

The Law of the Heart

Wisdom 7:23-28

Psalm 19

John 14:23-26

St. Boniface Episcopal Church, Sarasota FL

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This morning's readings speak to three issues: intimacy with God, comfort, and law. If you take the readings seriously, if you take them at face value in a literary manner, then the readings insist that these three things are one thing. Intimacy with God, comfort, and law are a single, complex reality. We must understand and accept all three if we are to achieve healing in our own lives, or if we hope to be a means of healing for others.

All three readings insist that God seeks intimacy with us. In today's Gospel, Jesus explains that he and his father are quite ready and willing to move in with you: "we will come to [you] and make our home with [you]". The Book of Wisdom assures us that God wanders around looking for people to live with, people to turn into friends. Seen in this context, the Psalm explores in some detail what living with God might be like. What would it be like to have God as a member of your household--someone who really understands just how hard your life can be, someone with whom to sit in silence, listening to the rain?

As I suppose you know, the two halves of a psalm-verse play off of one another in a great variety of ways. The basic literary convention calls for the two halves mirror each other more or less precisely. But no poet ever bothers to say exactly the same thing twice. Sometimes we see what looks like exact repetition because there is some artful word-play in the Hebrew that English cannot manage. Usually, however, what may look like simple repetition proves to be a thought-provoking assertion. This assertion can be subtle or it can be dramatic, but it is almost always there, even in translation.

Listen again, for instance at the very first verse in Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork." You can do two things with a line like that. You can say that the two halves are exactly equivalent--that the translation is weak or poet is lazy. You can say that "handiwork" is essentially synonymous with

"the glory of God." The sentence structure here obviously makes "handiwork" and "glory" look like synonyms.

Or you can do something more. You can play for a while, in your mind, with the idea that the glory of God is for God something like handiwork is for us, something like craftsmanship to the artisan. It seems to me, for instance, that stars in the sky might be like God's needlework. Or like God's first-rate work with a fine-tipped paintbrush. And if you like needlepoint or knitting, if you like woodworking or patching plaster or growing perennials, then your delight in your skill becomes an echo in you of the glory of God. Even a spreadsheet can do it. I did my very first spreadsheet a few weeks ago. It was *gorgeous*. Even a spreadsheet can be an echo of the glory of God. It is not the thing itself but our pleasure in the thing that makes it one of the ways in which any of us feels the intimate, sustaining friendship of God.

The middle section of Psalm 19 develops this idea at some length. The play between the two halves of a psalm verse here extends into the same kind of play between one verse and the next, until we have a whole marvelous array of something like playful synonyms for our intimate relationship with God. It revives the soul; it rejoices the heart. It gives wisdom to the innocent and light to anyone's eyes. It is enduring or absolutely reliable, more valuable than gold and sweeter than honey. What a list! Is this what God is after in our lives? Reviving us? Rejoicing our hearts? Putting some sparkle into our eyes?

That list, incredible as it is, gets more incredible yet if you look a bit closer. All three of today's readings are also talking about God's "law." Jesus says that he and his father will live with those who keep his law. The whole book of Wisdom tries to explain what we must do to find and to accept God's friendship. Psalm 19 talks over and over again about the law of God, the statutes of God, the judgments of the Lord. I know a poetic definition when a poet hands me one. That incredible list--revive, rejoice, all of that--are poetic definitions of what "law" really means. The law of God is not a list of do's and don'ts. The law of God is not a heavenly performance review, not a set of hoops that we have to leap through. Not at all.

The law of God in our hearts is whatever most truly and genuinely comforts and revives us, whatever we discover to be most powerfully sweet and valuable and reliable in our lives. The law of God is God's way into our lives. And God's way into our lives is through any of the ways in which we are most deeply, most intimately sustained. What a claim! Think of what this does to petty, small-minded religion! Think of what it might do to our lives if we could, this Lent, recognize that the glory and the majesty of God are waiting for us in our pleasure at any of the things that really keep us going inside our own lives.

Maybe that sounds excessively private, as if God's presence in this world is nothing more important than a warm-fuzzy with a halo. I don't think so. I think that the power of God, however it finds entrance into our lives, will all by itself make sure that we don't retreat into that comfort and lock the door behind us. In other places in Scripture, we are told that the law comes down to this: love God with your whole heart, and your neighbor as yourself. Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself.

Sure. We all know that. Today's readings on law explain two other things: what all of this feels like, and how the three directions of love have a single, common origin in God's glory and wisdom and love, in the outgoing, supportive nature of God. Any one kind of human love, genuinely pursued, always develops into the other two. Everybody knows that people who are really happy, people who are deeply at peace, are wonderful blessings for everyone they meet in the course of a day. I walk out of my neighborhood drycleaners feeling blessed by the guy who owns it. That's the reality that today's readings are trying to explain to us.

Today's psalm has a wonderful image for how God's comfort and healing in our lives can manifest itself as our ability to comfort and to heal one another. Let's go back to the opening four verses. Just listen to me read it--

The heavens declare the glory of God
and the firmament shows his handiwork.

One day tells its tale to another,
and one night imparts its knowledge to another.

Although they have no words or language,
and their voices are not heard,
Their sound has gone out into all lands,
and their message is heard to the ends of the world.

One day tells the next day about the glory of God, and night tells the next night, and the next day tells the day after that, until all the world knows. But neither day nor night have words for it.

We often don't have words for it either. The poet here--a person who does have the gift of words--insists from the very beginning of his poem that we don't have to know what to say. We only have to know God. We don't have to have good advice to give, we don't have to know what to say that will help. We don't have to say anything at all. A sunrise doesn't have anything to say either. Neither does a starry night. And the same can be true of us.

God's silent, intimate, comforting, reassuring presence in our lives can reach silently through us to comfort and to reassure others. "Although the sun and the stars have no words or language, and their voices are not heard, their sound has gone out into all the lands, and their message to the ends of the world." Silent presence to another's pain does not mean standing there feeling stupid because you have nothing to say.

Silence is not just the lack of noise while you struggle to find words. Real silence, God's silence, God's powerful and ministering silence, is our unembarrassed, courageous, and deliberate presence to the depths and the dignity of what someone else feels. Real silence knows its own kinship to moonrise over still water, to snow drifting silently into the Grand Canyon, to a beach that even the birds have not found. Healing silence is the silence that Coleridge celebrates as the "secret ministry of frost" that "shall hang . . . up silent icicles / Quietly shining to the quiet moon." The silent interpersonal presence that these poets celebrate is an extraordinary gift, an extraordinary art, deeply akin to the glorious and powerful handiwork of God.

And that message has in fact traveled to the ends of the world.