

In the Light

1 John 1:1-2:2

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I was talking with Jen earlier this week and she said something that stuck with me:

Perhaps more so after this past year, the corporeality of the resurrection feels more necessary. After a year of “connecting” not so much with people but with images of people mediated by screens, I’m finding that the physicality of Jesus's resurrected body matters to me in a new way.

Perhaps you feel the same. I certainly do. This has been a year where we have perhaps more keenly than ever been reminded of the importance of physical, embodied human life.

We have grown weary of screens (at least I have). Even as we acknowledge what a gift technology is, even as we are grateful for the opportunities to see the faces of those we love far away, even as we can’t imagine what we would have done over the last year without things like Zoom and Facetime, I think we can still acknowledge that we long for more than this.

Physical presence matters to us. We know deep in our bones that the way we have lived for the past year is not what we were created for.

This year more, perhaps more (or at least differently) than any other year, the hope of Easter has seemed so desperately necessary.

Jesus doesn’t float ethereally out of the grave and wing his way to an otherworldly heaven. He emerges out of the tomb as a flesh and blood human being. His hands and feet still bear the wounds of crucifixion. He allows people to touch him, he eats breakfast on the beach, he walks, and talks with his followers.

Easter hope is a profoundly embodied physical hope for a redeemed and renewed material creation.

Listen again to the opening words of 1 John:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life...

John is reminding his readers and hearers that the Christian hope is not some esoteric spiritual teaching or philosophy.

It's something anchored in things that real people saw and heard and touched.

Christianity confidently and scandalously declares that the God of heaven and earth has entered into, transformed, and redeemed flesh and blood existence.

So, what does it mean to live in response to the staggering truth of the resurrection?

In our passage this morning, John writes these words that could sum up the entire Christian life:

God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. Let us walk in the light as he is in the light.

Walk in the light as God is in the light. Sounds great. But what does it mean?

Does it mean that there must be no darkness in us as well? Does it mean that Christians have to be squeaky clean, spotless and shiny in every way? Is this what it means to live in light of resurrection?

Many, many Christians throughout history have thought this. Doesn't John even say as much?

If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true.

And yet, this is followed closely by these words:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us... If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1:8, 10).

It seems like John is putting us in a weird predicament. On the one hand, we must not walk in darkness. And yet, on the other hand, if we claim we have no sin, the truth is not in us, and we make God a liar.

But what if avoiding darkness has more to do with honesty than moral purity?

What if walking in the light—at least in part—means acknowledging the dark parts of who we are and allowing God to illuminate our need for him?

The word “sin” shows up five times in our reading this morning. This is a word that I know many struggle with, both inside and outside of the church.

It’s never fun to talk about sin. It seems morbid. For some, it conjures up unpleasant memories of times when the church seemed to be obsessed with little else, constantly policing behaviours and making people feel endlessly guilty.

Why not focus on the more positive features of faith?

I am sympathetic to these concerns. But I am convinced that if we just forfeit this category, we will not be able to make sense of ourselves or of what God has done.

The Episcopal priest and theologian Fleming Rutledge describes sin as “the colossal X-factor in human life.” She points out that this is true even in a world that is rapidly becoming secular and irreligious.

A recent Gallup poll in America showed that for the first time in its decades of polling, fewer than half of Americans claim membership in a church, synagogue or mosque. “The fall has been swift: From 70 percent in 1999 to 47 percent in 2020.”¹ I suspect Canada’s numbers would be even lower.

And yet, even in our irreligious times, anyone who spends any time on social media or reading the news of the day knows full well that this is to drink from a fire-hydrant of sin talk.

Condemnation of sin pours forth daily. It could be directed at sins related to failure to adhere to COVID restrictions. Just yesterday, I read an article in *The Globe and Mail* that wondered if we, as a society, have reached “peak pandemic judgment.” I’m sure we all have our own experiences of this by now.

Other times we condemn the sins of having the wrong views on race or sexuality or gender. Or the sins of embracing the wrong politics or social causes or failing in some other way to think rightly and sufficiently about the right issues with the right combination of guilt and sensitivity and outrage and commitment to “do better.”

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/10/opinion/sunday/religion-meritocracy-god.html>

We have not even remotely abandoned the concept of sin. We are still constantly policing behaviours and making people feel endlessly guilty, even if it's about different sins than in past times.

One of the deep ironies of our post-Christian cultural moment is that we are as morally zealous as we have ever been, yet we have few conceptual resources to explain either our moral fervour or our inability to live up to it.

We need to live in the honest and sober light that John offers in our passage today.

Christianity has always taught that human beings are both saint and sinner at the same time. We bear the image of God and carry the legacy of Cain.

We soar to heights of love and beauty and we descend to depths of ugliness and selfishness.

We are a conflicted mess. We want to do better but we can't.

This aspect of the human condition is most famously articulated in Romans 7, where Paul pens one of the most psychologically astute passages in the NT:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...

Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? (Romans 7:15, 21-24)

Who will rescue us? What's the way out of this predicament that is so basic to the human condition?

Well, it's not "calling out" and cancelling sins and sinners with ruthless efficiency.

It's not more inclusivity and unconscious bias training to root out all of our nasty prejudices.

It's not being constantly reminded to "be kind, be calm, and be safe," as our public health officials are constantly exhorting us.

It's not more bible study or prayer or worship or *even* inspiring sermons!

All of these things can help. But we are in need of stronger stuff than this. We are in need of rescue from the outside.

As Paul concludes this famous passage,

Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

To walk in the light is not to walk perfectly but to walk honestly and humbly before God and before others.

It is to refuse to pretend that we are other than we are: sinners in need of grace, mercy and forgiveness. Human beings who stumble and fall. People who do what we don't want to do and don't do what we want to do.

I'm not sure if you've noticed this or not, but it is easier to love people as God loves them when we stop demanding perfection from them.

When we are honest about ourselves, about our hidden motives and blind spots, about our failures and missteps, about our need for the grace and rescue of God, then it becomes easier to see others in the same light.

This kind of honesty and humility also allows us to give and to receive forgiveness, which is something that we seem to have left behind in our morally zealous, cancel-happy times.

Many have noted this irony of our cultural moment. We require repentance and penance almost endlessly (even as we claim to be irreligious). But the one thing that is rarely offered, the one crucial piece of the Christian framework that we as a culture have mostly left behind, is absolution.

We do not know how to forgive or who could finally pronounce such a thing. Sometimes, we don't even want to forgive.

How desperately we need the words of John:

[W]e have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1:7; 2:1-2).

Christianity gives us a huge gift. It allows us to be honest with ourselves, including the ugly and broken parts. But it also gives us a hope that goes beyond our moral performance.

So, let us walk in the light.

Let us walk with clear eyes and honest hearts. Let us confess our sins and receive forgiveness. Let us extend mercy to one another.

Above all, let us give thanks with great joy, that the love of God find us where we are and offers to us a living hope.

Thanks be to the God of Easter, who has made, is making, and will one day fully and finally make all things new. Even us.

Amen.

