

## April 12

I John 1:1-2:2

Seen, Heard and Handled

For the next five weeks I am going to have us look at the first letter of John. The materials associated with the disciple John make up the second largest group of materials found in the New Testament. Who is first? The Apostle Paul, his letters and through his traveling companion Luke, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, make up the majority of our New Testament. Then we have John's work which includes the Gospel of John, three letters of John and the book of Revelation. I taught a study a few years ago about this material and came to understand that John had a different understanding of the nature and work of Christ than did Paul and the other Gospel writers. He specifically had a much different understanding of the nature and working of the church. As early as 20 years after the death of Jesus there were rival Christian churches in Ephesus, so denominations are nothing new! Paul, who was trained as a rabbi, brought the hierarchical structures of the synagogue with him in his writings and his structuring of the faith communities he founded. John's idea was much more one of being led by the Spirit. Also, for John love, love of God and love towards one another was the key to faithfulness. So during these next weeks I want us to experience John's vision of what we, the church can be like. It will sound very familiar, at times, and at others we might think, the Bible wants us to do what? And so we begin.

Think for a moment about the early church. There was no Bible as of yet other than the Jewish Bible, what we call the Old Testament. The early churches likely had some collection of Jesus' sayings, perhaps the events of Holy Week were written down and they had letters from their founder, whoever that might be. Many people had set themselves up as traveling evangelists of the new faith. In this environment how do you know whom to listen to, what to believe? How do you, as a leader, exert your authority in a way that is engaging but yet authoritative? The writer of these letters who calls himself the elder, but tradition has named him John, whether that is the disciple John or another is open to debate, was written because there were problems within this faith community. Before addressing them he wanted to assert his credentials, so to speak,

for what he was going to share. Think for a moment. If you were to receive this letter, and it was sent to a church not just to an individual, what would you want to hear as proofs of authority? Remember there was no seminary to train pastors and no bishops to ordain them. You are on your own. You would want to know, in these earliest of days, that the writer knew Jesus. You would want to know that he had listened to him preach, seen him perform miracles, and an added bonus would have been for the writer to have experienced the risen Christ. This is why he begins, "We announce...what we have heard, what we have seen, our hands have handled." He goes on to add we have seen twice more! Now wouldn't you be ready to listen to what he had to say? Here is one who had seen Jesus, heard Jesus and touched Jesus. That is as good as it gets in the early church for credentials.

Now you are probably wondering what he would follow up with. What is the most important thing that he wants to say using this empowering opening? It is God is light. Now at first you might feel a little disappointed. You were probably hoping for something with more pizzazz. Yet, when he is trying to get the church back on track it is a mighty beginning. To say God is light and there is no darkness in God at all, sets the stage. He goes on to say, if we have fellowship with God and live in the darkness we are lying. You soon realize that dissention and even questioning John's authority are some of the ways that he sees that this community is living in darkness. But for now just hold that image of light in your mind.

What comes to mind? Brightness, purity, heat, and energy are just some of the terms that I conjure up. Even more, I think of it in terms of its opposite, darkness. Darkness is fear, chaos, and untruth, to think of a few. To hear that none of these dark images are found in God at all is no surprise. But then comes the challenge.

We are to live in the light. When I hear this statement what comes to my mind is walks I have taken in various places where the path is illuminated by small lights that give out just enough light for the path and not much more. There are no street lights or other sources of illumination. You walk from pool of light to pool of light and all around you is darkness. It is a scary kind of feeling. You don't know what surrounds you but you move forward in trust until you get to your destination.

That is the journey of faith we are asked to engage in. To trust and walk in the light. When you look at it in this way it is easy to know what to do. Telling the truth is putting your foot clearly on the lighted path while telling a lie is definitely a step into the darkness with whatever potential problems await. But then we try to make it less precise and ask, what about...and we know that is trying to walk on the sides, staying close enough to the light that we don't lose our way but also being way too comfortable with the shadows. We can think about all sorts of other examples. We know we are called to forgive but we want exceptions to this command. We know we are to love and we do really well with those who love us back. But when we hear we are to love our enemies or those who persecute us we find it harder to stay in the light. We know we are to be giving but want to limit our exposure.

The goal of walking in the light is before us. We understand how much better life is when we walk in the light but it is so hard to do it on a consistent basis. That is why the author of the letter says that we need to admit to where we are not light filled. There were some in his day, as today, who say they don't sin or proclaim they are walking in the light when they are not. Now they might not say this all the time but often proclaim their guiltlessness when confronted about a particular situation.

We can take the story of the man who was really angry at something his neighbor had done. He was ranting about the man's deeds to his pastor. The pastor reminded him that he was to love his neighbor to which the man replied, "I doubt you would say that if you had to live next door to him." The implication was that he could love someone who is challenging if he did not confront him on a daily basis, if he was living maybe six doors down but next door every day... Or the person who was challenged to forgive someone who had wronged them and they said, "I will as soon as they say they are sorry." We often look at our lives and where we are moving into the shadows or have even stepped fully out of the light we often want to proclaim that this isn't the case and that we are still in the light. John says there is no darkness with God. There is no shadow walking. Examine your life and admit to where this is not how you are living.

We do it so we will find forgiveness. We do it so we will find grace. We do it so we will grow in faith and be in full communion with God. As John gets ready to talk about divisiveness and unloving behavior he calls people first to walk in the light, and to acknowledge where this isn't happening so they will know they need, and ask for, and receive forgiveness. This message isn't meant to be a downer, reminding people of how great a sinner they are, but to give them a message of hope. Once you begin to realize that it is possible to walk in the light you don't want to embrace the shadows. Once you know you can change, you embrace this possibility. Once you get over the embarrassment of failure and see the possibilities of the future, life begins to get better. Then you can accept more easily admonishments to your character for you realize that the one challenging you is doing it for your own good.

Let me share an example of how this all plays out. Jenny and I had the privilege of playing bells under the direction of Tom Crossler who is with us today. He has kept four to five bell groups going for many years. The ones who progressed in playing were the ones who listened to Tom and to the other ringers and admitted to their mistakes. Then they were able to correct bad ringing practices and grow in proficiency. There were others, and here I am going to share a name that only a few in the group would know, Mel Jackson, who decided he knew about all he wanted to know about ringing and though he played for years he never moved beyond the beginning group. Mel's favorite statement was, if you make a mistake glare at your neighbor and they will think it was them.

The writer of the letter invites you to grow in your faith as you follow Jesus whom he knew, listened to and touched. He realized Jesus was pure light and asks us to strive to be like him. We will fail, we will get off the path or at least to the side and then we need to be reminded and to ask for forgiveness. It will be given and we then grow in our walking in the light.