

Life Gives Us Teachable Moments
Psalms for the Summer – Psalm 19
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Pastor Vern Christopherson

If you're anything like me, you've had a number of teachable moments in life. These teachable moments might be anything from an accomplishment for which you worked really hard, to a serious illness, to the loss of a family member or friend. These moments have a way of influencing who we are and what we become.

There are a couple of teachable moments from my life that I'd like to share with you today. They're not momentous – simply everyday occurrences – but hopefully they will tell you not only something about me, but about God, and the ways God speaks in and through our lives.

One such moment: During my second year of seminary, I spent a year studying at the Denver House of Studies. Early in the fall, a few of us set out to climb Long's Peak on the front range of the Rocky Mountains. The hike is sixteen miles round trip and close to a mile in elevation gain. We started at 3:30 in the morning so we could be off the mountain by noon, and hopefully avoid any afternoon thunderstorms. The journey was incredibly strenuous. I was regularly gasping for breath. The footing was often anything but secure. But I made it to the top: 14,259 feet. The view of the surrounding mountains was spectacular. Suddenly I had a new passion in life – hiking in the mountains and enjoying the beauty of God's magnificent creation. It was a teachable moment.

A second moment for me: As a seventh grader, I was a big fan of fireworks around the Fourth of July. I'm not talking about the fireworks that are part of a July 4th celebration or Kernel Days in Wells. I'm talking about the ones you fire off yourself, especially the exploding kind, as in Black Cats. Firecrackers were legal back in those days. My parents warned me to be very careful, but like a lot of issues in my early teens, I was listening with only half an ear. What could possibly go wrong?

One day we were lighting firecrackers on a bridge and tossing them into the creek below. I think we were hoping to scare up some fish. I lit a Black Cat. Suddenly a Volkswagen convertible drove by. We didn't see many convertibles in our neck of the woods. I turned to watch it, and promptly forgot I was

holding a lit firecracker. It exploded right next to my ear, which ended up ringing for the next several weeks. Looking back, I suppose what I was doing with those firecrackers wasn't terribly wrong, but it wasn't very smart either. I needed to make better choices. I was growing up. It was a teachable moment.

Psalm 19 comes in two parts. In fact, originally it might have been two separate poems, one lifting up God's revelation through creation, and the other lifting up God's revelation through scripture. Those two parts sound a little like the stories I just shared.

Evidently the psalmist had had his own teachable moments. Imagine those moments forming the backdrop of a morning devotion. By the time the devotion is over, the psalmist has laid his life before God. And then he says: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."

How many sermons have you heard over the years that started with those words? "Listen up," the preacher is praying with a dose of humility. "I'm hoping that God will speak to you through my words this day. And I'm trusting that you are listening. These are teachable moments."

So, what's on the psalmist's mind during his devotion? Creation...which provides a vast array of grand experiences. It's like a trip to the top of Long's Peak to behold God's handiwork. Leslie Brandt puts it like this in his *Psalms/Now* paraphrase: "Wherever I am, wherever I go, I can sense something of the power of God. The grandeur of the mountains, the depths of the oceans, the breathtaking wonder of interstellar space; all this proclaims the glory and majesty of God."

The psalmist has to be careful, though. In the ancient world, many of Israel's neighbors believed that nature was something to be worshipped. They bowed down before the sun, moon, and stars. These are *not* gods, the psalmist insists, but they do point to God the Creator. And what's amazing about creation is that it often speaks in sheer silence, without using words at all. Mountains and valleys, bald eagles and big horn sheep, cornfields and soybeans as far as the eye can see. *Pay attention*, says the psalmist, *God is speaking through his wondrous creation.*

What's on the psalmist's mind? Scripture...which provides a great many lessons for living. *Torah* is the word in Hebrew for the lessons that come our

way. It's used here not as "law" in a legal sense, but as "instruction" in how to live well.

Again, from *Psalms/Now*: "God has made a path on which we are to walk. God has proclaimed truth through the lips of his children. There are set before us principles which direct our steps in the way of peace and joy. God has given meaning to life, goals and objectives to this existence."

Says the psalmist: "Therein is the answer to our inner need, the fulfillment of our deepest longings. These things are of greater value than anything a person could even dare to imagine." *Pay attention*, says the psalmist, *God is speaking through scripture*.

Closely related to scripture, of course, are human shortcomings. Even though I'd been warned of the danger of fireworks, scripture can be a little like a lit firecracker ready to explode in our hands. Why does it explode? Because we get distracted and our thinking goes haywire. We insist on getting our way. We believe only what we want to believe, regardless of evidence to the contrary. It's the human condition, which the psalmist appears to know all too well.

Again, from *Psalms/Now*: "This is the course which I must travel. It is not easy; I make so many mistakes. Faults and obsessions plague me. O God, set me free from their tenacious hold. Encompass me with your love and grace that these things may not stand between you and me." *Pay attention*, says the psalmist, *God is speaking, even through our shortcomings*.

We come to the end of Psalm 19. The psalmist's morning devotion is almost over. He pauses for a moment, and then prays: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."

Friends, how important is it for you and me to do what the psalmist is doing in Psalm 19? Maybe more important than we realize. After all, life is busy and hectic. Information comes at us from every side. It's so easy to lose our way. Then what?

Would you believe that eight years after my journey up Long's Peak, we moved to Longmont, Colorado? I could see Long's Peak every day of the week. But too seldom did I stop to give thanks for the wonder of creation.

Or how about this: many of us have one, two, three, four Bibles at home. These are words of scripture waiting to instruct us in the way we should go. But how many of us stop to read, and reflect, and learn from them?

These teachable moments can and do show up almost anytime, including during the rigors of Olympic competition. In the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, American Mara Abbott held the lead toward the end of a grueling 87-mile bicycle race. It was a sizable lead. “She’s got the gold in her hands,” said the announcer. But Mara wasn’t good at finishing. Over the final 150 meters, three riders came up behind her, overtook her lead, and ended up winning the medals.

Mara was devastated. Only several months later could she begin to put it in perspective. She was working as a reporter for a newspaper in Buffalo, Wyoming. She wrote: “The Rio contest was the last race of my ten-year cycling career. The experience didn’t improve my times or earn me another trophy,” she said. “But somehow it gave me this touchstone and perspective that makes other decisions and value judgments easier for me. The opportunity and the feeling that I got out of that loss, and that fullness and that wholeness, is the greatest privilege I could have ever asked for. Ever since that time, you see, I’ve lived my life with greater urgency and purpose.” Mara concluded. “If you have a broken heart, it means you have done something big enough and important enough and valuable enough to have broken your heart.” For Mara Abbott, her bicycle race during the 2016 Summer Olympics was a teachable moment, indeed.

So, friends, what has God been saying to you lately? Have you had any teachable moments? And have you been paying attention? In our fast-paced, information-filled world, it might be more important than ever to carve out time for God. The good news is, God has a great many ways to speak to us, including creation and scripture and our all-too-human shortcomings.

If you’re looking to grow in your ability to listen, find a time that works for you. Maybe morning, maybe evening. Find a place that’s quiet and reflective. Maybe you can’t find time every day, but how about starting with once or twice a week? And when you do, lay your life before God, and listen. Here’s the truth: Life is full of teachable moments. God wants to use them to speak to you and me. And it’s our job to pay attention. *May the words our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen*