

There are two basic kinds of rides in amusement parks. Those that go in small circles, and those that go in large loops. I'm not much of a fan of rides that spin in circles. But I love the rides that travel in loops.

The rides that spin in circles are rather boring. Sometimes they spin rather slowly and can be rather dull kiddie rides. I think of the Dumbo the Elephant ride at Disneyland, or a merry go round, or a Ferris wheel. Sometimes they spin fast almost to the point of making you lose your lunch. And sometimes you spin independently in small circles while the ride spins in big circles. I think of those rides where you turn the tea cups with that handle in the middle. But if you keep going in circles, it's ultimately rather pointless.

But then there are the rides that travel in a large loop. Roller coasters are the prime example. You go out. You make a long and exciting trek. Then you return home to where you started. Or there are water loops, variations on river rides, whether through a jungle, or along roaring rapids, or through the underground world of the Pirates of the Caribbean.

When you go in circles you just spin aimlessly in place.

When you go on a loop ride, you make a big circuit that takes you somewhere exciting, and then brings you back.

There was a book in the New Testament that I used to think went in circles. It seemed to cover the same territory over and over and over again. Because of that, it was my least favorite NT book.

But I've had a change of heart. That book has grown on me. It's grown on me because it does take you somewhere. In fact, it takes you somewhere rather profound.

During the next 6 weeks, our epistle lessons will be drawn from this book. And this book is the First Epistle of John.

Since we'll hear 1John every week from now until Pentecost, I want to make a few preliminary comments on 1John in general, and then look for a few moments at our reading for today.

I could spend lots of time this morning going off on tangents about who wrote this letter and why. It is a subject of great and fascinating debate, and the scholars are all over the map with a number of fascinating theories. If you want to get a PhD in New Testament you can delve into all the intricacies of this question.

But the average consensus seems to be this. 1John, 2John, 3John, the Gospel according to John, and the book of Revelation may or may not have been written by the same person. Actually, there were probably several authors. But they probably all come out of the same community of churches in what is now western Turkey. And this community was built around the leadership of one of the original disciples, the beloved disciple, an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry, and crucifixion, and resurrection. It is this disciple's testimony that is preserved

in the Gospel of John. It is his theology that undergirds the Epistles of John and the book of Revelation. And of all 5 of these books, the two that are the most similar are the Gospel of John and the first Epistle of John.

We know why the Gospel of John was written. We heard it in our Gospel lesson this morning. "These (things) are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."<sup>1</sup>

The Gospel of John is also clear about the eyewitness testimony that undergirds it. We heard it last week on Good Friday during the account of the crucifixion: "He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth."<sup>2</sup>

The First Letter, the First Epistle of John has this same testimony undergirding it. But it is written for a slightly different purpose. It is written to address some specific problems in the churches founded by the beloved disciple. 1John is written to the 7 or more churches in John's extended community to address these problems. And we'll mention some of these problems as we go, because some of them still exist for us.

But the last preliminary remark before turning briefly to the text is about 1John's circular nature. That was the reason I used to hold it in low esteem. There are times when 1John seems overly repetitive, and tedious, and circular, seeming to go over the same things again and again. And on the surface, this is often true. After all, John was written to be heard. If you're listening to something, repetition helps recall.

But 1John is more than a ride that keeps going in circles. It is more like a loop the loop roller coaster. It may take you through a circle or two. But then it continues on around another bend to another exciting part of its journey.

So this morning, I want to turn to 1John.

1John starts out reminding its hearers of the eyewitness testimony that undergirds the proclamation of the good news. And it does it in a very poetic way.

It begins, "We declare to you what was from the beginning..."<sup>3</sup>

In other words: We're not making anything up. We're sticking to the same message we had from the beginning. And that message is that is about the Word of life, the Word of God, Jesus Christ who was with God in the beginning.

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 20:31

<sup>2</sup> Jn 19:35

<sup>3</sup> 1Jn 1:1

"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 (Jesus, the Word who brings life)."<sup>4</sup>

Heard, seen, touched--eyewitness words.

And 1John continues: "This life, (this Word, this Jesus) was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you..."<sup>5</sup>

In other words, this is the eyewitness testimony that we've all received from the beginning.

And then, we get the first hint of the purpose of 1John.

It says, "We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup>

What's at risk here? Fellowship. There are currents in the community that are driving it apart. 1John is appealing for unity. It is saying, we want you to be faithful to the testimony we received, and be in fellowship with us, so that we may all be in fellowship with the Father and with Jesus Christ.

And then 1John says this: "We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete."<sup>7</sup>

We want to be in fellowship with you. We want to be in community with you. We want you to experience the eternal life Jesus brings. If you're not experiencing that life, then our joy is incomplete.

We live in an era of division and disagreement. We live in a time when it is tempting to break off into factions. 1John is telling us, if we're not together, not only are you missing out. We're missing out as well. We are all impoverished by disunity.

Then 1John moves to a discussion about one of the specific problems their church was facing. It could be a whole sermon, but we'll just touch on it very briefly. Apparently, some were denying that they had any problems. They claimed they were free from sin. They claimed that the death of Christ was not necessary.

So 1John counters with this argument. Here's a quick summary. It says:

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<sup>4</sup> 1Jn 1:1

<sup>5</sup> 1Jn 1:2

<sup>6</sup> 1Jn 1:3

<sup>7</sup> 1Jn 1:4

1. The center of our proclamation is that God is light.
2. You can't claim to follow the light while you're in darkness and deception.
3. Walk in the light, and let the blood of Jesus, let the cross and resurrection, cleanse you from your sin.
4. If you say that you're sinless, you're lying to yourself, and the truth, and the light are not in you.
5. So, turn to Jesus, and let him cleanse you.<sup>8</sup>

We live in an age that desperately needs to hear that message.

If you think you're self-sufficient, you've got another thing coming. If you think you're perfect, you're deceiving yourself. If you think you've got it made, the truth is not in you, and you're in darkness.

But, if you're honest with yourself, if you turn to Jesus, you will find forgiveness. You will find cleansing and new life.

Jesus, through his death and resurrection, has done what you could not do for yourself. And the new life he enjoys is something he wants to share with you.

1John is telling us, "We've received this testimony. We proclaim it to you. And we want you to share in the new life Jesus brings."

You don't have to go around in circles. God offers a far more exciting ride. It goes up and down at times. But be assured, in the end, God wants to bring you home. Get on board.

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<sup>8</sup> The basic argument of 1Jn 1:5-8