

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 John 1:1-4

"The Word of Life"

It seems appropriate as we start out afresh on a "new church year" to ask some basic questions. What are we here for? What is Christianity all about, anyway? What matters, and what doesn't, in "the Christian message"? Is "church" all about moral tales for children that will reinforce the values we would like them to grow up with? What beliefs are specifically Christian, what are not, and where are the boundaries of Christian belief?

In the 21st C., as in the 1st C., the issue comes down to Jesus of Nazareth. Who was he? Who is he - given the Christian insistence that he is still alive today? What did or does he have to do with God? Why does he matter? The NT is full of letters written by Christian leaders of the 1st C who are trying to help new believers out of many different backgrounds wrestle with these issues, as well as some narratives of the growth of the early church, some apocalyptic visions of the end-times, some "wisdom" writing akin to the OT book of Proverbs, and of course four "Gospels" that seek to present the significance as well as some of the narrative of the life of Jesus.

Late in the 1st C., when the four Gospels were already in circulation in the churches, we find the series of letters of John - in all

likelihood the same John who was the author of the Fourth Gospel. You will already have noticed the similarity in language and style between the "prologues" of John's Gospel and his "First Letter." The letter is written to an unidentified Christian group, probably a church that had been founded in the Greco-Roman region of what they called Asia and we today call Turkey. John is concerned to help these Christians sort out issues that were already causing groups to separate - it's apparent from the First Letter that some people had left this church because they believed different things about Christianity from what John and other leaders had taught.

1) *The Word of Life*

John's letter - which is more like a printed sermon or essay than a letter - begins with a prolog that introduces what to him is the main issue. He calls it "the Word of life." What does that mean, and how is it related to following Jesus?

His readers, and anyone who is at all familiar with the Bible, immediately hear the word "Word." It is the most common expression to describe how God has communicated with his world, and especially his people. One of the most striking claims of Judaism, and in

turn of Christianity, was and is that the Creator of the world has *spoken* to men and women in history. Men and women, moved by the Spirit of God, spoke what they said were the words of God. "Thus says the LORD" was their claim! Chosen people had heard authentic "messages from God." Extraordinary, if true!

But the word "Word" had another connotation in the Greco-Roman world: it referred to the organizing principle behind the universe. There was a "divine logic" behind all the appearances. Even in Judaism, there was a version of this – that "in the beginning," God the Creator had "spoken" the world into existence. When God spoke a word, things happened. He spoke to nothing and it became something!

Now as you know, the astonishing claim of the Christians was that "the Word" had taken on human form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth! As John's Gospel had proclaimed, "the Word that was in the beginning with God... and was God... became flesh and dwelt among us." So when John's First Letter refers to "the Word of life" there can be no doubt what (or rather who) he is referring to – he means, with deliberate ambiguity, that the message of God has now appeared in the person of Jesus, the "Word Incarnate."

But John refers to this as "the Word of life." It is more than information, more than a message from God spoken by his latest and greatest prophet. The incarnation of God the Son in the person of Jesus represents the breaking into history of new life. Jesus does not just bring a message about living for God, he brings the very life of God into the world, and he invites ordinary human beings to share in that life. He calls it spiritual life, new life, life from above, abundant life, and – in the nature of things, if it is really "God-life", it is also everlasting life, endless life,

eternal life. Jesus brings life to men and women in a way that had never happened before. That is the astonishing Christian claim. Jesus is "the Word of life," and he brings with him and offers to others "the Word of life."

2) *Eternal and Visible*

What does John say in these few verses about Jesus the Word? Four things at least, which all bear on what it means to be his follower – things that apply to us, as much as they did to Christians of the 1st C.

He was and is eternal. He was there "in the beginning" – as both the Gospel and the First Letter claim. The "life" he has and brings is "eternal" life. Jesus was no afterthought of the Father, no late attempt to remedy a fallen world. He was the eternally co-existent Son with God the Father – and as we learn later, with the Holy Spirit. Some people found that hard to swallow – some still do today. One of the earliest Christian heresies was that Jesus was "made for the purpose" of redeeming the world, but that he was not eternal.

The second claim of John is that "the eternal" has become visible, manifest, shown forth – has "appeared" in history in Jesus. He claims to know this because he was one of the people who knew Jesus, followed him from the start of his ministry. He says "we have seen and heard and touched" the incarnate word. We were there! We know it happened. We were eye-witnesses! This is not a made-up story. We were there!

Because "we were there," says John, we can now testify to what we saw and heard and touched, and we can "proclaim" it to you. Witnesses speak of what they know from their own experience. They were not fooled, their senses registered real events, and these form the basis of their reasoned judgment that the stories about Jesus are true.

John says their proclamation of the message and the person of Jesus has a goal: that his hearers will be able to share with John and the other witnesses "fellowship" – a distinctly Christian expression for shared community, for the common life that is shared by those who follow Jesus. But this is not just a "horizontal" sharing among people who love one another; it is also a vertical "sharing" in the life of God. It is "fellowship" with God the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. The goal of the "gospel proclamation" is not just that people will know facts about Jesus, or what he taught in the Sermon on The Mount; nor even that they will be "saved from sin and hell," but that they will share in the life of God through Jesus – that they will know God and be known by him, that they will enjoy "fellowship" and "communion" with God through Jesus, that they will be born into his family and be filled with his life, that they will begin a relationship with God that will last forever. "This is eternal life, that people know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

3) *The Life*

Now if this was the message of John to 1st C. Christians about the essence and the goal of Christianity, what does it say to you and me at the start of another "church year"?

That the goal of what we do here is *to know God* and enter a relationship of intimacy with him that the NT calls "fellowship." That this comes *through Jesus Christ*. That the community we share with one another is based on and formed through Jesus Christ. You cannot have "church" without Jesus. You cannot have God the Father without Jesus. You cannot have moral teaching and Christian values without Jesus. He claimed that he was and is "the Way, the Truth and

the Life," and that "no-one comes to the Father except through him."

You may not like those claims, you may not accept those claims, but they are *Christian* claims. In the history of the church, there have been plenty of people – as there are today – who want Christianity on some other terms. They want it to be about loving people, and following Jesus' teachings. They want it to be about obeying the Ten Commandments. They want it to be about teaching morality to their children. They want it to be about prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor, and saving other people. But they don't want it to be about Jesus the Word Incarnate, or about accepting him as the eternal Son of God, or about receiving the spiritual life he offers.

"Christ-less Christianity" is a recurrent heresy. It was the great bane of 19th and early 20th C. Protestant "liberal Christianity" in this country. The "Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man" was all it needed to remake the world, or so it thought. Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr skewered it as a "gospel" in which "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross."

But such thinking survives today – in a scholarly form in things like *The Jesus Seminar* which purport to show that Jesus was not an original thinker, merely a prophet of modest Jewish insight into the ways of God and the world, and that most of what Christians believe about him was in fact made up by the church after the fact, with words put into Jesus' mouth. At the more popular level, we have the rash of "other gospels" that want to proclaim many discordant views of Jesus that existed in the early centuries, and how our NT is just the account favored by "the winners" in those debates.

The most widely read is undoubtedly *The Da Vinci Code*, where Dan Brown has his experts say that in the early years, Jesus was thought of as just one more Jewish prophet, but that the Emperor Constantine forced the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD to declare that Jesus was divine. That is, as most critics have noted, a remarkable misreading of history! In fact Jesus was widely regarded as divine in the early centuries, and the arguments were over whether he was truly *human*. (That is precisely what John will grapple with later in his letter, among other things.) But the Greco-Roman world had no trouble with divine beings walking about disguised as humans or animals – their mythology was full of them! The most famous story was how Zeus came down in the form of a swan and raped Leda, who gave birth to Helen of Troy... Michelangelo and Leonardo both painted it, and as late as 1924, W.B. Yeats was writing poems about it.

The Christian claim, from the 1st C. onwards, was that the man Jesus of Nazareth was also “the Word made flesh” – the incarnate second person of the Godhead who was “there from the beginning.” Christians today believe and proclaim that. You cannot have a “Christ-less” Christianity. You cannot have “fellowship with God” and leave Jesus out.

These are basics of Christian belief. In the nature of things, Christianity cannot just be whatever we want it to be; it has a form, a set of inspired writings, a set of beliefs, a series of doctrines. We may not understand them all, we may not much like some of the ones we do understand, but we are not free to discard them as not part of Christianity. Are there less central issues on which there is room for doubt and discussion? Certainly. But are there central beliefs that make up what C.S. Lewis called “*Mere Christianity*” – things that are believed “by everyone, everywhere, at all times”?

Yes, there are – and that Jesus Christ is the “Word of life” who appeared among us to share the life of God with us, is one of the most central. We had better believe it!

Let us pray...