

“Voice Behind the Light”

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Scripture - John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the life of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

May God give his blessing to the reading and understanding of his Holy Word, Amen.

Voice Behind the Light

I think these are some of the most powerful verses in the bible.

Today's scripture is like a sneak preview. It's almost like the writer feels the need to explain the story first before telling it. He seems to be determined to summarize everything first before bringing in the details of the story.

Today, I will be focusing on three key words in this scripture that are practically interchangeable.

Word and Light and Truth. They seem to be sprinkled throughout today's text.

The gospel cuts right to the chase with a broad statement, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The writer then begins to narrow down the focus, mentioning Jesus, not at first by name, but as 'the light' and then finally to name Jesus specifically, in the next to last verse, as the one who has made God known to us.

In fact, people much smarter than me have said that John 1:14 is the entire gospel in one sentence. Hear it again, "¹⁴*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*" When you go home today, read it again. Form your own opinion; verse 14.

In the first verse, we read that there was the Word, it was with God and it was God. If you let your imagination spin for a bit, this verse defines God. We cannot separate Word from God because they are one and the same. It spawns the idea that he 'says' it, 'thinks' it, 'wills' it... and it's done. Jesus is referred to as the light in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it, meaning the light has power. Darkness is not something that has substance. Darkness is the absence of light. And so, the light in the darkness is the one true thing that the darkness cannot overcome. The Word is the light that casts no shadow. As John mentions the light in the darkness, witness to the light, the true light, we get the feeling that the writer is speaking of God and Jesus in the same sense, as though they cannot be separated. Indeed, Jesus told us that when we see Him, we have seen the Father.

Light is used here as a metaphor. Why is light a good metaphor in this scripture? Light give us detail to what once was either darkness or just silhouettes. Light shows us things as they really are. Light allows us to recognize and appreciate. Light allows us to explore and discover. It gives us warmth. It gives us the chance to believe what we see. Try substituting the name 'Jesus' for the word 'Light' in all these examples and we see why it is a good metaphor.

Just as we cannot know the thoughts of another, we cannot know God's spirit unless we have the light of God's spirit, which teaches us. Without

the spirit, without the light, if we are spiritually lazy, things of God seem foolish. Not so if we see through the lens of God's light.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he also speaks of 'light.' He says that God made His light to shine in our hearts. In doing so, Jesus removed our spiritual blindness. He gave us the opportunity and the reason to believe.

Light helps us see truth.

After Jesus was arrested, Pilate had a chance to see the truth. He even asked Jesus, "What is truth?"

You will recall that Jesus did not respond to Pilate's question. He knew his future had been foretold and his silence showed his willingness to follow God's will. He was truth, living and breathing, standing there before Pilate, having preached and taught and lived by the Word of God, always pointing his followers to a hereafter. How many times did he say, "The kingdom of heaven is like....?"

In most philosophy texts, the word, "Truth" has three distinct forms or explanations.

First, it can include only that which I can verify. If it is said to be raining outside, I can go out there and verify it. I can just look at it or I can stand out in the middle of it and get wet. Regardless, I have first-hand proof that it is raining and that is the truth. No one can contradict me.

Second, I can validate something if the facts about it all seem to point to a logical conclusion. A child is presented with, what appears to be, a burned finger. He and his brother were unattended. His sibling says he had been playing with matches. Yes, this looks like a burned finger. Do the facts about this seem to 'Hang' together? Then it must be true.

Lastly is the pragmatic explanation. What works for you? When I use a map instead of a GPS to get somewhere, that's truth because it works for me.

Let's test these three explanations against God's truth. Can I verify God's existence with direct indisputable evidence? Of course not. Any theologian

will tell you that. Atheists have made an art form of punching holes in such attempts.

Can I prove that there is a God with facts that hang together in a logical pattern? When one thinks of a man who says he is the embodiment of God and yet comes claiming to be a servant rather than royalty, can you really say these facts are logical by earthly standards?

And finally, what orchestrated outcome works for you? What combination of steps, types of worship, spiritual practices, give you a visible, tangible outcome that you can show me and say, "See? This works!" In this definition of truth, something works only because I say it works.

The truth Jesus brings us cannot be defined by any of these earthly standards. How thankful we should be to have these opening words of John's Gospel, because it cannot be stated any better.

So, after these introductory, summarizing verses in today's scripture, Jesus' arrival was foretold by John the Baptist. John started off with a small following, and his preaching started a groundswell of attention in which he told people that something big was coming, something significant was about to happen. He was setting the stage for Jesus, the truth, the word, the light.

I think it is important to spend a little time talking about this Baptist named John. He came from a priestly family and we can only imagine what he might have learned from his father. And we know from the other gospels that the Baptist and Jesus were distant cousins. Luke tells us John was filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. There is some speculation that he spent time with the Essenes, who have been credited with writing what came to be known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. We are told he wore camel hair and ate locusts and honey. In short, he led a simple life.

We should try to picture the times and the culture of the world back then. I cannot help but wonder what made people follow John? His message was that of repentance and his self-denial behavior was evidence of his sincerity. But, we must remember, the people of those times and of that location had been promised a messiah. If you look in your bibles at home, turn to the section that narrates the time between the OT and NT. There

were about 400 hundred years in that period. And God said very little, if anything, according to historical records. Many social and political changes took place, but no theological enlightenments. Other conquering armies came on the scene. The promise of a messiah began to fade out like a repeating echo that diminishes each time it bounces off the canyon walls. In its place was the emphasis on the law, courtesy of the Sanhedrin in the temple.

It was a time of very rich versus very poor, no prophets, no religious vigor or revelation, staying out of trouble with the law, occasional upheaval in the streets, political corruption, and just getting from one day to the next.

Do some of these things sound familiar?

In the midst of this comes this Baptist from the wilderness and he talks about the coming messiah as though it will happen very soon! So, people did listen to John for good reason.

But there's a problem. In verse 10, it says that He made the world, He was in the world, but the world didn't know Him. He came to His own people and they didn't accept Him. He was not what they were looking for.

If there is information in the world that you don't know about, then you don't know that you don't know it. If you don't know what to look for, you won't find it.

Closer to home, how will the unchurched ever know what they don't know if they have never heard of it? Who will tell them about the light? Is there a small spark of truth in the unchurched that could become a flame? How would they receive the Word of God?

I recently met the editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Dr. Jill Duffield. A group of us ate lunch together with her at a recent Presbytery meeting and the question came up regarding what spiritual needs do the unchurched people feel? I know that if God were taken out of my life, there would be a huge empty space. I asked Dr. Duffield how do the unchurched fill that same empty hole? She replied that people find earthly things like hobbies, travel, self-help books, and recreational vehicles to give themselves a sense of fulfillment. That is, until a crisis hits and these then things just don't serve any purpose. One cannot offer up a prayer to a Winnebago!

Again, people don't know what they don't know. They haven't seen the light! They haven't heard the Word. They don't know the Truth!

They gravitate toward such material things because such things don't require faith, they can be controlled, require limited responsibility, and bring about quick gratification. All of these the exact opposite of what believers experience.

When is the last time you tasted a new food or a new combination of spices? You found a taste you didn't know was there. You didn't know what you had been missing. We are supposed to bring the light of Christ into the darkness; light that many people don't know exists. They simply find whatever they call truth by whatever works for them.

Yes, our world is filled with spiritual laziness.

There was a time when most non-church goers could at least recall when they did attend church. They remember at least a few bible verses from their childhood. But, I think that subset of the population is shrinking. More and more people are in need of basic bible knowledge.

Who will tell them about God and point out the fact that they are spiritually starving? Jesus is the embodiment of God's grace and we are asked to echo God's grace in our own lives. Our calling is to bring good news, the light and a new reality into what is a prevailing state of ignorance.

Who will be John the Baptist of the 21st century? Even in a small way?

Today's scripture tries to describe the indescribable, to explain the unexplainable. His words speak of a God who creates by will alone. A God whose existence goes against what is considered earthly powerful and pragmatically logical. A God who turns the human paradigm upside down by manifesting in human form in the role of a servant rather than as glittering royalty. A God who gives Himself up to death like a lowly criminal, rejected by His own, and yet still loving them.

God did what the law could not do.

Too many do not know that truth, the light, the word, is having eternal life with God.

Jesus gave his life to bring light to that message.

Dr. N.T. Wright says that Christianity is the response to the reality that something significant has happened that changes everything for the rest of time.

In his book, *Telling Secrets*, Frederick Buechner says this:

“Is it true, what Jesus believed, this Truth that he died for and lived for? Maybe the only way to know finally this side of falling off that precipice ourselves is to stop speaking and thinking and reading about it so much and to start watching and listening.”

He implies that God’s words are still speaking to us.

We are therefore reminded of the message found in Isaiah 30:21.

“Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’”

May God’s words, His truth, light your path.

Amen.