

The last two Trinity Seasons I have departed from my usual practice of preaching from one of the appointed lessons for the day – whether it be the Gospel, Epistle, Old Testament or Psalter lessons. In the past two years we have studied from beginning to end 1 and 2 Peter. This week we begin a study on First John. I do apologize for the fact that last week, no one showed up to open up the school. We now have a more phone numbers to call, in case it happens again, but the Vestry will be aggressively looking for a new, more permanent location.

First John is the first of three Epistles or letters by the Apostle John – identified in the Scriptures as John, the son of Zebedee – who is also credited with writing The Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation – all under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

While John does not identify himself as the author in First, Second or Third John – neither does he in the Gospel of John — it is commonly accepted that he is the author, which we will see more of in a moment. I say commonly accepted, because there is always someone who will disagree – but that is just the nature of the beast.

There is both external and internal evidence that John is the author of these Letters and the Gospel of John. Time does not permit us to look at all the external evidence, but it will suffice us to say the many “church fathers” from the 1<sup>st</sup> three centuries attributed these Letters and the Gospel to John, the son of Zebedee, one of the disciples of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

For example, those that are known as the church fathers, such as Polycarp, a disciple of John, whose writings bear a striking resemblance to the writings of John, quoted him often.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Irenaeus not only quoted from the Epistle, but attributed it to John. As early as 175 A.D., the Muratorian Canon – which was an early list of the books of the Bible, attributed the letters to John.

Third century church fathers – Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian and Dionysius all attributed the letters to John, the Apostle.

There is also, as I said, internal evidence. The writer was obviously an eyewitness to the person and work of Jesus Christ, as we will shortly see. We see this in both the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John. And remember, John was one of three disciples closest to Jesus and the one referred to “the one who Jesus loved.”

We also find that the style and content of the Gospel of John and First John are very similar – indicating the same author. It was obviously written by someone with the authority to address and instruct the people – again, indicating authorship by one chosen by the Lord Jesus himself.

We do not know the date of the writing, but it is thought to be written around the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century or the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup>. We do know that the letters of the aforementioned Ignatius, written about 110 A.D. bear a striking similarity to 1 John.

The occasion of the writing, as with many of the Epistles in the New Testament, was to address false teaching that had arisen. Biblical scholars think it was a form of Gnosticism, called Docetism, which said that Jesus only appeared human – he was not really God in the flesh – a vision or a ghost, if you will, and therefore only

“seemed to die.” This doctrine also denied the Trinity, the Incarnation, the atonement and just about every foundational doctrine of the Christian faith – those things that we confess in our Creeds every week.

1 John is known as one of the General Epistles, in that it was not written to any specific city or person, such as Rome, Corinth or Timothy. It was intended for general distribution.

As far as the theme of the Epistle, it emphasizes the truth of the Gospel as opposed to the false teachers, along with how we should live our lives in love and purity.

That is a little bit of background on the letter, so now let's begin. Please turn with me to 1 John 1:1-4 (READ).

Notice clearly the first phrase: “*That which was from the beginning...*” The reason that John states it this way is to indicate that he is referring to not only the person of Jesus Christ, but also his message and his work.

Remember, that Jesus is God's revelation to us and, as it says later in the verse, referring to the Gospel, it concerns the “*word of life.*”

These words also echo the opening sentence of the Gospel of John – John 1:1: “*In the beginning was the Word ...*” and also the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1:1: “*In the beginning.*”

However, there is a difference in what John says here – he does not say “*in the beginning*” but “*from the beginning*” – indicating that the person and work of Jesus Christ was told about in the Old Testament, which tells us of his eternal existence as the Son of God – or, as we saw two weeks ago – the pre-existent 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Trinity.

This pre-existent 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Trinity – the Word – was, as John describes in John 1:14: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” Jesus Christ, as God in flesh – came to earth and lived among us – that is, those people at the time of his coming. And the Apostle John was an eyewitness to the Word that became flesh, as he goes on to describe in 1 John 1:1.

“... *which we have heard ...*,” John was there – as I said, he was part of the inner circle of disciples – Peter, James and John. He was there at the transfiguration. He was the only disciple at the cross. But, as one of the twelve he had heard – and heard often – the words of Christ as he taught them personally and the people who followed him.

John had heard the truth of the Gospel ... he had heard about God ... he had heard about what Jesus came to do. As Peter said to the Sanhedrin, after the ascension: “*For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*” (Acts 4:20).

He then emphasizes, that not only did he hear the words of Christ, but also: “*which we have seen with our eyes.*” In other words, he is saying not only did he hear his words, but he physically saw what Jesus did – he saw Jesus turn the water into wine, he saw those who were healed, he saw those who were raised from dead and, most importantly, he was a witness to the resurrection. He was there from our Savior's baptism to his ascension.

The next phrase – “*which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled ...*” would seem to be a direct answer to Docetism which said that Jesus only appeared human. John is saying that he actually and physically touched the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, he used three of his senses to ascertain the presence of Jesus Christ – he heard, he saw and he touched.

You might remember that after his resurrection, when Jesus appeared to his disciples in the upper room, he invited them to touch him: John 20:20, 25, 27: “*When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord ... The other disciples therefore said to him, “We have seen the Lord.” So he said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe ... Then He said to Thomas, “Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.”*”

As John continues, he tells us who Jesus is: “*concerning the Word of life ...*” This simply is a summary of the Gospel. It refers to what he said “*That which was from the beginning ...*”

Remember, “*the Word*” is a term that John uses to describe Jesus – “*In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.*” Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh because he speaks the Word of God – in other words, he reveals God to us.

But not only does he reveal God’s Word to us, he also possesses life – eternal life. As John says in the Gospel – John 1:4: “*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.*”

This fact is concerned in the very words of Jesus in John 11:25-26 concerning the death of Lazarus: “*Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”*”

And in John 14:6: “*Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”*”

Jesus is the one who gives life – eternal life – to all that believe in him. And John was an eyewitness to the one who gives life – he heard, he saw and he touched.

As he goes on in verse two – this is what he told others about: “*the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us ...*”

John is telling us that this life in the person of Jesus Christ was manifested in history – it actually happened – and he is telling us about it. Jesus Christ was born ... he lived ... he died ... he rose from the dead ... he appeared after his resurrection – these are actual events from history. And John was a witness to most of them.

This is what John emphasizes as he continues: “*that which we have seen and heard we declare to you ...*”

Again, remember, that John is writing to counteract the heresy of Docetism – that Jesus only appeared human – that he was NOT really flesh and blood. John is telling us that by his senses – hearing, seeing and touching – this is not true. Jesus was human – God in flesh.

And it is because of this that we see the purpose of the letter: “*that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.*”

This, my friends, is the whole purpose of the Gospel – the person and work of Jesus Christ. That we, who were enemies of God because of our sin, can, BY FAITH IN CHRIST, have fellowship with the Father and the Son. As John says later in 5:13: “*These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.*”

This is very similar to what John says in the Gospel that bears his name: John 20:30-31: “*And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.*”

But notice he says in 1 John 1:3: “*fellowship with us.*” John is inviting his readers – which includes us – to have fellowship with the Apostles who were eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Christ.

This, my friends, is an incredible, and if I can say it, an awesome thought. We are one with Apostles – those who walked this earth with Jesus. We believe what they believe. We have faith in the same Savior.

And that is why John writes to us. This is the exact meaning of his concluding words: “*And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.*”

The Apostle John’s joy is that others may know the truth of the Gospel – that Jesus came to live, die and rise from the dead for the sins of those who believe in him. The Gospel brings joy – we who were once enemies of God, now have fellowship with Him – and all the other blessings of our salvation – the privilege of prayer and worship, the filling of the Holy Spirit, access to the Father – and so forth.

This is what John want us all to know – and this is why he writes to us. He was an eyewitness to the person and work of Jesus Christ – he was there. He heard what he said, he saw what he did and he touched him – and the record is before us. We will see how this all plays out as we continue our study in 1 John.