

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
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David Hammond  
Elemental: God All Around | Psalm 19:1-4**

Last weekend, my family and I were up at Seagull Lake. It's right at the gateway into the Boundary Waters—almost up as far as Canada. Some of you have been there before. My wife and I were celebrating our eleventh anniversary with our family and it was Saturday and a whole string of severe thunderstorms had been rolling through the area. So, we hadn't been able to get in the canoe, or even on the lake. We were sitting up, it was probably 9:30PM or so when dusk was setting in and we said, "You know what? We have a little window of opportunity here, let's get out there". So, we went out to the dock, it was still sprinkling, and it was calm, and it was like we were in a completely different world. As we pushed out, two loons popped up out of the water about ten feet away and swam out from us. They weren't fighting or attacking us, and I took that as a sign of our marriage, that they were as happy, but I'd never been that close to a loon before. They are really beautiful.

So, we paddled out on the lake, out there in the middle of nowhere, and we were able to find ourselves in one of the most staggering sunsets that I've seen in a long time. The colors just kept changing and exploding to the west, and behind us to the east were the deep purple of these thunderstorms moving off. It was actually kind of scary looking at the dark sky back behind us, but in the middle of a lake, you can see all the way around. It was absolutely breathtaking. And in that moment I recalled the words, "Let the skies proclaim the work of God's hands". They don't have speech, but Wow! Do they ever declare His glory day after day.

King David, the poet, said it this way in Psalm 19:

<sup>1</sup> The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. <sup>2</sup> Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. <sup>3</sup> They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. <sup>4</sup> Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. [Psalm 19:1-4]

Here's the cool part: the wonder of our shared faith is the day that, I in 2016, on Seagull Lake, can reach back to David six thousand miles away, twenty five hundred years ago. We're both looking at the same night sky, we worship the same God, and together we can agree about the night skies. You know, David—although he became the greatest king of Israel later on in his life—started out as a shepherd boy watching over the sheep, his family's sheep just outside the city of Bethlehem. He would be out there with the sheep, and he knew the stars in a different way. You know, you and I live in the city, so we look at the stars via an app on our phone, but he would have seen it like this. [picture shown] You know, when you're out in the remote areas, and you're away from the city, you see a sea of stars and you can see the stripe of the Milky Way down

through the sky. Any of you ever seen the sky like that, being out in the dark away from the city lights? It's spectacular, and this is what we'd like to explore in the teaching series Elemental: God All Around. How do we understand the natural world and what does that say about our own spirituality? Not just our relationship with God, but the men and women of faith like David, and many others after him, who looked up at the same skies, and saw the same trees, and the same mountains, and had things to say about it. And we want to see also how God was uniquely present through the natural elements and ask, "How should that change the way we think and live now in 2016 and beyond?"

So, today if you haven't noticed, I'm a very visual person and we're going to go through a visual journey of Scripture through a lot of slides. I want to give you permission to actually look at the screens a lot, so if you're not looking at me, it's actually part of my plan—you can look at the screens and take it in. And also, let your imagination go just a little bit. I know we all have plans that we're headed to, I'm headed to a barbeque this afternoon that I'm really excited about, but it's not here, yet. Let's just stay here and let your imagination sink into these images and places. Now, don't daydream too much. If you fall asleep or if you get lost in your thoughts, you can have your partner smack you and bring you back in if you need to be brought back in, but nonetheless, let's go on this journey and let's go back to the beginning.

Most of you in this room would self identify as Christians. That is those who have patterned themselves after the life and the way of Jesus Christ. And we know that Jesus Himself was a Jew. He would have grown up memorizing large portions of what we call The Torah, which is the first five books of our Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—and just like Jesus, we also learn about one of the most beautiful sections very early on that is the creation account. The Creation story in Genesis 1. It's not meant to be a scientific text, it's actually more like a poem or a song. It has breathtaking meter, and rhythm, and detail when it says, "In evening and morning the first day. And there was evening and morning the second day and so on and God said it was good." You know the story.

The Bible says that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was empty, and formless, and void. Nothingness. God starts by creating light. He separates the light from the darkness and draws them apart and creates these two basic properties, and then He separates the water above from the water below. Basically He makes the sky. So you have the sky above and the moisture up there and the water below. And then land forms and land starts to pop up and separate the oceans from the lakes, and streams, and creeks. And the land becomes filled with vegetation of all kinds; of flowers, and trees, beauty, and color. And after that he sets forth the celestial markers—the sun and the moon. And you have this tiny little phrase at the end of 16 that says, "And He also made the stars."

If any of you are interested in astronomy, the more we know, the more we realize we have no clue how vast it is. It just keeps going, and going, and going, and going. And so a lot of the miracle of creation is stuff we can't even see, stuff we don't even know, yet. Some of you are studying the subatomic level where we are learning about atomic

structure and the ways that what's going on in an atom constantly . . . life is constantly happening. We can't even see it, but it's buzzing all the time, and the black space in our universe, and atoms, and spaces is unbelievable to think about and fathom. For some of you, that is your field and you know what I'm talking about.

After that God fills the sea with fish of all varieties, and the land runs with animals of all kinds also. And then finally He creates us. He creates man and woman and He sets us in this paradise to rule over it, to steward the land. That, my friends, is our beginning, and God said that it was good!

Now, the next major chapter in the story is the history of the children of Israel. Literally, the twelve sons of a man who was named Israel. You most likely know this story as well. They became slaves in the Nile delta region in Egypt. And for four hundred years they were in slavery. It says, "They cried out to their God" and through wild displays of nature and through the ten plagues, God rescues them and frees them from Egypt. He actually walks them through the Red Sea, which is a literal body of water that is still there today. It's big, and they walk right through it on dry land because God made a way for them. He brought them to the other side to safety. They journey into the Sinai Desert, rugged but beautiful waste land, and up on Mount Sinai Moses ascends the mountain. He's shown the glory of God and his face is shining, it's radiant. He receives the Ten Commandments while the people tremble as the mountain shakes and erupts with fire down below.

Under Joshua's leadership, after a little forty year detour in that wilderness, they come into a land they say is flowing with milk and honey. Now, this is not a spectacular picture, but you notice what color the bushes are in the bottom of the screen there? They're green. You have water in this land, which enables life and enables things to grow: crops, food, livestock, flowers, milk and honey. The story actually camps out in this region of Israel. It's actually a very tiny area of land when you consider world geography, but for the next fifteen hundred years up until the time of Christ, we're right here at this location. Through the kings of Israel, through King David, through the prophets, and finally Jesus comes on the scene. Now the Gospels, the four books that start off our New Testament, tell about the life and ministry of Jesus, most of which happened in the region of Galilee. And Galilee, in the spring in particular, is gorgeous. It's a beautiful landscape and the Mount of Beatitudes, where we believe that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, is up on the north end of this lake, the Sea of Galilee—another gorgeous, spectacular location.

Jesus went down to Jerusalem where we know that He was crucified, He was buried, was raised to life, and He ascended back to heaven. His followers, in particular the apostle Paul, now take the Gospel from Jerusalem, this tiny place in Israel, to the ends of the earth, or at least to the ends of the known world at the time. So Paul travels from Israel up through what is modern day Syria, and Turkey, and Cyprus, and through modern day Greece, and all the way over to Rome eventually. And the Gospel goes down into Egypt as well.

But I want to give you a little bit of a perspective on the journeys of Paul. Paul walked thousands of miles, he sailed thousands as well, and he was in danger constantly, but if he had lived today, we probably would have pasted him on the front of all of our outdoor magazines and called him a spectacular adventurer and backpacker. He would have bought a lot of gear at REI probably, but in 2 Corinthians 2:11 there's this account where he talks about being in danger constantly, being shipwrecked, being beaten, being in danger on roads, and this is all true. As you know, if you take it upon yourself to walk thousands of miles in the middle of nowhere, or sail on seas without GPS and things, it's very dangerous. But, take a look at these pictures. These are the islands of Cyprus. I hope Paul brought a snorkel because that water looks amazing. Then there are the mountains of Turkey, central Turkey, where the church of Antioch would have been, and all these cities right in the middle of Turkey with majestic mountains, just beautiful scenery. And here are the coastlines and the islands of Greece—don't raise your hand, but some of you have been on cruises through this area—the Aegean Sea around Turkey and Greece, just gorgeous.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying Paul was on vacation. He was in a lot of danger and thank God he traveled and did what he did, because the Gospel was able to come across Europe and eventually to the Americas where we are benefactors of this Good News. But I just have to wonder if Paul had a journal. He was writing these letters that were carried, and these letters would have been written at great cost with a quill and ink, and they would be carried over miles and miles to these churches. His chief concern was the health of these baby churches that were uncertain about whether they would make it or not, so he wanted to get right to the point in his letters to the Ephesians, and the Galatians, and the Philippians. But if Paul had a journal, if he had an iPhone to snap some pictures, I can guarantee you, he would have known Psalm 19 and celebrated as he looked out over the mountains of Turkey, or over the Aegean Sea, and Greece or Turkey.

Before Paul, Jesus was a carpenter. He would have known the species of the trees. He would have known the landscape. His disciples were all fisherman, they would have been intimately connected with the landscape and with the Sea of Galilee, the weather patterns around that lake, and how they would navigate that. And before that, the children of Israel, they would have come out of their tents in the morning in the Sinai Desert and looked at the sunrise and would have had this connection with nature that was very different than what we experience today. So, my main conclusion is that we should all quit our jobs, sell our houses, and go camping, right? Particularly in Turkey. No. I mean you can go camping for sure, but please don't quit your job! But I would submit to you this . . . that for many of us, many of these key moments in our spiritual journeys have happened in and around places of natural beauty or majesty. Maybe some of you remember sitting around a campfire with friends, or at a camp when you were in high school—there's something about being outside. A lot of times we read in the Gospels that Jesus would often go early in the morning out to a remote location. There's this sense of getting away from life, of taking in natural beauty that just grounds you. It's like a foundation that we're supposed to have, but we have a little bit of a problem, right?

I mean the Israelites, and Jesus, and Paul, they walked and were in and around the earth. A lot of people today hold up the farmers who actually get their hands dirty on a regular basis, when most of us are driving around looking at cell phones, looking at computer screens, sitting in air conditioned rooms. We have no concept of the weather patterns and being on the land and of the land the way they did, so we have this barrier. We're going to talk about that in just a minute. So far I've showed you some really beautiful images and I hope you've been impressed. It's kind of like the cover of tourists' brochures, but let me ask you this. If you're in this Sinai Desert with a hundred plus degree temperatures in the middle of the day, what happens if you run out of water? You have a couple of days, and this happened to the children of Israel, right? There are a couple of poignant stories about the way that they were in danger of losing life because of water. Or, what if you're Paul and you're sailing out? Have you ever been offshore fishing or way out on a cruise? It's a little bit unsettling when you see the last piece of land move out of sight and all you have around you for 360 degrees is just water, right? That would have happened to Paul, except in many cases, storms blew in and suddenly life was not guaranteed out on the Mediterranean Sea with no GPS and no Coast Guard to rescue you.

So, I want to dig into this a little bit and I think there's a familiar story—C.S. Lewis and the Chronicles of Narnia—the character of Susan when she hears about the lion Aslan. Do you remember that she gets a little bit unsettled and she says, *oh, I didn't know we were going to be meeting this lion guy. Is he safe?* And Mr. Beaver, do you remember what he says? He says, *who said anything about safety? Of course he isn't safe, but he is good.*

And I had an event in my life a couple of weeks ago that helped draw this out in a personal way. I don't want to give you the impression that I'm like this outdoor adventurer guy because I'm not—I wish I was—but I've had in my life the last couple of weeks some great experiences. My family and I were down in Cape Paterson, North Carolina on vacation, it's where I grew up. I grew up in Virginia; we would go to the outer banks a lot, go surfing and fishing down there. So we were in Cape Paterson, and the tropical storm Colin blew through. I don't know if anyone was following that . . . it started in the Gulf and came up the coast, dropped just a torrential down pour. We were safe, it wasn't a big deal, but it was like fifty mile an hour winds and torrential down pour, it went by really fast.

Later on in the day, it calmed down substantially, and my brother and I love to surf and we were like, *should we go out there? It's pretty big!* And we're out of shape, we don't surf up here, so it's like any other sport when you're out of shape—it's not necessarily safe to do it. But we made it out and we were sitting out in the water in this glassy calm water floating over these huge swells, the spray of the waves was flying up because the offshore winds were blowing a little bit, and the sun was setting. It was just breathtakingly beautiful, and for me, it's like my happy place being out on the ocean on a day like that. It was dangerous, but it was good. I haven't felt that alive in quite some time.

I recall also, and some of you know, there are two words that we often talk about when we describe God. The theologians will say the transcendence and imminence of God. I want to break this down. Can you say transcendence? Say transcendence. And imminence. Say imminence. They're kind of tongue-twisters, don't say them too fast. So the transcendence of God is this idea that God is beyond. He is other. He is vast. When we look at the universe and we see things, we realize that we are very small. There's that picture of us back on the lake. Does anyone see a tiny dot in the middle of the screen on the left side? It's like a bug up there? That's our canoe out there. It's times like this when you're out in the middle of nowhere and you feel this big. That my friends, is the transcendence of God, where we are before God and we say, *man, You are other*. And this is a good thing; this is not a bad thing. Can you imagine if God was small and somehow felt insignificant? There's something about this relationship of our finiteness, our smallness, and God's greatness that is actually a really, really good thing. The imminence of God on the other hand is about God's nearness. We often say that Jesus Christ became flesh. He became flesh and he dwelt among us. This is this idea of God beyond coming near and becoming known. The imminence of God is that God says and whispers to you, *I am here, I am near, I see you, and you are loved*. That is the imminence of God. And here I think is the magic of nature. Nature helps us very rapidly move into that tension, that space between the transcendence of God and the imminence of God, right?

So this summer when you're looking up at a sunset that is just gorgeous, you are able to snap into this mode of saying, Wow! Like something in you should shudder at the fact that this sunset created by the way the sun, that is ninety-two million miles away, that God set that in motion and just . . . He could have made a sunset grey, but He made it like that instead. And so you shudder at the vastness of God, His ability to create this moment, but at the same time, something inside of you should laugh or maybe cry that you're able to take part in this. That He's right there with you enjoying it alongside of you saying, *I'm here, you are loved, and you have a home in this world*.

So day and night the natural world sings the song of creation and it gives us a glimpse of a creator and helps us to know His power, but also His deep love for us as we find our place in the world.

I want to close with this. I ask you to do two things this summer. The first one is I want to encourage you, to push you to embrace the extremes, right? My surfing story, the story of us paddling out after the storm, that's an extreme. That doesn't happen very often. There are times when you're going to be faced with a choice: do I sit in my house or do I get up at 5:00AM to watch the sunrise, or do I hike that trail even though I don't feel like it? Or do I let my grandkids splash water on me and laugh with them instead of staying away from that? The extreme for you could look a lot different. I hope some of you go skydiving or do something crazy this summer. If you do please tell me. But for all of you, what is it that you might push yourself just a little bit to find yourself in a place of transcendence, of joy, or to even contemplate the fury of nature at the same time? Embrace or run to the extremes. Do something you wouldn't normally do. The second thing though I ask of you to is to savor the middle. Most of life is lived in these very

average places, right? I mean today we're all going to have lunch after this. It's possible that at lunch you might sit outside at a restaurant. How can you be thankful for the ways that God is with you, with your friends, with your family in that middle, very normal place in life? Because that's where life happens, that's where most of us dwell and exist, so cultivate a sense of humility, a sense of thanksgiving in the normal daily stuff, because we can't always live in the extremes. But again, that sense of transcendence and imminence, that sense of it, the extremes and the normalcy, that's where we will grow and expand as people.

I'm going to invite my wife Heather up. She's a writer and does a lot of other talented things. I want her to share a poem by Wendell Berry. He's a guy who's a farmer and really has a special way of talking about nature, so listen to this poem and then we'll close in prayer.

"The Peace of Wild Things"  
Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Let's pray. God we are grateful for this daily grace that You offer us. That You could have put us in a mundane setting, but instead You give us fantastic beauty to call home. Would You guide us and call us into transcendent places beyond words, beyond explanation? And would You be near and form us in the average mundane places that happen every day? Lord we give You our summer, we give You our lives, we thank You for the heat of this season and the beauty that it offers us. We ask that we'd honor You as Your children. We thank You daily and open ourselves to new ways of understanding You in Your creation. It's in Your name we pray, amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*