

The Heavens Are Telling

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 6, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Psalm 19](#) and [Psalm 8](#)

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you,
O God, our rock and our redeemer.

The Merlin phone app has changed what it's like for me to sit on the screened porch on the family cabin in New Hampshire. On one hand, I can generally distinguish between squirrel chatter and bird song. On the other hand, I have never learned to distinguish between a goldfinch, a red-winged blackbird, a chickadee, and a cardinal. And the woods are so dense I hardly ever spot them in the trees. Only when they are in the air can I see them, and then they're moving and it is hard to see them clearly. Now, I can sit on the porch and start up the Merlin app, and it will tell me who I'm hearing.

One afternoon while I was on vacation, my father, a neighbor, and I were sitting on the porch chatting about the news around the lake when I interrupted, pointing out to the air over the lake, to say, "That's a bald eagle." In the more than 60 years I've been going to that cabin, I don't think I ever saw any kind of eagle, and there was a bald eagle flying southward over the water. I grabbed my camera, but by the time I got down to the water, she was gone. I thought maybe she'd landed in a tree to look for lunch, so I zoomed in and found ... an empty tree.

Later, I saw two ospreys playing with each other in flight in the air over the water – I don't remember ever seeing osprey at the lake before. Again, they didn't stay long enough for me to get a picture.

And then, on my last full day on the lake, the bald eagle returned. And she posed long enough for me to get this picture.



Then she flew to the other side of the lake. I saw which trees she landed in, but it was too far away for me to see her. So I just cranked up the zoom on my camera, and when I got the pictures on my computer, there she was.



Humming birds astound me by their ability to hover. I find any bird that can land on a thin metal ledge, really no bigger than a thick wire, surrounding a bird feeder to be acrobatically impressive. And still, there is something about the raptors in flight – the eagles and ospreys and hawks – that fill me with a distinctive feeling of awe. Maybe it's part jealousy that they can travel through the air; maybe it's the sense of power I feel as I watch them fly; maybe it's simply the beauty. Whatever it is, when I look at raptor, especially in flight, it is awe that I feel.

I think that's the word for what the psalmists were feeling when they wrote psalms we heard today: awe. "The poet of Psalm 19 saw the sky and the clouds ... as masterpieces of creation's permanent collection. 'The heavens are telling the glory of God; the sky proclaims the work of God's hands,' the poet writes, in verses that C.S. Lewis deemed to be 'the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.' The Hebrew word for 'heaven' here is *shamayim*, which has the same meaning and is elsewhere translated simply as 'sky.' Coming from root words *esh* (fire) and *mayim* (water), *shamayim* is a beautiful, poetic way of referring to the heavens as the combination of fire and water – the sky as the domain of sun and cloud. The Hebrew word translated as 'sky' in the second half of the verse is *raqia*, meaning an expanse of an extended surface. With this first verse of Psalm 19, we have something more literally like: The beautiful skies are telling the glory of God; the expansive skies proclaim the works of God's hands."¹

¹ Daniel Cooperrider, *Speak with the Earth and It Will Teach You* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2022), 144.

Daniel Cooperrider says, "This first verse is a paradigmatic example of the type of parallel structure that is key to understanding the Hebrew poetry of the Bible. Hebrew poetry tends to work by way of presenting two lines at a time that both aim to express nearly the same sentiment or to express the same idea but in two different ways ... In other words, it uses language as a type of homing device, using words to circle around an idea, even an idea as hard to talk about as God, homing in, circling around, the way a moth circles around a flame. Psalm 19:1 is, in my estimation, about as close to being seared by the flame of God as any words can come."²

There is a paradox in the first four verses of Psalm 19:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth
and their words to the end of the world.*

The heavens proclaim God's glory, yet they do so without words. There is no speech or words, so their voice cannot be heard, and yet their voice goes out to all the earth and their words to the end of the world. As I've sat with that paradox, I've come to realize that that we humans can only "hear" this wordless, soundless voice if we pay attention.

I don't know how much attention you paid to the Artemis II mission in April. I didn't pay much attention until I saw some of the pictures that came back with them. This is an image of the Moon fully eclipsing the Sun. From the crew's perspective, the Moon appears large enough to completely block the Sun, creating nearly 54 minutes of totality and extending the view far beyond what is possible from Earth.



² *Ibid*, 144-145.

This is an image of a muted blue Earth with bright white clouds set behind the cratered lunar surface. Between the clouds is the blue of the oceans, and from this distance we get a sense of how small the sky is. It is this thin layer that sustains life, this thin layer in which we live and move and have our being. The dark portion of Earth is experiencing nighttime.



The poet who wrote Psalm 8 did so from within that thin layer of air, looking up at the heavens at night:

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are humans that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

How lucky are we that we get to look back down to the earth, to see the earth as part of the heavens, if not personally, at least through pictures.

Cooperrider suggests we read Psalm 19 as a daytime companion to Psalm 8's midnight meditation on the stars. "In both poems," he writes, "the wonder of what is displayed by the stars and the moon at night and by the clouds and the sun by day transports or elevates the human heart into communion with God. In both poems, the celestial phenomena of stars and clouds are instances in which we can witness the hand of God at work in creation. They are occasions to trace the fingerprints of God, as these poems make direct reference to God's hands (Psalm 19) and God's fingers (Psalm 8). The feeling is one of dizzying, dazzling intricacy and immensity – that the things of heaven, the stars and the clouds, as distant and vast as they are, are but miniature figurines, the playthings of God's fingertips."³

I thought about dropping half of Psalm 19 from today's readings. At first, the switch from the awe of creation expressed in the first six verses of Psalm 19 to the celebration of the law in verses 7 through 10 seemed jarring to me. I kept them because I think that awe is

³ *Ibid*, 145.

but one response to the majesty of creation. Ethical living is another, and the focus on the Torah is a reminder of that.

If the law is given as a gift to help God's people live in community with justice and grace (and I think it is), then maybe we can find some guidance in the Torah about living in community with the rest of creation. And not just the laws of the Hebrew scriptures. I think there is some guidance in the laws of chemistry and physics, too. For instance, we know from the laws of chemistry and physics that when we mess around with the chemical makeup of the air, even a little bit, we can change the climate.

Human civilization started developing some 10,000 years ago with the development of agriculture. For most of those 10,000 years, the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere was about 260 to 280 parts per million. Then, in the 1800, humans started extracting carbon-laden fossil fuels from under the earth and started burning them, releasing CO₂ into the atmosphere, changing the chemical makeup of the air. And now there are 427ppm of CO₂ in the atmosphere.⁴ While that's 50% more CO₂ than for all of human civilization until the 1800s, it's still only a tiny fraction of the all the chemicals in the air. And that shift is enough to cause all kinds of havoc with the climates around the globe. That's how delicately balanced creation is.

These two things are true at the same time: The heavens *are* telling the glory of God; and humans need to be doing a better job of caring for this glorious, awe-inspiring, delicately balanced creation.

Amen.

⁴ For an up-to-date readings of CO₂ levels, see <https://www.co2.earth/daily-co2>.