

Speaking That Makes Sense

John 1:9



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Swarthmore Presbyterian Church
December 17, 2017

The gospel of John is a terribly contentious gospel. Some biblical scholars see in John's gospel a protracted judicial process in which witnesses are summoned, one after another, either to accuse or to excuse Jesus. Whereas the verb "to bear witness" appears only twice in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it appears thirty-three times in the gospel of John. Clearly testimony plays a significant role in this gospel.

The figure of John the Baptist is the first in the series of witnesses who give testimony about Jesus. Though his reputation as a baptizer is well-known, what really seems to matter about John the Baptist to the writer of this gospel is the testimony that the Baptist gives about Jesus. Whereas he is depicted in the other gospels as a preacher of repentance, here in this gospel, he is first and foremost the one sent by God to testify to who Jesus is.

The writer of this gospel presumably knows the veneration in which John the Baptist was held. He knows how famous John was - that he attracted hordes of people wherever he went. In his gospel, however, none of this is described; John the Baptist's purpose is to direct everyone's attention away from himself and toward Jesus. So when priests and Levites were sent by Jewish authorities to demand his identity, John the Baptist deflects their demands, negating their questions. "Who are you?" . . . 'I am not the Messiah.' . . . 'What then? Are you Elijah?' . . . 'I am not.' . . . 'Are you the prophet?' . . . 'No.'" Once the transfer of attention is made and his followers begin to follow Jesus instead, John simply slips away.

I like *this* John the Baptist. I like the way he doesn't draw a lot of attention to himself. I like that he is a man of few words and that the words he says are to testify to Jesus as the true light: that "the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (1:9).

In a novel that I haven't yet finished reading, *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr, there is a character named Marie Laure, who grows up in Paris at the time of the Second World War. At the age of six, Marie loses her sight. Her father, who is a master craftsman, builds a perfect miniature of their neighborhood so that she can learn it by touch and always find her way home. For a long time the miniature model of their neighborhood does not seem like the real world to her. Whereas the real world is brimming with noise and smells, her father's model smells only of dried glue and sawdust. Nevertheless, her father persists in asking her to memorize its every detail - the houses, the angles of streets, the gardens. . .

Over a year into her blindness, Marie-Laure's father takes her to a street in the neighborhood that runs alongside the edge of a garden, a path that they take every morning, spins her around three times, and tells her, "Now, you're going to take us home". Panicked, with her senses all a jumble, she feels as though the world has tilted. All at once she hears crows cawing, brakes hissing, and shop doors ringing. And though her father tells her to take it one centimeter at a time, she gives up, crying, "It's so big."

Week after week, she fails the exercise. Instead of leading her father to their home, she mistakenly takes detours that take the father-daughter pair further from home than they started. Surprisingly, when she turns eight, she begins to get it right. At home, as she runs her fingers over the model, she begins to count "miniature benches, trees, lampposts, doorways. Every day some new detail emerges - each storm drain, park bench, and hydrant in the model has its counterpart in the real world." Calmer on their walks, she can make sense of the sounds she hears, the odors and fragrances she smells. No longer are all her senses jumbled and no longer does the world feel tilted. A left here, a right there, "three storm drains four storm drains five". Then, one day, she leads them to their apartment building and reaches out to touch the trunk of the chestnut tree that is her old friend. Exuberant, her father swings her around and around as they laugh together.

For Marie-Laure, light was reinstated in her life when all of her senses were attuned to the world around her, when sound, smell, and vibrations were in sync with the details of the miniature she had memorized by touch. Light shone when everything that had been jumbled up finally made sense.

Over the course of his life, American theologian Jonathan Edwards filled notebooks and notebooks with observations about all the things he encountered in the world around him. He studied the petals of flowers, the veins of leaves. He marveled at the patterns in nature. He described them in detail - their proportions, their shapes, sizes, and colors. Quite evidently he was fascinated by what he observed, by their harmonies and agreements, and he wanted to understand how everything related to every other thing. Taking notes and notes, he eventually realized that his pursuit to understand the way in which all things relate to all other things could not be exhausted by journaling. So, he took a different approach, a scriptural approach. After pouring over the scriptures, Edwards concluded that God created everything to be in relation to everything else for the ultimate purpose of love. So, every proportion, harmony, agreement that our senses observed or felt between things was an expression of the love for which God created the world.

Of course, we know that not everything is in perfect harmony. There are plenty of perversions, deformities, and dissonances in the world around us. There are plenty of times when love is not what orders our relationships. Edwards called such deformities sin, and he spoke of Christ as the light that enables us to see both when things are deformed and when they are in harmonious proportion.

In an interview with religion journalist Krista Tippett, the Congressman from Georgia John Lewis spoke about his first time leaving the South to go to the North. He was eleven years old when he and some of his first cousins traveled with an aunt and uncle to Buffalo for a visit. "Being there," where there was no segregation, he said, "gave me hope. I wanted to believe, and I did believe, that things would get better. Later I discovered that you have to have this sense of faith that what you're moving toward is already done. It's already happened."

Despite the deformities in our social and moral lives, to live *as if* the beloved community already existed is wisdom by which John Lewis and others during the Civil Rights Movement lived. It is wisdom that had its basis in the early church. By beginning his gospel with a prologue that reaches back to the time when God created the world, even before God created the world, the writer of the Gospel of John profoundly acknowledges the original intention of creation that all things are in harmonious relation to all other things. There is already, from the time of creation, this intended reality.

The passage we read today from the Gospel of John is part of that prologue. It speaks of Christ coming into the world as light, the same light that was in the beginning when God created the world. Speaking of Christ as light sounds so abstract, but light is what enables us to see concretely what is what and to make sense of how all things are related.

In Advent, we are called, with John the Baptist and with Mary, to testify to the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. There is nothing abstract about this, amazing and miraculous as it is. Christ comes in flesh and blood, and only when we bear witness to him, using all our senses, can we truly be enlightened. Only when we receive Jesus Christ through touch, taste, sound, and sight, will we be able truly to see all that Christ will reveal to us.