

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Genesis 1:1-5

Throughout the whole pandemic the hope has always been about the development of a vaccine. Normally such vaccines take years to become approved, but science has done it in less than a year. The vaccine is being given to people in health services, and some who are at high risk are now scheduled to receive it. Some of you may remember how the Salk vaccine brought such hope in the world of polio 60 years ago. It is another seeming victory of science over the world.

Science seems to be the answer again and again to the problems in this world. Science gives us hy-bred seeds that can produce far better yields in dry conditions. It is what we look to for answers to energy dependencies and climate change. It is what has allowed us to “zoom” when we haven’t been able to see each other. So it becomes more and more natural for us to look to science to solve our problems.

So where does that leave our faith? Our Old Testament lesson is the account of creation. We are told that our scientific knowledge has shown that account to be a fable, something for history books, not present reality. People have signs in their yards that say among other things that they believe that “Science is real,” which infers that we should trust in science over the Bible. Why should people go to church when they can do it from the comfort of home? Why should we even bother with church at all when the answers can be found in science? After all we are right across the street from Iowa State University of Science and Technology.

This is not a new thought. In 1966, just over 50 years ago, the distinguished Canadian-born anthropologist Anthony Wallace confidently predicted the global demise of religion at the hands of an advancing science: ‘belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the world, as a result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge’. Wallace’s vision was not exceptional. On the contrary, the modern social sciences, which took shape in 19th-century Western Europe, saw the world they were living in and thought it would be that way for all people in the future. Religion would fade and be replaced by science.

But that didn’t happen. Look at the USA. The US is arguably the most scientifically and technologically advanced society in the world, and yet at the same time the most religious of Western societies. As the British sociologist David Martin concluded in *The Future of Christianity* (2011): “There is no consistent

relation between the degree of scientific advance and a reduced profile of religious influence, belief and practice.”

Science gives great benefits. But think about what it can also do. Accidents are part of life. So are catastrophes. Two of Boeing’s new 737 Max 8 jetliners, arguably the most modern of modern aircraft, crashed in the space of less than five months. A cathedral (Notre Dame in Paris) whose construction started in the 12th century burned before our eyes, despite explicit fire-safety procedures and the presence of an on-site firefighter and a security agent. If Notre-Dame stood for so many centuries, why did safeguards unavailable to prior generations fail? How did modernizing the venerable Boeing 737 result in two horrific crashes, even as, on average, air travel is safer than ever before?

Charles Perrow in his book Normal Accidents made a case for the obvious: Accidents *happen*. What he meant is that they *must* happen. Worse, according to Perrow, a humbling cautionary tale lurks in complicated systems: Our very attempts to stave off disaster by introducing safety systems ultimately increase the overall complexity of the systems, ensuring that some unpredictable outcome will rear its ugly head no matter what. Complicated human-machine systems might surprise us with outcomes more favorable than we have any reason to expect. They also might shock us with catastrophe.

We can see that with the pandemic. Even as the vaccine works to stop the spread of the disease, the long term effects will still be with us. The stress on people in caring facilities, on children cut off from each other away from schools, and on those who may have developed depression from it will continue. Science can only do so much.

Genesis one tells us. “In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth.” There is nothing scientific about that. We can’t prove it. Even our experience which tells us that we and the world we live in exist doesn’t prove that, because it all might just be an image or a dream. Some theorists say that our universe is just a hologram projected by the real reality. But where science needs proof and has its limits, God does not. God is God whether or not we can prove or understand Him.

And what we see in Genesis is not just that God made the world, but how He did it. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” There is no scientific process explained; just God says, and it is done. My own understanding

on this account in Genesis 1 is shaped by what our former pastor, Richard Osslund said, “Genesis one is not about explaining creation, but a commentary on God’s Word.” That is why it begins the Bible. Everything else in the Scriptures is backed by the point that what God says, is.

But we can think, “Where is there proof for that?” If we look for proof we will always fall short. To prove something, you have to have some way to duplicate or measure it. People used to think that the sun went around the earth, but we have ways to prove by measurement and observation that it is just the opposite. But there is more we can’t prove than what we can. Our measurements in space tell us that what we can measure—matter and energy—is only a fraction of the universe. Most of the universe is made up of so-called “dark matter” and “dark energy” which we cannot observe. Our best scientific models for the universe can only explain it if there is an infinite number of universes and we just happen to inhabit the one we live in. The only way we could “prove” God is if we are God himself. And we know what happens when we try to be like that. We become like Adam and Eve who were told by the serpent, “Eat the fruit and you will be like God.”

We have something better than proof. We have God who says, “Let there be,” and our universe came to be. And it didn’t just come to be. It came so that you and I could live in it. The Word said, “Let there be light;” and there was light. That same Word said, “Rise up, take your cot, and walk,” and the paralyzed man walked. The Word said, “Lazarus, come out,” and Lazarus came out of the tomb alive. The Word says, “Your sins are forgiven,” and they are. The Word says, “You were baptized into My death so that as I rose from the dead, you can walk in newness of life.” The Word says, “This is My body; this is My blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” The Word says, “Whoever believes in Me has eternal life.”

“Let there be.” God’s Word is not in competition with science. In confirmation class I show students a cookbook and a car manual. I ask them if they can bake a cake with the car manual or change a transmission with a cookbook. That is what happens when we try to use Scriptures to do science or science to explain who we really are and why we are here. Scripture is God’s Word, the Word doesn’t answer our questions about how things work in this universe, but how we receive and live the life God offers to us in His Word—Christ Jesus.