

Seeing is believing. Or is it. Today our Epistle reading and our Gospel reading are from First John and the Gospel of John, respectively. And they both deal with the theme of seeing is believing.

I could spend lots of time this morning going off on tangents about who wrote these books 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, this is a terrific area for a dissertation.

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 his 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 in style and vocabulary are the Gospel of John and the first Epistle of John. So the thought is, First John and the Gospel of John were probably written by the same writer, based on the testimony of that eyewitness, known in John's gospel as the beloved disciple.

And both of them deal with the theme, seeing is believing.

The Gospel of John is 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."¹

In other words, the disciple was a firsthand witness of Jesus' crucifixion. After Jesus' side was pierced by a spear, the disciple saw blood and water flowing out. Blood and water, symbolic of Eucharist and Baptism, flowing out of the side of the crucified Christ. He wants us to know that testimony is accurate. And he wants us to believe what he's seen.

And that theme is extended in our Gospel lesson this morning. We hear the story of Thomas who missed the appearance of the resurrected Jesus on Easter night. But a week later, on the Sunday after Easter, Jesus appears to his disciples again. This time Thomas sees him, and Thomas believes. Thomas gives the fullest profession of faith in John's Gospel: "My Lord and my God."

And then Jesus says something important to Thomas and his disciples. But the words are perhaps even more important to those who would come after that first generation of disciples. These words are important to us, who did not see Jesus that night, but have received the eyewitness testimony of those who have.

¹ Jn 19:35

Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

That's aimed at us. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

And then John tells us that Jesus did many other things that are not written down in this Gospel. But then he adds the crucial statement.

"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."

That's the heart of the matter. That's the topic sentence, that's the key idea in the entire Gospel. John has relayed to us the eyewitness testimony of the Beloved Disciple. And then he tells us that he wrote these things down so that we may believe that Jesus is God's anointed, the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. And even more importantly, that through believing we may experience the life he brings.

John has told us, "He is the way, the truth and the life. He is the Resurrection and life. He is the light of the world." Believe in him. Share in the life he brings. That's the purpose of the Gospel of John.

The First Letter, the First Epistle of John has this same eyewitness 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 modern Christians. So I want to look at it in detail (bulletins).

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.

v1 "We declare to you what was from the beginning..."

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.

v1 "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)."

Heard, seen, touched--eyewitness words.

v2 "This life, (this Word, this Jesus) was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you..."

This is the eyewitness testimony that we've all received from the beginning.

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

v3 "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."

What's at risk here? Fellowship. There are currents in the community that are driving it apart. 1John is appealing for unity. 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 notice that last line: 4 "We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete."

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, 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.

v5 'The center of our proclamation is that God is light.'

v6 You can't claim to follow the light while you're in darkness and deception.

v7 Walk in the light, and let the blood of Jesus, let the cross and resurrection, cleanse you from your sin.

v8 If you say that you're sinless, you're lying to yourself, and the truth, and the light are not in you.

So, v9, turn to Jesus, and let him cleanse you.

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. 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."

Seeing is believing? It was for the first generation of disciples. But the Gospel of John and the First Epistle of John ask us to believe based upon what they have seen. They relay eyewitness testimony to us. And they invite us to believe.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."