



WRESTLED FROM THE ROCK

John 1:1-18

January 5, 2020

Dr. Thomas E. Evans

George Ross in his book *Let Us Live Before We Die*, tells a story of the master renaissance sculptor.

When Michelangelo was a little boy, one of his friends gave him a small Greek sculpture of a human form, half chiseled from the marble. For the rest of his life, Michelangelo kept that little statue by his bed. It was the last thing he saw before he went to sleep, the first thing he saw when he awoke. For him it became a symbol of [humanity's] anguished effort to be liberated from the prison of its own ignorance. Michelangelo devoted his whole life to freeing figures from stone. Sometimes it would take him months, even years. Always he began with a vision of the man or the woman locked up in the stone. He said, "It is my job, my task, to set that man, that woman, free."

Michelangelo's mission in sculpting is an apt metaphor for the task of Scripture, of the Word. As John's Gospel implies, we are trapped in darkness, a darkness which is a confusion of the mind. Scripture is God's means to rescue our ossified minds from the prison of our own ignorance. Without scripture, we would have no clear understanding of God.

Who God is, is not obvious.

There are many facts of the universe that are not obvious from personal observation, but which are clear in hindsight – such as the earth being round and revolving around the sun.

Imagine for a moment you knew nothing of Christianity or Judaism. What conclusions could we make concerning the nature of God if, in fact, we could even assume God's existence? Nature's testimony about God would be ambiguous at best. On the one hand, we might point to the grandeur of mountains and the beauty of flowers to conclude there is a powerful creator who loves beauty. On the other hand, the existence of genetic defects, bacteriological diseases, famines, and tornados

might lead us to conclude that this God is indifferent at best to the human creature. Examining humans would be of no more help.

We might point to acts of heroism, kindness, and self-sacrifice to claim that goodness is a fundamental property in this universe. But we could equally point to the acts of genocide and greed to conclude that evil's power is of equal force – a fact many religions have claimed. Since we cannot discern God on our own, God gives us the Word, as Psalm 119 claims, "to be a lamp to our feet and a light to my path." God's Word gives us direction. John Calvin, French reformer and founder of Presbyterian theology, explained that "God bestows knowledge of [Godself] only in scripture." In other words, we cannot learn any truths about God apart from God's gift of the Word to us.

In the Word we learn that creation is good not evil; we learn that God forgives and calls us to a new way of living; we learn that we must also be forgiving; we learn that God loves the world; that God is not indifferent, but takes an active role in our lives.

As the Reformers studied history, they discovered the human tendency to distort and bureaucratize God's Word, even in Biblical times. As they studied scripture, they honed in on God's declaration in Isaiah, "See I am doing a new thing."

Just as Michelangelo sought to wrestle a figure trapped in stone, the reformers saw the danger of setting our own Biblical interpretations in stone.

As John discloses, God's Word is "enfleshed", that is, made alive. It is a living Word. God's Word has a creative force. The Word creates the community of the church. As we read in John's Gospel, all things were created through this Word made flesh. God's desire is for this Word to create

life within us. The Word is to be incarnated in us, that is to come alive within us, which is exactly what God did.

God knew that words on a page would not be sufficient. We would not get it without something concrete, without a living example. Scripture is the means by which we come to know this living Word in Jesus Christ. In God's Word, we not only get ideas or information about God, but Godself. After all, which is more effective – sending a letter or email or coming in person?

So, knowing God's words is not enough. Your stories and the statistics of the survey show us there is something more important, more fundamental to the faith – coming to know the one of whom the Word speaks. Spending time with him. Speaking with him. This is how the word comes to life within you. Your answers showed that just studying the Bible is not enough. It takes an active devotional life. The word of God must drive us to the Word of God. The word that has come alive in Christ Jesus.

A true story, told by renowned scholar Robert McAfee Brown, will make the point.

A navy transport had 1500 marines on board who were being brought back to the United States from Japan. On the second day a small group came to the chaplain and to his intense surprise asked him to lead them in Bible Study.

Swallowing his amazement, the chaplain jumped at the chance. The group read the eleventh chapter of John which describes the raising of Lazarus from the dead ending with Jesus proclamation, "I am the resurrection and the life whosoever believes in me though dead yet shall they live and whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die." The marines wanted to know not so much did Lazarus truly come back from the dead but whether that statement of Jesus was true in (what was then) 1946.

When the discussion was over, a corporal followed the chaplain back to the cabin. After a few false starts he got to the point. "Chaplain, I felt as though everything we read this morning

was pointed right at me. I've been in a living hell for the last six months and for the first time I feel as though I'd gotten free." As he talked the story came out. One night with some friends he had gotten into serious trouble. He felt guilt, terribly guilty. And each day the ship got nearer to San Francisco his feeling increased that he had ruined his life and that he would never be able to face his family back home. But he said, "Up until now chaplain I've been a dead man. I have felt utterly condemned by myself by my family (if they knew) and by God. I've been dead but now after reading about Jesus and Lazarus I am alive again. The forgiveness of God can reach even me. The resurrection Jesus was talking about is a real thing after all right now."

Scripture was to that Marine what Michelangelo was to the rock. It freed him from the prison of his tortured soul. By giving him the Word of life, THE WORD which is Jesus Christ, not the idea, but Christ himself. The promise of Scripture, in reading and hearing it, is that God will be made alive to us as well. Amen.