

God is Light

I John 1:1-2:2

April 11, 2021

On this second Sunday of Eastertide our text proclaims, God Is Light!

In my occasional experiences as a gardener in my yards I have been amazed at the importance of sunlight for plants to grow and thrive. The energy of the sun is vital in a way I had not understood. Plants thrive when they get the right amount of sunlight and energy.

So with humans as well: we thrive in the light of God, as we bask in the light and live in the light and walk in the light.

## I

The first Epistle of John reveals a rift in the Johannine community, a community of persons and churches (around Ephesus) oriented around the Gospel of John. It has been easy for Christians to romanticize and idealize the early church as the perfect church and say that we need to go back to recover our bearings. But there's no perfect church, then or now. Today we are speaking of *early Christianities*, not early Christianity. There was far more diversity than we have assumed, and no small conflict.

So here we have this Johannine community embroiled in a theological fight. One group is threatening to leave and start their own, more pure, community built around John's gospel and teachings. They believe themselves the true interpreters of the Gospel of John. The masterful scholar of John's

gospel and the epistles of John, Raymond Brown, calls this group “the secessionists”. We know the spirit of secessionism well!

So, here were the issues at play. Three big ones.

1) For the secessionists, the flesh-and-bloodness of Jesus was not important. His being born in the flesh was *immaterial*. It was his divine spiritual nature that was important. The early Christian Gnostics believed that the fleshly, earthly material world was evil, and that salvation then was escaping this realm. Jesus, they said, only *appeared* to be a flesh and blood human.

If you are taught to hate your fleshly existence and believe that this material realm is evil, it affects your relationship with creation, the earth, and your own body and self.

We can call this a “disembodied” Christianity, or what Wendell Berry calls a “disincarnate Christianity”. Such belief leads us to care little about the welfare of God’s world. But the Incarnation, God coming to us in Jesus, “bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh”, means matter *matters*. Salvation is not about escaping the world, but caring for it and loving it.

2) Issue number 2. The lack of concern about moral behavior. The secessionists said that if you believe in Jesus and have the right knowledge about God, that’s all you need to be saved. The moral life was secondary.

3) The third issue was that if you believed in Jesus and had the right knowledge about God you could live a sinless life. Such “sinless perfectionism” has been an issue throughout Church history, including among Baptists at some points.

It is easier to become sinless when you can define what “sin” is—that is, the ones you are not likely, or too old, to commit.

When I was growing up in Southern Baptist Land, the real sins had to do with “pelvic issues”. Sex outside of marriage was the big one. Sex, tobacco and alcohol, were the unholy trinity of sins. Other sins, like greed, were barely mentioned.

The other issue here was the presumption that if you were spiritually right and loved Jesus, you *could not sin*. Such a belief was a poor student of human nature. The *London Times*, years ago, said that the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith was “original sin”.

If you read this epistle slowly enough you can see the theological skirmishes just beneath the surface. That is why the writers of the epistle emphasizes “love” so much. “God is Love!” he exclaims in chapter four. I’ll preach on that in a few weeks, but for today let’s dwell on “God is Light”.

## II

The prologue to the letter, verses 1-4, is all about being witnesses to the real flesh and blood Jesus. They had seen it with their eyes and touched it with their hands.

This is what we proclaim to you:

What was from the beginning,

what we have heard,

and what we have seen with our own eyes

and felt with our own hands....

The “word of life”, as the writer put it, is that Jesus was a real human being, and we have heard him, seen him and touched him.

What was, and is, so important about this real flesh-and-bloodness of Jesus? If Jesus became flesh, our flesh can be holy too. We can let go of our hatred of our flesh and our self.

And it pertains to the meaning of salvation. Is salvation only escaping this evil material existence to spend eternity with God? Or is it about heaven’s coming to us. Salvation is not only about getting into heaven; it is about heaven getting into us!

### III

So now we move to those concerns John calls “walking in the light.” We thrive and grow when we walk in the light of God.

“God is light!” The writer exclaims (v.5). Living in the light means living under what Paul called the “law of love”, a moral life based in love.

Then the writer follows this theological assertion with a second: “*and in him there is no darkness at all*”. Does God have a shadow face on the other side of his “love face”?

Does God have a split personality? We’ve been taught that God is a God of love, and also that God is a punishing God of wrath. And you’re never sure which God you are going to meet that day! But the writer is saying there is no darkness in God. God is undiluted love and undiluted light, as the carol goes: “Love’s pure light.”

Sometimes when tragedy, ill-fortune or illness strike, we worry whether it is because God is punishing us for something wrong we have done. That fear is somewhere in our lizard brain amplified by a theology of fear. But God is “love’s pure light.”

#### IV

So now we move to the moral dimension of what the writer calls “walking in the light.”

If we boast, “We are in communion with Him.”

While continuing to walk in darkness,

we are liars,

and we do not walk in truth.

What does it mean to walk in darkness? I think you can feel it when you do. Your heart becomes a heart of darkness, full of bitterness, rage, resentment and cruelty. Your heart becomes hard, or ice. Someone has said, “Hell is not fire, it is ice.”

Sometimes we find ourselves living in secrecy and deceit, avoiding the light, avoiding God, avoiding those closest to us, avoiding our own down deep self.

And now we come to the false belief that if we believe in Jesus and have the right knowledge of God, we can be sinless, what I called above, “sinless perfection.” So the writer says:

If we boast, “We have not sinned,  
we make God a liar,  
and God’s word is not in us. (v.10)

Sinless perfection is a human impossibility. The writer is saying, If you think you cannot sin, you are in big trouble—and so are the ones you live with!

#### IV

So let’s talk about sin. Don’t turn off your T.V. sets! Recognizing your sins and your capacity for sin is the path toward the authentic self.

Sin is betraying you own best and highest values.

Sin is what harms others and your own self. In the Iona Community Worship Book their prayer of confession goes:

I confess to my brokenness  
to the ways I wound my life  
the lives of others  
and the life of the world.

Sin is getting on the wrong train—and you might not know it at first.

Sin is getting caught, and getting caught up, in the structures of sin in our world which harm and destroy lives and life itself. Such structures of sin are all the *isms* that God want to be *wasims*: racism, sexism, white supremacism and Christian supremacism, to begin the list. We have the human problem of wanting to be “separate and superior”, to use Richard Rohr’s phrase. This mania infects all life including the life of the church. “My church is better than yours, my religion is better than yours.”

So John says starkly:

If we boast, “We are free from the guilt of sin”,  
we deceive ourselves;  
and the truth is not in us (v.8)

One of the most dangerous and destructive illusions with which we live is “false innocence”. We tell our own stories in such a way that we are innocent, pure, clean. Nations tell themselves the same stories. But false innocence blinds us from the wrong and harm we have done and so propels us to do more wrong and harm.

The French mathematician and spiritual writer Pascal wrote in his *Pensees*, or “Thoughts”:

Man is neither angel nor beast, and the misfortune is that the one who would act the angel acts the beast.

## V

So what are we to do in the face of the sins of our lives, what novelist Reynolds Price called “our loyal flaws?” Go to the God of love, and as a self no longer trying to defend itself, confess your sins. These words of John have always given me hope:

But if we confess our sins  
God is faithful and just  
to forgive our sins  
and cleanse us from all wrongdoing (v.9).

There is forgiveness here from God! And there is *transformation* here too. It is the liberating grace of God. We need both because sin is not only something we do, it is something that can have power over us. So Grace is pardon, and Grace is power.

## VI

There is one more beautiful word from John. “My little children”, he says, “I am writing this to you to keep you from sin”,

But if anyone does sin (which is likely)

We have an Advocate in the Father’s presence,

Jesus Christ....(2:1)

Literally, we have a Paraclete”, one who is “called alongside” us. He will stand by us and for us, our Advocate. We all need advocates through life, children as they begin school, adults when they are starting out, all of us some days when we are undergoing attacks. Jesus is our Advocate all life long.

In Handel’s *Messiah* there is a beautiful soprano solo we love: “I Know That My Redeemer Liveth.” The words come from the mouth of Job who has suffered unthinkable suffering, loss and sorrow and whose so called “friends”, have come to him to say, “You must have done something terribly wrong for this to happen, some hidden sin. Be honest with yourself, Job!”

And Job says, with amazing faith: “I know that my Redeemer, my Advocate, liveth, and when in the life to come I will see God, I will see him on my side.”

That is who Jesus is, your Redeemer, your Advocate. He is on your side!



