

The Heavens Are Telling...

Psalm 19: 1 - 14

I have not been working too far ahead on the messages in this series. I put together the basic ideas, and the schedule, last November/ December, so we'd have some idea as to where we were going to go with this, but actually fleshing out those ideas has been left to the week prior to each message. So when people are saying to me, "I've been enjoying this series" (which I appreciate very much) and I answer, "So am I!" I don't mean to sound arrogant, like I like hearing myself preach! I just mean that I have really been enjoying working on these messages, because it seems that each week I've been surprised by something that I really hadn't considered in my initial sketches. So, it really has been fun for me, too.

* That proved even more evident in this week's preparation. To be honest with you, I thought that this message was going to be the most 'cut and dried' of the entire series. I don't mean that it didn't interest me, in fact, just the opposite. I just thought I knew exactly what I was going to bring today, what direction I was going to go. And it was going to be something on the order of Psalm 19 – *"The heavens are telling the glory of God!"*

I figured that we would be looking at that and some other passages that remind us that God is visible throughout the Creation. And since our premise for this series has been that the presence of God is what heaven is all about, it stands to reason that when we see God in God's creation, we are going to get a 'hint of heaven'. Well, actually, I *am* going to go there, but the more I thought about it, I realized that I was really limited in *where* I was looking to see God's glory in creation.

* I just can't help it; I gravitate to the awe of the world's natural beauty – in nature, in the wilderness, in the vastness and complexity of the universe. Paul writes in Romans 1:20

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...

* We can see God through nature, in the things that have been created, says the Scriptures. But I'd like to expand a little bit the way we might think about that today, and 'make a case' for

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some other ways that we might see God's Glory in connection with the physical world, with creation.

In James 1:17 we read

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

So, *everything* good and *everything* perfect is 'from above', coming down from our Father in heaven. I love Gene Peterson's rendition of this in The Message:

Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light.

* What a better place to begin this message in our series, "Heaven on Earth/ Hints of Heaven" than that? What are those "desirable and beneficial gifts"; those good and perfect gifts that are coming (continuing action, *coming*) from the Father of Light – and particularly, for this installment of our series, what are those gifts that are available to anyone? In theology we would call this 'general revelation' – what are some signs of the glory of God that are perceivable by anyone who has a desire to see?

* I'd like to suggest to you that part of that answer is nature *itself* (and it is a huge part) so we've been looking at pictures of the beauty of nature and creation as I've been speaking. I could look at these all day. I could sit where you are sitting, and look at pictures like this for 20 minutes and have a prayer, and I would feel like I've worshipped today.

* I realize that it is certainly possible for someone to look at these mountains, waterfalls, pictures from the Hubble orbiting telescope and others like these and still come away dry and empty. But it is not possible for me to do that, and maybe that is true for you as well. I cannot *not* see God in these things that defy any plausible explanation for their existence other than a wildly creative God. It's an old argument for the existence of God, but I think it still stands true – a watch implies a *watchmaker*.

* For me, the existence of a universe that is *beautiful* beyond description, on every level, from its vastness that can only be visualized through metaphors (it's "like *this*") down to the incredible

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order and complexity, and *mystery* in its smallest details, this universe – even in this fallen state – implies not only a Creator, but a certain kind of Creator.

* If beauty is derivative then God is awesome indeed. And so, whenever and wherever we come upon *beauty* we are getting a glimpse of heaven... it is *heaven on earth*. Because God is beautiful! God is awesome, and we see this full well in what God has made.

* So the question I want to explore a little bit today is this: “Where is beauty to be found in the Created world?” Or, “Where is God mostly clearly showing himself through Creation?”

Let’s take a side trip here, and go to heaven. (Ha!) Revelation 21

We’ve read the beginning of this vision a few times in this series – it’s the place that describes God ‘dwelling among the people’ and wiping away every tear, etc. What I’m about to read is the end of the vision, where John attempts to put into human words what he was seeing in his heart, as God ‘opened the door to heaven’ for him to peek inside.

I made a statement in the very beginning of this series something like this: that when it comes to a physical description of heaven, I believe that all language is metaphorical, and not literal. I.e., there is *meaning* in these words, but I think they are describing something that is indescribable. But still, take a look at John’s choice of words, and we see something very consistent: *beauty*.

** 9 One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. 13 There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. 14 The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.*

There is such mystery here! He is describing ‘the bride of the Lamb’ – which as we saw last week, is *us*! The church! The people of God. And yet, he is describing the bride in terms of a *place* – the Holy **City**, the New Jerusalem.

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At the same time, this clearly is meant to be a description of **the** dwelling place of God with God's people – which as we've been seeing again and again, is the essence of heaven. When a *people* are described in terms of a *place* we better be careful in how literally we take this! You know? Better to let the images wash over your soul as we see some of deep symbolism here (like the 12 Gates – with the names of the 12 Tribes of Israel, 12 Angels guarding the gates, the 12 foundations of the city (with the names of the 12 Apostles) – in this we see the connection between the Old Testament (Old Covenant people) and New Testament (New Covenant people).

* *15 The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls.*

[Now, why 'gold'? Well, because gold was so valuable, pure, and beautiful...]

16 The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. 17 He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick [about 200 feet], by human measurement, which the angel was using. 18 The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. 19 The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone.

The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. 21 The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.

* The walls are *decorated* with precious stones... intentional beauty!

And notice too, the most significant feature of this city – it's shape. It was enormous – “12,000 stadia” is about 1200 miles. And it was 1200 miles in length, width, and *height*. Which, of course, makes it a cube! Now if you remember, in the message I shared with you the week before Christmas, we talked about the Holy of Holies in the Jewish tabernacle, that place where only the High Priest could go once a year to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

That was the place that symbolized the presence of God to the nation of Israel, it's where the Shekinah Glory [the light of God] shone on the lid of the Ark 24/7 – that place was called the mercy seat. And we saw, that when Jesus breathed his last on the Cross, how the veil in the Temple was torn in two from *top to bottom*. The veil that was the entranceway to the Holy of Holies. That tearing symbolized that our access to God had been granted through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We could now come into the very presence of God – and come *boldly*.

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That picture, that event, is certainly connected with the picture that John is painting for us here in Revelation 21. This Holy City is the shape of the Holy of Holies in the Temple. The entire City of Jerusalem has become the Holy Place where access to God is granted permanently. There are three gates on every side of this place. The gates are always open! It is huge – there is room for all. And it is beautiful beyond description.

** 22 I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.*

Remember the ‘shekinah glory’? the Light of God that shone on the mercy seat? Now, it lights the entire city.

24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. 25 On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. 26 The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. 27 Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

These are human words trying to describe something that is beyond words. Somehow, rolled into one, we have a description, from God’s own perspective, of the beauty of the Bride of Christ – that would be us (which is mind-blowing in itself!), *and* a visualization of the ‘center’ of Heaven itself, in which John uses every word of beauty, value, preciousness, and purity that he knows.

As we consider this ‘glimpse into heaven’, it should help us to realize that this part of God’s nature, God’s being, this **beauty**, is evident *everywhere* that God ‘is’. Yes, this world is ‘fallen’, it is broken; yes, there are sin scars on this earth that mars some of the beauty; yes, what we see here in many ways is like what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13 – ‘like looking through a mirror *dimly*’; *nevertheless*, God’s beauty, God’s glory is *here*. It is seen in God’s creation – which God called *good* – it is seen in everything in creation that is (as James wrote) good and desirable and perfect.

It is seen in the delicate balance of the seasons... and in the amazing complexity of countless eco systems that result in fragrant and eye- popping beauty. It is seen in natural formations, and especially in those places untouched by human hands.

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* But God's glory is also seen in the crown of Creation – human beings – who reflect that Image of God in which we've been created. We - who were pronounced 'very good' by our Creator. As we demonstrate the characteristics of our Heavenly Father. As the Image of God shines forth, God's glory is evident.

* So, in *human creativity*, God's glory is evident. For example, when we hear beautiful music aren't our hearts are moved? – in ways that come through a tremendous menu of styles, across cultures, and languages, music speaks to our hearts, and tells the Glory of God. I think at least part of that is that in using our creativity in music, we are reflecting the Glory of God.

* The same is true for great art – there's a lot of art I don't get, but Dianna and I love to walk through the Philadelphia Museum of Art and drink it in... you ever notice how quiet it is in those halls? Almost... holy? Not *almost* – God's glory is demonstrated in beauty, and in creativity.

I was thinking about this last Monday as I walked in the Pinelands. I've heard people call the Pines 'boring', but I consistently find that God is there! And I came across a (thankfully) rather unusual sight – some trash that someone had left alongside the trail. And I thought about how especially nasty this looked in the midst of such serenity and natural beauty.

And I had this thought: we've been hearing a lot about our 'carbon footprints' lately; we're being asked to consider the kind of lasting impact we're making on our environment. And I think that's a good thing. But I thought of instead of a 'carbon footprint', what if we thought about our 'sin footprint? How has 'sin' impacted the created world so as to cover over the Glory of God?

One of my many little quirks is that I am unable to sleep in a moving vehicle. So, if you ever end up with me in car late at night, you can feel free to close your eyes, because I *can't*. I may get grouchy and irritable (I don't know, you'll have to ask Dianna about that) but I can't fall asleep. And it's been that way since I was a little kid.

* I remember sitting in the back seat of my father's car just staring out the window... and sometimes it would be raining out, and it would get rather steamy back there (hardly anybody

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had AC in their cars back then in my neighborhood). So every once in a while, I'd take my shirt sleeve, and I'd wipe away the mist... and sometimes I'd be surprised as to where we were.

"Wow, look at that! That building, that mountain!" We've come a long way!

Well, I was thinking about that, and it led to this (you can agree with me or not, I'm just throwing it out here for you to think about!): I think that whenever we do something in the natural world that 'reverses' or at least *addresses* the effects of sin – bad things that have happened or have continued because of human decisions – *these* things also give Glory to God. These acts are like wiping the mist off the window – it doesn't last, but for a moment at least, we get to see something more than we did before. We can see a little further.

* When we find ways to help an impoverished community preserve precious natural resources, but still give them an opportunity to make a decent living, I think that is kind of a reversing of our 'sin footprint', and it gives glory to God. Digging a well in Africa – gives glory to God, by allowing people to receive and benefit from the goodness of God's creation more equitably.

When we go to the Dominican Republic for years, and pass out thousands of doses of Vermox so children and parents can have at least a 6 month respite from internal parasites – something that is a direct result of poverty – we're 'reversing our sin footprint' and giving glory to God in God's creation. See what I mean?

* When groups of people go to the Gulf Coast, to Greensburg KA, to the Appalachian mountains, to Camden, to someone's home in Moorestown, or Mt. Laurel, or a hospital to minister to people who are hurting, we are uncovering the 'sin footprint' and allowing God's Glory to shine forth. In the created world.

There is hurt and pain, and suffering all around us. We all know it. In spite of the beauty that we've been talking about, it's rare when we mistake this world for heaven. And yet... God has left a witness, a hint of what is to come. Right here among us. We read of a time yet to come when this broken world will be fixed, a time when the beauty of its Creator will be unveiled, a time when the effects of sin will be wiped away – forever.

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And we're patiently waiting for it.

* But for now, we keep on wiping away the mist... we keep seeking. And we *will* find: the Glory of God is among us. The heavens are telling the glory of God.