

Light, Certainty, and Commandments

1 John 1:5-2:6

The Apostle John's first letter to the early believers was written late in life, probably just after he wrote his gospel for that third generation of Christians who, unlike John, had never heard Jesus' voice, never seen his face, never touched his cloak or felt the warmth of his hand on their sleeve. And John's gospel was bold. There was no sweet nativity story in John's description of Jesus' origins. "*In the beginning,*" John wrote, "*was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God! And all things came to be through him, and apart from him not one thing came to be which has come to be.*"

On and on John went with the majestic language until finally he boiled it down to the man who had called him and his brother James out of their fishing boat so many decades before. "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth...No one has seen God at any time but the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.*" You have to read 46 verses into the first chapter of John's gospel before Nathaniel pops the bubble of all this majestic talk, saying in so many words, "*You mean the guy is from Nazareth? Isn't that kind of a rough town?*"

Because John sees the Lord Jesus with the starry eyes and the wide open heart of a young fisherman's apprentice. John saw this guy that looked for all the world like a carpenter, as a visitor from heaven. Even as an old man, long after most of us would have become cynical and world weary, John described Jesus in this letter as Someone from heaven who made him come alive. He writes about Jesus in this letter, "*And the life was made visible and we have seen and heard and announce to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made visible to us.*"

So John, after all these years, still saw Jesus, the woodworker from the working class town, as Someone sent by God to welcome us into that network of relationships that finds its origin in heaven where the Father, Son and Holy Spirit had always known and loved and served each other.

So John tells his readers so far away and so many years later, "*What we have seen and heard we announce also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ!*" What he meant by fellowship was that there has always been a circle in heaven where God has made a place for ordinary people like you and me to be

part of the give and take of the love and holiness and wisdom and power that Father and Son and Spirit have shared with one another and have wanted to share with the human race from our very origins.

The problem being that we're a long way from that now. By the time Jesus had called John and James from their fishing boat, God had invested thousands of years and 45 books of the Old Testament just to begin to chart a course where people like you and me could begin to dream of being back in the heavenly circle, that original fellowship that our ancestors blew off so that they could rule their own lives, live their own preferences, set their own priorities.

And hasn't that worked well! Broken hearts and minds and bodies, families torn apart, races and peoples and nations so embittered by lies and prejudices that they take up arms against each other when, really, there's plenty for all, if we could just get free from lies and tangles that sin has woven in our hearts. But despite our long, sad history, there are still places reserved for us in the fellowship, in that circle in heaven where love and holiness and wisdom and selfless sacrifice are there for us to learn if we would only believe that God loves us enough to forgive us our sins and to weave back into us the qualities we lost when the Serpent enlisted us in his rebellion against God.

So many, many lost souls had made their way into God's circle, long before Jesus walked up to James and John in a boat on a beach in Galilee. But before God the Son became one of us, people had to find God based on shadowy hints and symbols and a Savior who was yet unseen.

So the point of John's excitement was not that no one knew or loved or served God before Jesus of Nazareth came on the scene, announcing to the wrong sort of people that what belonged to his Father could be theirs as well if they'd only trust Jesus to get them back into the circle. For centuries, some limited number of people, mostly from one small corner of the planet, and had loved and trusted and known God and had been admitted into his fellowship of love and light.

What excited John was that with Jesus on the ground and the Spirit on the loose, we were no longer dealing with hints and shadows and symbols and rituals but with a visible, tangible Man, a Savior who had been raised up on a cross for all to see, and who had risen from the grave and ascended into heaven to make a path toward God that anyone from anywhere could take. So John wrote all this in a letter to far away people in the port cities of western Asia, saying, *"This is the message which we have heard from [Jesus] and announce to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all!"*

So the first thing to know about the God who made us is that, morally, ethically, he is nothing like us. No tangles in his heart, no confusion in his mind, nothing in his character that can't be

loved and trusted and admired. God is light, Jesus taught. And it follows, John writes, that to belong in his circle we have to turn from our own delusions and selfishness and learn to be like him. *“If we walk in the light,” as he himself is in the light,”* John wrote, *“we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”*

Leon Morris has written in a commentary that this is not what we would expect John to say. After all, John’s been talking about a fellowship with the Father and the Son in heaven. So we would expect him to promise that walking in the light would bring us into fellowship with God and the angels. But no! What actually happens, if ever we should walk with God, is that God teaches us to practice heavenly values and disciplines with *“each other”*, with the believers around us here on earth.

So the heavenly fellowship happens right here with us in Church. And in that fellowship, John promises, *“the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”* And the point here is that, the way John frames it, walking in the light is anything but putting on some sort of otherworldly, sinless perfection.

It is not God putting us in a trance and making us instantly, painlessly better than what we really are in a given moment. Rather, we walk in the light together in the give and take of ordinary relationships here and now. And this walk is founded on the premise that we’ll need forgiveness and cleansing for the sins we commit and the mistakes we make, even as we’re walking in the light.

So it follows that walking in the light is more a matter of being honest about sin with God and people than it is about our suddenly being morally superior due to some mysterious religious experience. And it’s in that vein that John goes on: *“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar and his word is not in us.”*

What John is teaching here is that really walking in the light, which involves our opening our hearts in prayer and our minds as we read God’s word and our lives to each other as we worship and build God’s kingdom together, a real walk with God will protect us from the temptation to practice just enough religion that we can kid ourselves that we’re fine the way we are. Because to be honest with God and to be honest with each other is to be shown every single day that we are not fine the way we are. And none of us will attempt it, none of us will venture into the sort of light God shines on us unless we’re absolutely convinced that God is both kind enough to forgive us and wise enough to teach us a way of life that is better than what we already have and what we already are. Only then will we make a move toward what Jesus taught us is light.

“Little children,” John address the early Christians and us, *“I write these things to you that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And he himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for our sins only, but also for those of the whole world.”* The point being that, now that Jesus has died and risen from the dead and ascended to the Father, the kindness God wants to extend to us is no longer really in question. There is a Man, one of us, in heaven standing at the Father’s side, visible proof for all to see how that the Father is committed to seeing us back in the circle, back in fellowship with him.

This word, *“propitiation”* is different from the more common word used in the New Testament to describe the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins. The more common word, expiation or atonement, speaks of Jesus bearing our guilt on the cross. So atonement teaches that because Jesus identified with us and bore our judgment, the moment we identify with him, we can step into the light, we can venture into the presence of God absolutely free of guilt and shame. We sing it all the time: *“Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow.”*

So atonement looks at us, it addresses our freedom from guilt and shame because Christ died for us. Propitiation looks at God. It addresses how what Jesus did on the cross satisfies in the heart of God the burning anger he feels against all the outrages human sin has perpetuated against everything and everyone God loves and holds dear. Many times I’ve described for you just how outrageous human sin can be, holocausts, injustices, cruelties great and small. I could go on and on and paint in technicolor all the reasons God has to be angry about sin. But the truth is I’m tired of it.

This week, one morning at breakfast, I read Psalm 90 which was written by Moses, I think, near the end of his life. Another old man thinking about God and light. But Moses was the first. He painted the very first written picture of how God’s light is different from the darkness that sin causes in our hearts and in the world around us. Moses wrote more than 600 commandments, many of them hints and symbols and shadows that no longer apply now that Christ has come. But also in the commandments are timeless principles, drawing moral and ethical boundaries that will never change.

Moses himself found his Law a burden too great to bear. As an old man, he sang to God: *“...we are brought to an end by your anger, by your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.”* After all, Moses had been to the top of the mountain. He knew all about blinding, terrifying light. He was too close to God to kid himself about his sins and their consequences. He understood and respected God’s anger, but Moses also believed that God would show mercy to anyone who loved and trusted and would

learn from the commandments what God wanted him or her to be. So Moses closed Psalm 90 singing about mercy: *“Make us glad”* he sang, *“for as many days as you have afflicted us...Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us...establish the work of our hands...yes, establish the work of our hands.”*

And the Bible tells us that God did bless what Moses worked so hard to build. I think many, many of us have not gotten close to the God because the first hint of his anger against our sin either frightens or infuriates us. But John writes us in this letter that we can enter God’s presence, we can face his light and holiness because we don’t go there alone and unprotected. Jesus has already gone there before us. He’s already made peace with his Father for the sins that would provoke his anger and offend his justice had Christ not already borne them on the cross.

So God is not angry at us. We have no reason to feel guilt and shame in God’s presence so long as we love and trust and identify with Christ. And how can we know that we belong to Christ? John spells it right out for us: *“...we know that we have come to know him if we keep his commandments...whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.”* So God’s grace, taken to heart, leads us to embrace precisely love and commitment and obedience that seemed so hateful and fearful and beyond our reach before God welcomed us into the circle.