

**Sensing God's Word in Creation**  
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Based upon Psalm 19:1-4b; Mark 4:26-29

We're so used to thinking of the Bible as our source of God's word that the idea of finding God's word in creation seems odd. But that's exactly what Psalm 19 is telling us to do. Listen to the words again:

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 meaning goes out through all the Earth,  
and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4)

If you've seen the night sky in desert country, you know exactly what the Psalm is saying. It's an astounding sight. In the dry, clear air of the desert we see stars strewn across an inky black sky, stretching from one horizon to another. The sight takes our breath away; we can't help but feel a profound sense of awe at the extravagance and beauty of God's creation.

But the Psalm then speaks of more than a *feeling* of awe. A few lines further on, the text reminds us that the law of the Lord is perfect, and that it revives the soul. In the Bible, the word 'Law' usually refers to God's commandments, but coming so soon after the lines we just heard and a few others about the regular rising and setting of the sun, it's pretty clear that 'law' includes the laws of nature as well. And I suspect that most of us would agree that nature – the first flowers we see in the spring, a spectacular sunrise, or a hawk gracefully soaring on the updraft over a mountain ridge – nature *does* refresh our soul at times when life seems too tangled to bear.

But of course, creation refreshes more than our souls. Everything we eat or drink comes from creation. We get our food from grocery stores, and it's easy for us to forget the real source.

But biblical people grew their own food, and they knew in their bones how deeply they depended on the fertility of the land.

And Israel's land is difficult to farm – the soil is thin, and the rain is sparse. It takes extraordinary care to farm that land successfully. When people cared for the land, it provided a good yield, and they were profoundly grateful. Psalm 65 captures their gratitude in the praise they offer God:

You visit the Earth and water it, ...  
softening it with showers,  
and blessing its growth.  
You crown the year with your bounty; ...  
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,  
the hills gird themselves with joy,  
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,  
the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
they shout and sing together for joy. (Psalm 65:9-13)

That last line is important: the people, the pastures, the hills, the meadows, and the valleys all shout and sing together!

But it didn't always go that well. At times the song faded away. People forgot God, and the Bible says they began worshiping idols again. Often the idol was simply greed; people began to cultivate the land too intensively, and exhausted its fertility. Jeremiah captures God's angry reaction graphically:

Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard,  
they have trampled down my portion, ...  
They have made it a desolation;  
desolate, it mourns to me.  
The whole land is made desolate,  
but no one lays it to heart. ...

The land is *mourning*! God hears the land's mourning, and is angry that people don't notice ... they don't even *care*.

Caring for the land matters in two ways. It preserves the health of the land, and it builds relationship with creation. Relationship is fundamental to the way the Bible understands land and covenant. Walter Brueggemann, who has long been our leading Old Testament scholar, points out again and again that the Old Testament treats God, land, and people as partners in covenantal relationship. God had created all creatures and declared all good, the usual translation of the Hebrew word *tov*, which means 'good' in the broadest possible sense – bountiful, prospering, flourishing, doing well. God intended *all* creatures to flourish, and to *celebrate* together when things go well, and to *mourn* together when things go badly. We're all in this thing called life together. It's our togetherness, our partnership, that makes life possible.

That sense of covenantal partnership isn't just an abstract principal. Israel's thin soil is fragile, easily depleted of nutrients. The Israelites learned that land had to be allowed to lie fallow every seven years to restore its fertility. But they always lived on the edge, and when food became scarce, it was tempting to plant the land just more year to grow a little more food. It can be hard to respect the needs of the land, and at times people treated land as nothing more than property to be used for their own benefit, forgetting that land was intended to prosper too. When they ignored the needs of the land, it became barren. Crops failed. As they grew hungrier, people tended to push the land further beyond its limits, often spiraling into full-blown famine.

In the depths of that famine, the people felt abandoned by God, and prayed for deliverance. Somehow, in their anguish and their prayer, they remembered the mandates of covenant and the need to care for the land. In that anguish, they sensed the real meaning of God's word, and they began to care for the land once more, living in harmony with the land. As they did, fertility slowly recovered, and the people began to prosper again.

That pattern of brokenness and restoration of land and people happened again and again. From that experience, endlessly repeated, the Israelites sensed that the fertility of the land was a measure of the quality of the covenant. When the land prospered, the people did too, and they sensed that the covenantal relationship was healthy. When the land became desolate, the people did too, and they knew that the covenant was in trouble.

This intimate relationship between land and people – the sense that the two prosper together or not at all – may well be why Jesus so often used agricultural images to portray the Kingdom of God – images like Mark’s parable of the seed growing secretly that we just heard. Those parables are rich metaphors for the Kingdom in an agrarian community. But I think the parables were more than useful metaphors. They were concrete *examples* of how God intended creation to work, of the partnership God intended to sustain all creatures.

We often analyze the parables to pull out ideas that we think Jesus wanted to convey. But I’m not sure Jesus wanted to convey ideas at all. His followers had experienced these processes at work and though they didn’t understand how seeds grew, they *knew* the joy of a bountiful harvest, and the hunger that sprouts from seeds that fail to produce a crop. The parables, I think, are intended to resonate with people’s inner experience, not with their intellect. We no longer grow our own food or go hungry when crops fail, so we miss the experiential context of the parables that Jesus’ followers knew so well. And when we interpret the parables conceptually, we miss the reality of the experience. And God, I think, lives in reality, not in our concepts.

One solution is to experience God’s presence in the reality of our environment, finding God in places at risk, places we care about. We can each do that by finding a place that matters to us, perhaps a stream we love to fish, a path through a patch of woods that makes us feel at home, or simply a tree that shades us in the summer and gladdens our hearts with color in the fall. We can take time to know this place in all its individuality and in all seasons. We can pay attention to how it’s doing; allow ourselves to care deeply about its welfare – to celebrate with it when it flourishes, and to mourn with it when it suffers. And we can do things that help it flourish, things that help it be what God created it to be.

We can let our caring be the seed in our hearts that sprouts and grows into love for all creation. We can’t explain the process, but we can feel it happening. We can pray for creation, and listen for God’s response, sensing God’s presence, God’s partnership with us and with all of creation. And in that sense of partnership, we can, I think, begin to care more deeply about creation, and become the person that God created each of us to be.