

“Light and Word”

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Text: John 1:1-18

I was gone Sunday. I went to Renaissance Weekend, where experts in politics, business, science and religion gather to talk about various issues. It was a fascinating gathering. I learned from astronauts, Nobel Prize winners, physicists, and brain surgeons. I think these sorts of gatherings are much needed. It's important for experts to work beyond their silos. We know what happens when religion works in a vacuum without science—people stop realizing that the Bible is an ancient text, filled with depth and wisdom, and they begin thinking that the Bible is a science textbook, and that a flat world was created in seven days, 6,000 years ago.

But it's not just that religion needs science. Science needs religion as well. For instance, I heard about a pill that's being developed that would wipe away traumatic events from a person's memory. Just like an aspirin would blot out a headache, a bad memory would be gone with one swallow.

What would you do? Would you take the pill?

This may seem like a good idea, at first. Our brains are amazing things and we already have mysterious mechanisms in place that make us forget and suppress trauma when we need to. Trial lawyers explain that it's very difficult to get to the truth of what actually happened in a violent crime, because our brains efficiently rewrite our memories in a way that we can live with them.

But there are many problems with blotting out our traumatic events in an artificial manner. When I was talking with Victoria about this earlier in the week, she wondered, “How would humans keep our hands out of fire if we never remembered getting burned?” It's a good question to extend. How would we ever moderate our drinking without remembering the hangover? How would someone leave that abusive spouse, if we only remember romance, and could not recall the bruises? How would we ever look for peace in times of war? If our answer to traumatic events is to erase them, then how could we ever feel empathy toward another human? How could we relate to one another's sufferings? How could we heal from a traumatic wound, if we cannot locate its root cause? There is something about suffering that makes us human and trying to erase one difficult event would cause an avalanche of other complications. We cannot keep our suffering in the dark.

I'm pretty sure that Philip K. Dick explored this subject of wiping out traumas in one of his science fiction novels, and I know that it was a Jim Carey movie, *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Religion can definitely be of use in this area. Many theological reasons exist, indicating that erasing suffering is a bad idea. Think about it. As we come together in this place to figure out how to be more fully human, we understand that the scriptural narrative starts with light and word. **Our very formation as humans is wrapped up in illumination and wisdom, and we cannot lose sight of our ancient wisdom, even in the face of modern technological advances.**

Let me give you some theological context. Four creation myths exist in the Bible. They're extremely important, which might be hard for us to understand, because we are so used to looking at things from a chronological or scientific perspective. These stories do not teach us that the earth was created in seven days, 6,000 years ago, but these stories *do* teach us something deep and profound about God and humanity. They are truths that cannot be tested in a laboratory.

The first creation myth is in Genesis 1. That's the one you're probably most familiar with. If you went to Sunday school as a child, you probably focused on this story. In it, God creates light in one of God's first acts.

The second account is in Genesis 2, and it focuses on the creation of humanity. It talks about God forming us from the dust of the earth and breathing life into us. We are earth creatures, filled with God's breath.

The third one is in Proverbs 8. It is written from the perspective of a woman, who personifies wisdom. She exists at creation. Feminist theologians have lifted up Proverbs 8 as important as we move beyond our thinking of God as male.

John 1 is the fourth creation narrative. The author writes a much more cosmic sort of account of the Christmas story, describing Jesus as light and word. John places Jesus at creation. And the interesting thing here is that in this passage, light is not something that God creates, but Jesus is the light and the *logos*, which means the word or the wisdom. In these accounts, light and wisdom have primacy. They are divine.

And that's important to remember as we endeavor to be human, we must understand this connection between God and humanity, light, and wisdom. In our earliest myths we come into being through light and wisdom. Light in the ancient world had a deep meaning. It was not just the sun in the sky or the lamp that they lit in the evening, but it also gave a sense of illumination, understanding, revelation, or knowledge.

John Calvin understood the connections between God, humanity, and knowledge. He begins the *Institutes* with this truth: "The knowledge of God and ourselves [are] mutually connected."

He explains that the wisdom is made up of these two things: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves.

So, as we think of that little pill and our humanity, we know that in order to have knowledge of ourselves, we must move toward shining a light on our past, on the things that make us ashamed, on the things that we would rather hide.

For when we try to hide our excessive drinking, we can become dependent on substances that will hurt our bodies and relationships. When we cover up the bruises from our spouse, we stay trapped in abusive relationships. When soldiers can never look at the moral injury that they have endured or inflicted, they will become prisoners of their own shame.

But when we can face these dark things, as individuals and as a society, when we can bring light and wisdom to our human experience, then we can heal, forgive, and escape the patterns that hurt us and others.

I think about broad swaths of history. There is no doubt that this is a time of incredible technological advancement. We have been able to do amazing things. We can travel in space. We can move from one continent to another within 24 hours. We can hold unbelievable stores of information in the palm of our hands. We have encyclopedias of information at our fingertips! We have libraries books and music available at all times.

And yet, we have not always kept the amount of information that we store in check with the quality of our wisdom. Just as this is a time of great technological advance, the gospel of John was written during a great time of wisdom. It was created in what scholars call the “axial age.” It was a time when the major religions of the world arose, and when our philosophical architecture was being put into place in the east and the west. The moral and ethical understandings that we still hold to, were developed during that time. And just as we have incredible technological advances now, that was a time of vast philosophical and religious development.

And now, we need to keep the two in check. For each time a technological advance creates damage to the planet, there needs to be a balance of wisdom that says, “We are stewards of this creation, not consumers of it.” When we develop social media, there needs to be a balance of wisdom that asks, “How will this allow us to see something divine in one another, and lead us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves?” As we develop more artificial intelligence, we need to ask, “What is the human cost?” When there is a new pill that can wipe out our traumatic memories, we need wisdom to cry out, “What can we learn from our suffering? What about the lessons of Job? What about the Israelites who wandered in the desert?” Because, my friends, though this is a time of great technological advances, but this is not the greatest age of wisdom. We’re having a hard time discerning the difference between truth and propaganda. We are having difficulty with loving one another across the aisle. And we still need to reach for our ancient texts, our creation myths for that sort of wisdom.

This week, it became clearer as I sat, listening to all of the incredibly exciting developments taking place in science and technology, that there needs to be a balance of light and wisdom.

The act of illumination is one of the main attributes of God. And as we come together, we do not yearn for darkness. Instead, we seek revelation, a deeper understanding of truth, an enlightened reality. We seek to learn from Jesus, the Christ, who is fully human and who is light and wisdom.

To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.