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Psalm 19: 7 – 10, 2 Timothy 3: 14 – 17
July 15, 2018

Old Testament Reading Psalm 19: 7 – 10

7 The instructions of the LORD are perfect, reviving the soul. The decrees of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. **8** The commandments of the LORD are right, bringing joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are clear, giving insight for living. **9** Reverence for the LORD is pure, lasting forever. The laws of the LORD are true; each one is fair. **10** They are more desirable than gold, even the finest gold. They are sweeter than honey, even honey dripping from the comb. (*New Living Translation*)

New Testament Reading 2 Timothy 3: 14 – 17

(*The apostle Paul is writing to his protégé, Timothy.*)

14 But you must continue with the things you have learned and found convincing. You know who taught you. **15** Since childhood you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus. **16** Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, **17** so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good. (*Common English Bible*)

Prayer before sermon:

Oh, Lord, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19: 14)

Last week, my husband Kevin and I were in New Mexico, spending some of the time in the desert. One night, when the skies were clear, the moon was a waning crescent, and the lights of Alamogordo were hidden by the hills, I drank in the beauty and wonder of a night sky filled with stars I do not see living here in the city. Just off the end of the tail of my favorite summer constellation—Scorpio—I saw the pinprick lights of hundreds of thousands of stars. There, the sky looked milky, and I understood why our galaxy is called the Milky Way. The heavens were proclaiming to me the glory of the LORD.

We spent the other part of our New Mexico vacation in the Sacramento Mountains near Cloudcroft. One morning, as we sat on the deck, a hummingbird flew near me, hovered in front of my face, and then flew away. Throughout each spring and summer during the 4 years we lived in Clinton, MO, I watched the hummingbird which nested in the honeysuckle on our patio. Since moving here to Copperas Cove, I have watched a

hummingbird visiting the flowers along our back fence each morning. The presence of the hummingbird—in Clinton, MO, in Copperas Cove, TX, in Cloudcroft, NM—the presence of the hummingbird wherever I’m drinking my morning coffee reminds me that God is with me wherever I may be. Often, when I am out in God’s creation, it is as if God is speaking, telling me of God’s expansive power, reminding me of God’s compassionate presence.

God is speaking ... In the 1970s there was a contemporary Christian song whose lyrics included “God said it; I believe it; that settles it for me.” I doubt neither the songwriter nor the singers or even those who since have placed this sentiment on the bumpers of their cars or shared it in their Facebook feeds were referring to God revealing God’s power and presence through creation. Instead, I suspect it refers to their understanding of God’s revelation of God’s character and will through scripture. “God said it; I believe it; that settles it” is this week’s installment of your summer sermon series examining “Common but not necessarily Biblical wisdom.” As with the other topics you have explored, this one has some truth in it, but we need to unpack it to see where that truth is and where it may not be.

There certainly are places in our holy literature where the Biblical writers themselves attest, “God said it.” In Genesis, chapter 12, we hear the ancient storyteller beginning the story of God’s plan for our redemption with God saying to Abram, “Leave your land, your family, and your father’s household for the land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1 *Common English Bible*) Fifteen hundred years later, after the Babylonians had overrun Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah says God told him to bring a word of hope to the defeated and exiled Jews. “ ‘I know the plans I have in mind for you,’ declares the LORD; ‘plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.’ ” (Jeremiah 29: 11 *Common English Bible*). About 700 years after that, John of Patmos shares a vision from God with his community of faith. It is a fledgling Christian community beset by persecution. At the end of this vision, the risen and already ascended Jesus speaks a promise “Look, I am coming soon,” (Revelation 22:12 *Common English Bible*) a promise to restore all things for God’s original, good purpose—in the new heaven and new earth. (Revelation chapters 21 – 22) There are places in our holy literature in which the Biblical writers attest, “God said it.” But that’s not the case with other parts of the scripture. Consider the book of Psalms from which today’s Call to Worship, Confessional Sequence, and Old Testament reading come. The psalms are not what God said, but instead the psalmist’s response to God or to where the psalmist finds himself in life. In the psalms we hear praise for God’s power and creativity, gratitude for God’s provision, confession for the psalmist’s failure to live up to God’s intention, lament for

the pressures that weigh the psalmist down, and ranting about the oppression the psalmist experiences. God—literally—said it—is true for some but not all of the Biblical witness.

So what about the part that God did say? Can we boldly proclaim for it—“God said it, that settles it”? In the Exodus story we find the newly-freed Hebrew slaves, escaped from Egypt and gathered at the base of Mt. Sinai where God is inviting them into covenant relationship (Exodus 19:5) They listen as God speaks the terms of this covenant—terms which begin with what we call “The 10 Commandments.” As God speaks, the earth shakes, thunder booms, lightning flashes, and the people are filled with fear. They retreat and ask Moses to continue the conversation with God up on the mountain on their behalf. (Exodus 20 and following) Jews refer to these ten commandments and what Moses relays to the people later as the Torah—the Law. It is what God said. But, that does not settle it. In Judaism, there is a rich tradition of studying and debating the Torah. What exactly does each commandment mean? What exactly does it look like to obey each of these instructions? A thousand years after God spoke the Torah, Jesus entered this debate—interpreting and re-interpreting the law. In his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 – 7), Jesus says, *“17 ‘Don't even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven't come to do away with them but to fulfill them. 18 I say to you very seriously that as long as heaven and earth exist, neither the smallest letter nor even the smallest stroke of a pen will be erased from the Law until everything there becomes a reality.’”* (Matthew 5: 17 – 18 Common English Bible)

It sounds like, “God said it, that settles it.” But Jesus continues *21 “You have heard that it was said ... [That’s one of the 10 Commandments. (Exodus 20:6)] Don't commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment.”* (Matthew 5: 21 – 22 Common English Bible) Then keep reading ... Jesus says, *27 “You have heard that it was said, Don't commit adultery [That’s one of the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20:7)] 28 But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. (Matthew 5: 27 – 28 Common English Bible) 38 “You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. [This is part of the Torah Moses received from God ... on the people’s behalf (Exodus 21:24)] 39 But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. (Matthew 5: 38 – 39 CEB)*

Three of the gospel writers recount Jesus in conflict with the religious leaders because he healed on the Sabbath. “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8) is one of the 10 Commandments. Jesus re-interpreted Sabbath-keeping to include working—when it accomplishes good for others. [healing on the Sabbath recounted in Matthew 12: 9 – 14, Mark 3: 1 – 6, Luke 6: 6 – 11]

So, even when God said it, for Jesus, that did not “settle it.” In the instructions for living into God’s covenant that we find in the Torah, in the calls to live justly and do kindness that we hear from the prophets, in the poetry which speaks the language of our hearts, in the letters which encourage persecuted believers or chastise Christians in conflict, God is revealed to us. In the opportunities to read about and reflect on the mistakes made and the successes enjoyed by our spiritual ancestors as they walked their journeys of faith, God is revealed to us. In our ongoing, prayer-fueled, communal study of scripture God’s character, God’s activity in the world, and God’s will are revealed to us. These ongoing revelations shape our lives of faith.

That’s what the apostle Paul is telling his protégé Timothy in today’s New Testament reading. Here’s the translation from *the Message*, a contemporary version of the Bible : **15** ... *There's nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. 17 Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.* (2 Timothy 3: 15 – 17 *the Message*)

Who God is and what God wills is most fully revealed to us in the life & ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. The gospel writer John introduces Jesus as the Word—with a capital W. It is in **reading** Jesus that we most fully understand who God is. It is in **reading** Jesus that we most completely experience God’s amazing grace and steadfast love. It is in **reading** Jesus that we most surely recognize the direction God wills for our lives. It is in **reading** Jesus that we most clearly see God’s hope for God’s world.

God reveals God’s self to us day by day, step by step, word by word, person by person, relationship by relationship. God’s revelation is an ongoing process. Listening with all our senses, engaging our head, heart, and the very depth of our being, we open ourselves up to God’s word—wherever we might experience it—in creation, in relationships, in scripture and especially in Jesus the Christ, our Lord and Savior. Thanks be to God.