

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday after Trinity, June 22, 2014

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 134, 80:1, 508, 371, 644.

Lessons: Genesis 1:1-3, 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 1:1-14.

Sermon Text: 1 John 1:1-4.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

Before reading the Epistle Lesson please read the following:

In John's day, written documents were intended to be read aloud. Not much more than 10-15 % of all people were able to read and write. Such a letter as what we call First John was sent as a written document, knowing that most people would hear it, not read it.

As you personally study the whole letter, it may seem that there is a great deal of repetition, but this is for emphasis. This makes John's letters different from Paul's letters.

Our sermon today begins a study of First John. Please listen carefully as we hear the Word of God beginning with First John 1:1.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

John is the one of Jesus' disciples who lived the longest, probably dying about 97 A.D.. Jesus had been crucified about 33 A. D. It is likely that this letter was written by the inspiration of God the Holy Ghost to the same group of congregations as are mentioned in Revelation, which was also written by John. These groups of Christians were in Asia Minor, in the area of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. In the book of Revelation we read: "*John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.*" (Revelation 1:4) The fact that Jesus is the eternal Son of God is also presented in this book.

These congregations had been founded by Paul or his companions. But after Paul had died as a martyr in Rome about 67 A. D. historians believe that John left Jerusalem and made Ephesus his home. During the remaining thirty or so years of his life he had the oversight over the churches in Asia Minor. It was toward the end of his life that he wrote this letter. As the only surviving apostle and as an aged pastor addressing men of a later generation, he speaks like a father instructing and admonishing his children. In chapter 2 John tells us "*I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.*" (1 John 2:26)

As we begin our examination of John's letters, we find this invitation:

LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT THE WORD OF LIFE, JOHN SAYS.

- 1. I have seen, heard, and touched the Word of Life.**
- 2. I declare unto you the Word of Life.**

In these verses the apostle announces the topic, or subject matter, of his letter: Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of Life, who became flesh for the salvation of mankind.

The general purpose and goal of the letter is to warn against false teachers, many of whom seem to have come from the congregations themselves. He designates them as false prophets and as antichrists. From the contents of this letter we learn that they denied the incarnation of Jesus, they attempted to reduce the horror which Christians should feel toward sin, and they denied brotherly love. This was a trend of thought and practice which was found quite generally in those days, and which also severely troubled the Christian Church for almost another century.

People generally had no use for the God which Paul, John, and the other apostles taught about. Paganism was rampant. Many in the visible church were faced with forces trying to corrupt their faith in Jesus. Doesn't that sound like the very days in which we are living? John stresses that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh, and later in the letter he talks about the necessity of love. He pleads with his hearers to remain faithful.

This letter was addressed to the many "house churches" that constituted the region-wide community of the believers in Asia Minor. A "house church" would be a fairly small group that met in the houses of other believers. For that reason, when we look at the history as well as the content of John's letters, it seems that they have a great deal to say about – and to say to – our small churches.

It is accurate to say that the goal of this letter as well as the letters of Second and Third John is to reinforce the faith and life of the hearer against the threat of the deceptions that come from outside the believers. They were written to protect the group of believers in Christ from further disintegration.

All the verses of our sermon text are a single sentence in the original Greek. John interrupts in the middle of the sentence, much as we might when we talk, to tell about "the life". This, of course, is the way we sometimes talk, when one thought interrupts another and we talk about something else for a moment before coming back to what we started to say.

When John talks about Jesus Christ as "the life", this reminds us of what he said at the beginning of his Gospel: ***"In him [– that is, in Jesus –] was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. [that was John the Baptist.] He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world."*** (John 1:4-9)

The apostle John in this book really knows his subject, for he claims personal knowledge of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. ***"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life."*** What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we inspected and our hands touched concerning the Word of Life is what we are writing to you about.

The Word of Life is the heart of this letter, just as he is the heart and center of all Scripture and must be the heart and center of all we preach. John truly emphasizes Jesus, rather than himself. John never identifies himself by name in his Gospel and in his three epistles. He does, however, name himself five times in the book of Revelation, emphasizing that God is speaking to and through him. From the writing style and the fact that the early church fully accepted these books as the writing of John the Apostle we, too, accept John as the author speaking by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost.

John starts by repeating the kind of things he wrote in our Gospel lesson.

John assures us that he himself saw, heard and touched that ***"Word of life,"*** that is, Jesus Christ. So we have evidence that the one writing this letter has the authority of an apostle, commissioned and sent by Jesus Christ himself. This letter is not just one man's opinion, but is totally consistent with all of the Holy Scriptures. He says ***"we"***. He identifies himself with those who spent time with Jesus when he was here on earth.

He himself had seen, heard, and touched the Word of Life. He was an eyewitness. John, along with his brother James and with Peter and Andrew, was one of the first called to be disciples. From that time on he heard, saw, witnessed, and even touched Jesus, until at the foot of the Cross Jesus spoke to him, telling John to take care of his mother.

John repeats that idea twice again within three verses to emphasize it, to burn it into the ears and hearts of his hearers. ***"For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us; That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you."***

It must be emphasized even today, that Jesus is eternal, that he came from the Father in heaven and was revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. Of course unbelievers have become very skilled and crafty at ignoring and setting aside the Holy Scriptures. And there is the danger that even believers will come to doubt what the Holy Scriptures tell us. We see and hear around us attacks every day – from the mouths of acquaintances, from the majority of people in our society, from "the media" – that God is not as he presents himself in the Bible. People

want a different kind of god, one whose teachings they can change or set aside to fit their own ideas and lifestyles.

And there is a very real danger, just as when John wrote these words, that we fall into that kind of thinking. We are tempted in this way: If others think so little of God's Holy Word, and think so little of Jesus himself, maybe we shouldn't put such stock in the Bible, too? The pressure may be very subtle, it may be very direct, but pressure is placed upon us, too, to set aside what God tells us in his Word, both in his Law and in his Gospel. We, too, need to hear again that Jesus, the true path to life, the true life itself, was revealed, was manifested in the Scriptures.

John assures us it is true, and he emphasizes it by his repetition.

The eternal, essential, personal Word, which was in the beginning with God and was God, is Jesus Christ. He is called the "Word," because in him God has revealed himself, has made himself and his entire counsel of salvation known to men. He is the "Word of Life," because he, as the true God, has the fullness of true, everlasting life in himself, because he is the Source and Fountain of all true life, and because he gives eternal life to all those who come to him in truth and repentance.

John wastes no time in telling us that Jesus Christ is eternal, **"from the beginning."** The doubting and then the rejection of this fact is one of the heresies that became so troubling so early in the Christian church on earth. False teachers were claiming that Jesus was created, and not an eternal part of the eternal Godhead. That is an essential part of our creeds, but even today there are churches which do not teach and do not fully acknowledge that Jesus Christ is "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity; and also true man, born of the virgin Mary." Every true Christian confesses and believes that truth, just as Martin Luther taught in his explanation from the Scriptures about the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed.

Jesus did not come into existence at the beginning, at the creation of the world, at the period when time first began to be reckoned, but he was. He already existed. He is from eternity. The eternal Son of God became man, for John says that he heard him, that his own ears received the doctrine of life from his lips; that he saw him with his own eyes. John had opportunity enough to learn of Jesus Christ and to see everything that he did. John's hands even touched and handled Jesus, and the evening of the Passover meal in the upper room was probably not the only time when he leaned on the breast of Jesus.

"That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you." John says "this is what we are proclaiming unto you – the Word of Life."

That is what John declares, teaches, proclaims, preaches also to us through the written Word of God.

To look ahead to our next sermon, we point out that John emphasizes these things **"that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full."**

But we must close this sermon today with the fact and the reason Jesus came to earth: We quote from the second chapter of this book: **"My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."** (1 John 2:1-2)

We know that everyone sins, and especially we know that we sin. The Law of God makes that obvious and plain. God's goal for us is that we do not sin. But we sin daily and much, in thought, word, and deed.

But remember that we have an advocate, **"one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One."** He assures us of the forgiveness of our sins. **"Jesus Christ, the Righteous One... is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."** Jesus paid the price for our sins. Believe that and be saved! May God bless our study of this book of the Bible and comfort us with the assurance of the forgiveness of our sins. Amen.