

Sermon for Zion, June 14, 2020 – Walking in the Light – The Letters of John pt. 1

Scripture: 1 John 1:5-7

Sermon Title: Walking in the Light

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*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

They're just little letters; easy to miss. If you make it through the Gospels, the Book of Acts, through all the Letters of Paul; if you work your way through the difficult Letter to the Hebrews, and James, and 1 and 2 Peter, you'll finally find them, stuck there at the end, right next to Jude the Obscure, and just before the mysterious and scary Book of the Revelation. Like I said, they're easy to miss. But when you do find them, and read them – it won't take long, they're only 6 or 7 pages altogether – you'll realise that they're well worth the search.

They remind me of some parables of Jesus – the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price, the woman hunting for the lost coin – something which, when found, has a value far surpassing what was thought. These are the Letters of John. 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, we call them, but they're all the same John. And their message is consistent. They're all about love.

Not romantic love. John isn't much interested in that. Not some syrupy, goopy, generally-feel-good squishy-feeling love. John isn't much interested in that either. Nor is he interested in sentimental, cosy-feeling love. No, the love John is interested in writing about is the kind of love that changes things, changes the world, changes us. John is interested in God's love for us and for the world, and the ways in which we can go about living that love. And there's nothing romantic or squishy or sentimental about that. This is love on the front lines. This is love as a revolutionary force. This is life-and-death love.

That's the love John writes about, and it is the love we are going to spend the next number of Sundays learning about, thinking about, being challenged and transformed by. And in the process, challenging and transforming our world.

But before we go much further – who is this John? And who is he writing to? We can say with confidence that the John who wrote these letters is the same John who wrote the Gospel of John, and that this John is the one whom Jesus called as a disciple, and as an apostle – one of the inner circle – one of the Twelve. He was with Jesus from the beginning, together with his brother James; Jesus called them to follow him, and they left their father’s fishing business, and did just that. In fact, together with Peter and James, John was part of the inner circle of the inner circle – again and again, we hear of Jesus going off with Peter, James and John, to ascend the Mount of Transfiguration, or to watch over him in the Garden of Gethsemane while he prayed, and so on. So when you are reading John’s Gospel, or when you are reading these letters, you are seeing right into the heart and mind of the closest of followers; you are seeing right into the heart and mind of Jesus himself.

So the words John shares with us through these letters are words which reflect his experience of Jesus, and what was of greatest importance to Jesus’ teaching. As John himself writes, in introduction to these letters (1 John 1:1-5):

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you.*

Did you get that last bit? “*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you.*” That makes what John writes pretty important. Very important! So, next question: to whom is he writing?

By the time he writes these letters, John, once the youngest of the Apostles, is now an old man – and the last surviving Apostle, the others having been eliminated, one by one, by tyrants and rulers and authorities whose power was, they believed, undermined by the message of Jesus. John’s brother James was actually the first of the Apostles to die; Herod put him to death by the sword. Peter was executed by Nero; and the list goes on. Only John remains, as the eyewitness close companion to Jesus. Spreading the Gospel beyond the Jerusalem community, John has settled in

Ephesus, on the west coast of Turkey, a large Greco-Roman city, and has established congregations there, and is overseeing congregations in the surrounding area.

And sadly, things aren't going so well. There are problems in each of these congregations – you can read about them in the first few chapters of the Revelation, in seven other letters. The trouble was, it was fashionable in Greek and Roman society to mix beliefs of various religions together, along with various schools of philosophical thought, the idea being every religion was more or less the same, and we can do with them as we please.

So the apostolic witness of who Jesus was, what Jesus said and taught and did, and how Jesus called us to live, was muddled up with all kinds of other beliefs and thoughts, and resembled the true faith less and less. For example: Was Jesus the Christ? Well, we are all Christs of a sort, aren't we? Was Jesus the Son of God? Well, again, strictly speaking, isn't the spark of God in us all? And Jesus wasn't real, was he? – more of a vision, more of an idea than a man. And as for sin – well, what is sin anyway? We are all free to act as we see fit, as long as mostly no one gets hurt.

These are the issues plaguing John's congregations, and they aren't too far from the issues troubling the church today – which makes these letters very important for us to come to know a little better. A lot better.

Because there is a lot of darkness in our world. There's an old saying, "there's light at the end of the tunnel," but nowadays, you worry that the light is yet another oncoming train. Our environment is in peril, our political systems are in crisis, our economy is at a standstill, our schools are shuttered, our families are separated, our society is in turmoil, our police forces are reeling, and lest we forget, we are still in the throes of a global pandemic. And – and - our churches are closed. Our churches are closed! I'm thankful we have internet church, but our churches are closed. Where do we turn for light? Where is there hope in our darkness?

There is good news. The same John who wrote us these letters, the same John who wrote the Gospel which bears his name, said this:

- *The true light that gives light to everyone has come into the world. John 1:9*
- *In him is life, and that life is the light of all mankind. John 1:4*
- *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1:5*

And who is this light? Well, the Jesus of whom John wrote proclaimed,

- *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” John 8:12*
- *“I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.” John 12:46*

The image of God bringing light to our world is an ancient one. The first act of creation was God proclaiming, *“Let there be light.”* And out of the chaos, out of the darkness, came order. Came hope. Came life. *“And God saw that it was good.”*

The Psalms carry this imagery forward. The very presence of God was equated with light: *The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent - Psalm 104:2.* The presence of God, the light of God, was equated with hope, with life, with blessing, with salvation:

- *The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine on us. Psalm 118:27*
- *Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, Lord. Psalm 89:15*
- *Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous. Psalm 112:4*
- *For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. Psalm 36:9*
- *The Lord is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid? Psalm 27:1*
- *For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life. Psalm 56:13*
- *If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. Psalm 139:11-12*

Did you hear that last part? *“even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”* There is no darkness too dark that the light of God cannot penetrate it; no darkness that can overcome God’s light. *You, Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light. Psalm 18:28.*

And Jesus is that light, that light of creation, of hope, of life, of the very presence of God, come into our world, to be with us, to show us the way, to light the path

through our darkness, and into the very presence of God. *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”*

That is the light which John saw when he and his brother were mending their nets – the light which seemed to shine from the one on shore, calling their names. And they followed. And for three years John watched that light spread, bringing hope, and healing, and salvation. He saw the dead raised, the lepers cleansed, the lame walk, the blind begin to see. He saw the darkness of the world try to extinguish that light once and for all, nailing it to a cross; he saw the skies grow dark in despair.

But he saw, too, the light pouring out from the tomb, the Easter dawn filling the world, the face of the risen Saviour, the light of Jesus, alive, alive, triumphant over even the darkness of death. Forty days later, in the Upper Room, he saw the light of the Holy Spirit descending upon the faithful, and he felt the very power of God flowing in, under, around and through him. And with that power he proclaimed the message of light to all who would listen, and to many who, in their darkness, would not. Prison, beatings, persecution, could not take the light from John’s heart, for it was the light of God which filled his soul, and nothing could put that out; nothing could take that away.

He brought the story of Jesus, the power of the Gospel of light, throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, all the way through to the very edge of the Eastern Empire, to the coastal city of Ephesus itself, where he gathered believers together, one by one, heart by heart, light by light, forming communities of faith throughout Asia Minor – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea, each a lampstand of hope, shining the light of God into the world.

But the darkness was not done. There were those within these communities of faith who began to forget their first love, who lost sight of the light, who wandered from the path. Tempted by the allure of the world, by the desires so irresistibly leading them astray, they began to fall into their old patterns, their old ways. And the communities began to fracture. One by one, disputes arose, arguments broke out, selfishness spread its poison, divisions ensued. The Gospel of light was watered down, compromised, forgotten. The image of Jesus which John had seen, experienced, and forever preached, became muddled, mixed up with others, ever more difficult to see. Darkness encroached once again.

And so John picked up parchment and quill, and began to write.

*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

And as his letter continues, he will lay out not only the problem, but the solution; not only the diagnosis, but the cure. He will remind us how to love. And in learning again how to love, to recapture the light of hope, of truth, of salvation. In learning again how to love, we will again see the light of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Friends, there is a lot of darkness in our world. But there is a light. There is a light in our darkness. And the darkness has never, will never, can never put it out.

*The Lord is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?*

*“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”*

Together, over these days and weeks to come, let’s rediscover that light, recapture that love, rededicate ourselves to that path, and so bring light into our hearts, our homes, our world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.