear this put best. Through all their studies they see a devastating change in our society that simply cannot be remedied with 30 minutes of Sunday School or a sermon once a week (and the average for most Christians is maybe twice a month, not once a week). To think that this can counteract the voice of our secular culture is simply absurd.

The voice of our secular culture, the "word" around about us, comes to us not in 30 minutes once a week but 24 hours a day, seven days a week, year after year after year, blaring into our consciousness whether we know it or not. No wonder that they say the knowledge of the word is disappearing. And as it disappears so God who is further and further into the background, further and further away to become this impersonal force, rather than the God in whom we live and move and have our being, who we know and to whom we can relate, and our ability to speak to one another on a common basis with a common body of knowledge which is the basis of every communication begins to disappear.

And even in the church, because the knowledge has gone, we find ourselves speaking different languages to one another. And Babel returns. And Babel returns because we do not have a common voice around which our discussion goes. This is how it is. Every study shows it.

But this is not how it has to be. We all have the ability to turn things around in this regard, to put back into practice what the Psalmist believes, that God is on

the edge of his seat bursting to speak to us, overflowing with words and creation and in the book, that we might hear his voice and enter into a life-giving, life transforming relationship with Him.

And we all have the ability to change our schedules so that day by day we read his word. On the back of your bulletin there is a schedule of Bible reading. It doesn't take long but it does take commitment day by day to stop and listen.

Some people look at me as a pastor and say well you got to know the Bible because you spent so long at seminary. Well I was very lucky to spend a long time at seminary. I went for three years and then I had to go back for remedial classes (in my doctoral program) for the next five years after that because I didn't "get it" the first time around. But actually, the truth is that I did not learn the Bible by going to seminary. On my first day at seminary I tested out of Bible content **because I had been to a Christian camp from the time I was 13 which challenged us even as children to read a small portion of the Bible every day.** And almost every day from the age of 13 on I read that passage and came to know the God who speaks and fortunately at seminary the book that God has given. But it was *before* seminary, it was *not because* of seminary and this is how God longs to work in your life as well. In our lives together. The Ten Commandments speak about the Sabbath day, which God observed. One day for God out of seven. One day for God out of seven.

And since the printing press, since we can have this second book, the book of Scripture in our hands, surely a portion of every day should be given to hearing what God has to say to us. Simple practices, simple practices which transform and change our lives.

What good news we have been given that our God speaks and listens. God speaks to people like you and me a word built into the very fabric of creation if only we would tune in.

God speaks a word given to us in this book which has been passed down and translated so that we can all hear and read in our own languages, a book that he summons us to be open and to make time so that we hear the voice of God, and enter into a relationship for which we were made and remade through Jesus Christ, a word which will give us life and purpose and meaning now and forever.

Let us bow before God in prayer. Holy God, stop us in our tracks. Help us to tune in to You, to listen to Your voice in the world around about us and Your voice in scripture until as with any lover we cannot bear to live separated from You, out of touch, not hearing Your voice. So may we have ears to hear and hearts to follow, through Jesus Christ Your Son. Amen.

¹ Allen, Diogenes. *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1989.

² Miller, Donald. *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*. Thomas Nelson, 2003.

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