

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 2:3-8
SECOND LESSON: 1 John 1:1-2:2
April 11, 2021

“God Is Light”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The newspaper reporter was determined to shrink the information about a new scientific advance into 500 words or less, which greatly aggravated the scientist concerned. He complained loudly to the reporter saying, “My research is meaningless if taken out of context!” The next day the article appeared on the front page, “Famous Scientist Says His Research is Meaningless.”

Context is everything, and as we begin a short series in the letter of 1 John, it’s important for us to know WHO this letter was written to, to a lesser extent WHO wrote it, and most importantly, WHY.

The WHO the letter was written to is most likely a group of churches in Asia Minor, now known as Turkey. It seems strange to us because we know Turkey as a predominately Muslim nation, but Turkey was one of Christianity’s earliest strongholds. Since no specific names are mentioned, we can safely conclude that this was written as a circular letter to be read by a number of churches. As to who the author was, we don’t actually know. Tradition says the apostle John, but John was a very common name.

The next and most important question is WHY. Why was this letter written? Quite simply it was written to counteract a very dangerous new development. Some within the Christian community had left and adopted new beliefs, beliefs we generally call Gnosticism. Gnosis means knowledge. Gnostics thought that they had secret hidden knowledge that made them better than everyone else. You probably know this type of person. They’re obnoxious. But this was especially dangerous because these groups took parts of Christianity and mixed them with other religious ideas to create a whole new false hybrid. One particular form started by a man named Cerinthus from Ephesus may be behind this letter. Cerinthus taught that Jesus was just an ordinary man until the Christ Spirit came upon him at baptism. That same Spirit jumped ship right before the crucifixion, which doesn’t sound very considerate to me, but in their understanding the Spirit could not be involved in anything as messy as suffering and death. This, of course, runs directly contrary to the message of the gospel, because that is exactly what God took on.

The false teachers, or antichrists, proved to be much more popular to the general public than genuine Christianity. *Isn’t that always the way?* First—they appealed to people’s desire to feel superior to everyone else. And second—because they separated out the spiritual world from the physical, in some instances they made what you did with your body irrelevant. It was therefore possible to be super-spiritual and totally immoral AT THE SAME TIME. How appealing is that!

The letter of 1 John contains many thoughts on love and how God wants us to love one another, but it begins by addressing those who think that they are perfect, and who as a result look down on their sisters and brothers. 1 John begins by asserting these strong simple words, God is light, and in God 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. . . . If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” So, who claims to be without sin? Obviously in this context the Gnostics who left the church to set up on their own. They thought they could claim to be perfect and yet “walk in darkness” in their actions.

When we stop to think about it, however, what 1 John refers to is almost universal in application. In practice, pretty much all of us think that we are “perfect.” We don’t put it that way, of course. We don’t actually admit that we think this to others. But we start by taking our own opinions and insights as gospel, and everyone and everything else is measured against that standard. “*I’m right, and you’re questionable,*” is what we go by. We’re simply not very good at recognizing our own prejudices, mistakes and character flaws. We have a huge blind spot when it comes to ourselves. It’s part of the human condition. I can’t see myself as others see me. I can’t experience myself the way others experience me. To me, my voice doesn’t even sound the same! (I hate listening to recordings of myself. I always wonder how on earth people could listen to that woman.) Not one of us truly knows how we come across to others in relationship. There’s no bird’s eye view available.

Think about it in a physical way. A number of years ago I was working on two additional degrees at the Lutheran Seminary, a second masters and a doctorate. As a result, I was not able to exercise to the same degree. And I gained weight. It just crept on over time. But here’s the thing—I didn’t really realize I had gained the weight until I saw a photograph of myself—from behind. I was becoming pear shaped and didn’t even know it. When I saw myself as others saw me, I freaked out. And went on a diet. And started exercising. But I have to pay attention. And when it comes to our relationships, most of us aren’t paying that close attention, and we don’t have the benefit of a camera.

Fortunately, the author of 1 John is not saying that we have to be perfect. In fact, he is saying that we are not perfect, but that if we confess our sins we can be forgiven. To “confess” however, is a very loaded word in our culture. People “confess” to crimes. But let’s take a moment to demystify this word. In Greek it is the same word that is used when we “confess” our faith. It just means “to speak the same thing” or to “agree”. When we confess our sin we’re just recognizing the truth that we screwed up. No wailing and gnashing of teeth are required, just simple, direct honesty. *I shouldn’t have done that. I was wrong.* It is amazing the lengths people will go to avoid saying these simple words. To admit we made a mistake somehow in our minds means admitting that we ARE a mistake. But the author of 1 John assures us that God is faithful and just and will forgive us and clean us up, washing away all that is not right. It’s not making a mistake that’s the problem. It’s claiming that we NEVER make mistakes that’s the problem. Those who are willing and able to

acknowledge failure have Jesus as an advocate, the same Jesus who died for our sins and the sins of the whole world.

These congregations the letter of I John was written to were struggling. They had experienced some of their members walk out and join this allegedly superior group, and those left behind couldn't help comparing themselves. Were some believers superior to others? Were some churches better than others? What's it all about anyway?

There is no perfect church. It doesn't exist. Some have better music than others. Some are traditional and others are informal. There are large churches and small churches, conservative churches and progressive churches, but one thing is absolutely guaranteed. Not one of them is perfect. And the author of I John knows this, because immediately after he tells us that we can't walk in darkness and expect to have a good relationship with God and one another he tells us that the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin, and if we claim to be without sin, we're delusional!

God is light, and in God there is no darkness at all. We can't have fellowship with God or one another if we persist in walking in darkness. But it's not special knowledge or education or skill that draws us closer to God and one another. It's love, and the ability to admit when we're wrong. The true church, the real body of Christ, is the imperfect group of God's children gathered together in love, humble enough to acknowledge fault, gracious enough to forgive, and committed to walking in the light. Amen.

Isaiah 2:3-8

³ Many peoples will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

⁴ He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

⁵ Come, descendants of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the Lord.

1 John 1:1-2:2

1 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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ We write this to make our joy complete.

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷ 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.

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

2 My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.