

Life Made Known, Joy Made Whole

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture lesson comes from three places.

The first one, Old Testament lesson, a reading from the book of Genesis. Genesis chapter 1, verse 1 to 4. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Now the earth was formless and empty. Darkness was over the surface of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, Let there be light.

And there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. The grass withers and the flowers fade. The second comes from the Gospel of John.

[1 : 18] John chapter 1, verse 1 to verse 5. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. And the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, Lord Christ. And the third New Testament lesson, a reading from John's first epistle. First John chapter 1, verse 1 to 4.

Verse 1 to 5. That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at, and our hands have touched. This we proclaim concerning the word of life.

The life appeared. We have seen it and testified to it. And we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.

[2 : 26] And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, Amy.

Good morning, Christ Church. I want to echo Amy's greetings and her happy Mother's Day. It's good to be with you this Mother's Day, this cold Mother's Day, and this Lord's Day. We come and worship our God and King.

Will you join me in prayer? Our Father, we want to come into this place, into this time, desperate for your voice, wanting to encounter you, the one who is from the beginning.

We want to encounter your Son, Jesus Christ, who came in the flesh, who was seen and heard and touched and beheld. And we want to behold him, too. Would you help us to do that by your Spirit?

Help us to see the goodness of the good news of the incarnate Christ come to be our God.

Come to make us his own and to give us the completeness of joy that we all long for. God, give us that joy. Help us to see as we ought to see.

[3 : 50] And we pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen. Well, I hope that everyone enjoyed our guest preacher last week, Christine Ingrid Bretzen from Foster the City.

I always love her unique, you know, her passion and her authenticity and her warmth. And, of course, we love her ministry, right? Foster the city as we are a church trying to lead people into deeper relationships with Christ, ultimately for the good of our city, especially by caring for children. And, you know, with these guest preachers who are going to be coming this summer, we have, I think, six more, if you include Amy as one of them. And it's important for me to say that it's not just about me getting a breather, okay?

We really hope and pray that these guest preachers come in and help us as a church to have a wider view of what God's doing in the Bay Area and beyond, a glimpse of the wider family of Jesus Christ.

And, yeah, they're going to come and they're going to be different. They're going to have different voices and different styles. They'll be coming from various traditions and personal backgrounds and from serving in different ministry contexts.

[4 : 53] And they might make us feel uncomfortable. One of them even warned me. He's like, I'm going to bring it. I said, go for it, man. Just bring it. They might make us feel uncomfortable. And they might emphasize things and talk about things differently.

But what I want to encourage us to do throughout this summer, throughout the next 16 weeks, is to lean in with charity and most of all with attention to the beauty of how God is diversely working in ways beyond these tiny little walls of Christchurch East Bay.

And he's doing that to fulfill his perfect purposes. All right, so can we lean in? Can you promise me we'll do that? All right, thank you. But anyway, today you got me. And so feel free to scrutinize to your heart's content and to be as uncharitable as possible because I'm your pastor, right?

And you know I'll always love you. But today we're kicking off a new sermon series. While our guest preachers are going to come and just bring the topics and passages that are on their hearts, what I'll be preaching is the New Testament letter of 1 John.

So here at Christchurch, we try to orient our sense of time not just around, you know, our Hallmark calendars, our national calendars, our kids' school calendars, but we try to orient our time around the historical events of Jesus.

[6 : 06] And that's why we follow the Christian liturgical calendar. That's why from Christmas to Easter, we are always in one of the four Gospels. Most recently, we were in John's Gospel. And that's why now in this Easter season and going forward, we're going to continue in an epistle, in a letter written to the church after the events of Jesus' life.

And we're going to be in the particular epistle of 1 John, which many people believe was written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of John. And so in this transition from a Gospel account to a letter to a church, we're going to consider the what next, right?

The what next of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. What next? Like, how then shall we live as the church? How then shall we live in the Spirit of Christ? All right, so the title of our sermon series in 1 John is going to be Life, Light, and Love.

Three L words. Life, Light, and Love. Three words you're going to see a lot in this letter as the author is constantly pointing us to the eternal abundant life that God wants for us.

He's constantly pointing us to the light that God's shown, that we might know this pure life, and also the love that's produced and practiced by those who walk in the life and light of Christ.

[7 : 16] All right, Life, Light, and Love. And today what we're going to focus on is that first L word, Life. We're going to talk about Life Revealed, Life Proclaimed, and Life Enjoyed. Life Revealed, Proclaimed, and Enjoyed.

So first, let's start with Life Revealed. You know, just the other week, a woman here in our church, she asked me quite earnestly, she said, what is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of life? And you know, reflecting on that moment, I am struck by how much of an honor it was for her to ask me that question. How much of an honor it was for me to be asked such a question. Like, consider how humble and open someone needs to be to earnestly seek another's opinion on a matter of such ultimate significance, right?

Especially on a matter so greatly contested in our world. Honestly, as a fellow fallible human being, I had no business answering that question, even wearing my collar.

At least not from any inherent authority of my own, right? Like really, who am I to tell someone what the meaning of their life is? Or to tell them more generally what the meaning of all of life is?

[8 : 23] Who is anybody to definitively answer that question for others, or even really for ourselves? Who is worthy? But see, that also raises a problem for us, right?

Because even as none of us is worthy to answer that question, what is the meaning of life? We all desperately need an answer, don't we? The choked up woman I was having this conversation with, she needed an answer.

I need an answer. You need an answer. But the thing is, as we're all searching for this definitive word, this transcendent interpretation concerning what life is, and what life is about, and how to live

life rightly, where might we find the true word of life?

Well, 1 John would indicate that we start at the beginning. So look with me at verse 1. The author of 1 John writes, that which was from the beginning, this we proclaim concerning the word of life.

The author here is saying, that which was from the beginning, the very beginning. Like in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. That beginning, that which was from the beginning, we proclaim concerning the word of life.

[9 : 31] Not a word of life, but the word of life. See, the author of 1 John understands, and wants us readers to understand, that only the one who was there at the beginning, only the one who began the beginning, only the author of life, has the authoritative word of life.

The apostles here are saying, for us to understand anything about life, we need an understanding of what was at the beginning of life. We need to know life's true origin story.

But that leaves us in a conundrum, right? Because again, there are multiple competing words of life, competing origin stories, and none of us is able to get back into a time machine to see what really happened.

And you might say that that's what's wrong with this world. We can't agree with one another about which story is the true story about life and life's meaning. I mean, look at our nation today, fighting furiously about what life is, and when life begins, and whose lives matter more.

But see, that's why the apostle writing 1 John is marveling at what has happened through the coming of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, in the flesh.

[10 : 43] See, 1 John acknowledges that even though we all should have known and we all should have been able to see the truth about life from the beginning, and even though we chose to pursue life apart from God, and all our understandings of life have been darkened as we've moved away from God's light, the good news of 1 John is that that which was from the beginning, this word of life which we in our sin and our darkness suppressed and were blinded from seeing because of our arrogance, this truth about life that we foolishly exchanged for a lie, seeking life from created things rather than the creator, the good news of 1 John is that this word of life that we refuse to see, God still revealed.

God still made to appear once again in Christ. And this is the gospel that God, the author of life, the giver of light, graciously sent forth his word of life to appear once again to a sinful, self-blinding humanity in the flesh.

As it says in verse 1, to be heard with real ears and seen with real eyes and touched with real hands and ultimately be held with jaws dropped. And this is the gospel that when we all like sheep went astray, seeking life in poisonous pastures, blind to our own destruction, that that which was from the beginning, God himself who had every reason to give up on us and to leave us in our darkness and our death, he said, let there be light again.

He said, let there be life again. Again. By his pure and abundant grace, this God sent to us the light and life of the world in the flesh, Jesus Christ.

That's what we confess here at Christ's church. Though we never, though the world never deserved it, the author of 1 John is marveling that as it says in verse 2, the life appeared and we have even seen it and testify to it.

[12 : 43] And not just any life. It says in verse 2, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. This isn't some mere life that appeared like some temporary, biological, material existence before death.

The life that appeared, the life God wanted to show the world once again, the life he wanted us to hear and see and touch and behold was the eternal life that existed with the triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit from all eternity, enjoyed, perfect, and complete.

And it's the life that was graciously offered to us, sinful creatures like you and me. This is the kind of life that 1 John is talking about. This is the kind of life we all long for.

The very reason we even bother to ask such profound questions as what is the meaning of life is because we were made by the one who is eternal life himself. And the one who wants this eternal life, this abundant life for us.

This is what Jesus was getting at when he said, I have come that you might have life and life to the full, abundant life. Or when he said, this is eternal life, that you know God the Father.

[13 : 50] 1 John begins with this announcement, right? That the word of life, which was at the beginning of history, has graciously come again into history in the flesh.

And 1 John exists because the apostles cannot help but proclaim and write about this eternal life they've physically encountered and experienced, and that's forever changed their lives for the better.

This experience, this life that they've encountered that they know can forever change the world for the better. That's what they're here to do in 1 John, to proclaim this life.

So let's talk about that. Let's talk about life proclaimed, point number two. Now there's something I want us to notice about how 1 John opens up. This apostle is making a huge universal claim here that changes everything if it is true, that the eternal word of life that was at the beginning was physically revealed to the apostles.

It's a huge claim. He's pretty much claiming that to know this eternal life is to listen to what these apostles have to say about this eternal life that they've witnessed with their very own eyes.

[14:53] It's a huge, huge claim of ultimate significance, and yet, notice how this letter, it doesn't present as defensive, does it? These apostles, they don't launch into philosophical defenses of this eternal life.

They don't try to make rational arguments. They don't supply mounds of technical evidence that they surely must have had, right? What they do in 1 John is simply tell their story, simply proclaim what they believe to be the best news that they ever heard, and simply invite others to just come and see.

Just come and see. They aren't fearful and apologetic. They aren't scheming and devising arguments. They are simply being themselves and telling their stories and sharing their good news. Really what all the rest of us do, religious or not religious, whether we recognize it or not, we're all bearers of whatever we believe to be good news, right?

It's just what humans do. And I think this is a word for the Christians in the room who maybe are embarrassed to tell our friends and our family and our colleagues and our neighbors about Jesus and this abundant life that we have that they could actually have too.

I think we need this reminder that it's not a matter of having all the answers. Sharing the good news about Jesus is not a matter of winning arguments. It's not a matter of imposing our beliefs and colonizing others' minds.

[16:16] Friends, being obedient disciples of Jesus who seek to make disciples of Jesus is simply about talking about him and why he's good news to us personally, why he's our source of abundant life.

It's just about being authentic. It's just about being who we are. Nothing more. Again, if you have good news, why not share it? Or is it not that good to you?

You know, when I worked at a cancer center in Southern California right after I finished my undergrad at UC Irvine. I worked there two years and one of my jobs was to call our patients and to let them know that the doctor had seen their lab work and that maybe he needed to see them again, which meant the lab work wasn't good.

But most of the time, I got to just tell them, it looks good and you should celebrate. And I remember on one occasion with one patient, he'd finish his radiation therapy with us.

I remember seeing him every day for, I don't know, six weeks in a row. And it'd been a year of good lab results. And I remember the doctor said to me, you can call him now, tell him the labs look good and tell him you're cancer free.

[17:26] You're cancer free. You get to say that to him. And do you think I was hesitant to make that call? Do you think I was skittish or embarrassed? No. I had good news for this man, this friend.

Do you think I had to fake happiness for this patient that I got to see every day? No. I just had to be me. I just had to be human. So my brothers and sisters in Christ in this room, let's be more human.

Let's be good news bearers in the same way that we bear the good news of our favorite podcast or that bomb chocolate chip cookie recipe that we've discovered or that binge-worthy Netflix series.

Let's just be good news bearers. And you know, for those in the room who aren't Christians, I really hope that that's what you encounter and sense in this community of faith here.

We're not here to sell you anything, to cram anything down your throats or to shame you out of unbelief and into proper belief. We just want to keep it real with you. We just want to invite you to see what we see, that knowing Jesus is eternal life.

[18:37] And honestly, while we do believe that there is compelling and what we believe to be indicative evidence concerning Jesus as the word of life, and while we truly do love to reason together, we had to ask me anything last week and we welcome all questions and doubts here.

Let me be up front with everyone and say I cannot prove, I cannot prove Christianity. I cannot prove Christianity. And actually, Christianity doesn't even claim to be provable in our modern sense of the word.

In fact, to prove something of such significance as if what God has already revealed and said was not already trustworthy in and of itself, well, that would actually contradict our very faith.

That would actually contradict God's very essential sovereignty and ultimacy. See, God, at least the God of the Scriptures, revealed to us in Jesus, by his very nature, he can neither be proved nor disproved by mere mortal creaturely means.

So ultimately, just like everything else, whether we're an atheist or an agnostic or hold to some other religious tradition, including Christianity, it's going to come down to faith.

[19 : 47] And while we do think that the Christian faith is reasonable, Christ's church, Christ's church exists, Christ's church doesn't primarily exist to convince people that Christianity is merely reasonable.

Christ's church exists to lead people into deeper, life-giving relationships with Christ and his living church through life-on-life community and for the abundant life of the city.

That's why we exist. Here at Christ's church, as it says in verse three, we proclaim to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

The author of 1 John is simply saying, this is what we've seen and heard and we've got to tell you about it. Why? Because we want you to have fellowship with us and also with the one true God.

That's what we're about here. We want people to come into deeper relationships with the one true triune God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Now that may not excite you like it excites me, like it excites our staff, like it excites our elders here at this church.

[20 : 59] A few weeks ago, we were talking with some of the youth about how Jesus has this amazing good news when he says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

But one of our youth was like, well, you know, real talk. What if none of my friends wants the Father? What if no one wants a relationship with God? What if no one even believes in God? How is that good news that Jesus is the way to the Father if people don't even believe in the Father or people don't even want God? And that's real talk in our increasingly, you know, post-Christian society.

Maybe that describes you this morning. Even some of us Christians here who feel distant from God and maybe we're getting to be okay with that. What's so good about fellowship with these ancient apostles who wrote this New Testament letter?

What's so good about fellowship with Christians? What's so good about fellowship with the church? What's so good about fellowship with the Christian God? With our remaining time, I want to try to convey to us the uniquely life-giving joy of fellowship, of Christian fellowship with the triune God.

[22 : 07] And so this is my last point, life enjoyed. See, ultimately, this letter is written and Jesus Christ in the flesh is proclaimed by these apostles, not just so that people might have fellowship with the apostles and with the triune God, but as it says here in verse four, more generally, we write this to make our joy complete.

That is the ultimate motivation of this letter. It's joy. Joy. And I know this might seem counterintuitive to some of us who tend to think of religion or of God or Christianity and God's words as limitations on our pleasure.

Just last week, during our Ask Me Anything lunch, we talked about this. Part of our discussion, it got honest about how Christianity can seem like a limiting and prohibitive burden on our life.

But my question was, well, what if what we thought was a limitation in our sinful, darkened understanding, what if it was actually freedom in the light of God's wisdom?

Like, think about it. Had Adam and Eve not sinned in the garden, perhaps we would not have needed to be told to not murder and not steal and not lie and commit adultery.

[23 : 23] What if God's way of life and joy only seem counterintuitive because that's how far we've strayed from God's light? I think some of us need to hear this morning from 1 John that the God of the Scriptures is a God who truly wants your joy.

The God of the Scriptures revealed to us in Christ, He truly wants your joy, truly, even more than you want it, truly. And it's only found, though, in fellowship with Him.

It's only found in the very source of eternal life and joy. You know, this woman who I just alluded to who asked me that question the other week, what is the meaning of life?

Well, me being the totally insensitive and uncaring pastor of care that I am here, I have to be honest that my first impulse was just to give a textbook answer from our church's doctrinal standards.

So, elders, please don't fire me, but I'm embarrassed to admit that I threw the catechism at her. I cited the Westminster Shorter Catechism question and answer number one, which asks and answers, what is the chief end of man?

[24 : 35] And answers, the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. And she was like, uh, thank you for that textbook answer.

And I was super embarrassed. But, you know, I don't mean to vindicate myself. That was poor pastoral care. That's not what I hope our deacons do here. But if we take a second to dwell on this answer, the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.

If we can get ourselves to see this statement not just as a textbook answer written by, you know, a bunch of 17th century British men, it's actually quite beautiful.

It's actually quite beautiful. An eternal truth that the glorious almighty God who deserves all our worship and all our praise and all our honor, our holy, holy, holy creator before whom it only makes sense to bow down in submission and service.

That He not only created us to glorify Him as we should, but to enjoy Him forever. Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that kind of our God?

[25 : 55] That the glorious God who enjoyed perfect joy and fulfillment and abundant life and wholeness from all eternity as Father, Son, and Spirit, He designed us creatures to engage in and participate with Himself in the mutually inclusive activity of glorifying and enjoying Him forever.

Now, in case you remain unconvinced and don't find it believable or compelling that the triune creator to whom you owe your life created you, that He created you to enjoy intimate fellowship with Him, in case you still find it not very compelling or convincing that the kind of fellowship that the eternal, divine Father, Son, and Spirit perfectly enjoyed without need of you from all eternity has been offered to you.

I'm not sure that there's much more than I can say, but I do want to close by pointing us to the fruit produced by this rich Christian soil, the fruit produced from this unique joy of Christian fellowship with the triune God.

Again, look with me at verse 4. We write these things to make our joy complete. We write these things to make our joy complete. Now, this might sound like selfish at first.

Like, we're just telling you what we saw and heard for our own joy, that is, for the author's joy to be complete. But actually, when it says our joy, and this is based on some nerdy, textual, critical evidence that I don't have time to get into, but when he says our joy, I actually think, and many, most New Testament scholars think as well, that this joy is an inclusive joy, designating not just the authors, but the readers as well.

[27 : 38] So what it's saying is we apostles write this not just to make our joy complete, but to make both our joy and your joy complete, both the writers and the readers together.

And forgive me for getting into this little detail at the end of the sermon, but chew on that for a second. Chew on it for a second. This is quite an incredible concern for others, if you think about it. It's quite an incredible radical neighborly mutuality that's being shown here, this conviction that I can't have joy unless you have it. I can't be complete unless you are.

I want us to be struck by how profound this is. Like, what if we lived in a world where everyone truly believed this and lived every second of their lives in this way and with this urgency?

My joy won't be complete unless my neighbor's is. Isn't that the kind of world you'd want to live in, but know that you don't live in? And isn't this the kind of life you want to live, but know that you don't live?

[28 : 43] The question I want us to consider in closing is what could possibly engender such incredible concern for others, such radical neighborly mutuality, such a harmonious union and sharing of fellowship where the joy of others is integrally wrapped in our own?

Well, might we find a clue in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Like, might we find a clue in the archetypal pattern of the triune God in which the Father and the Son and the Spirit have given themselves to glorifying one another in mutual and harmonious joy from all eternity and then have graciously invited us into it, their creatures, into their joyous, eternal fellowship of life?

Or might we find a clue in the Son of God who voluntarily entered into history in the flesh and became a fellow human, a fellow brother, the one who, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, dying in the place of sinners to secure their eternal resurrection life and joy forever? The one who gave Himself body and blood for us because He wanted us, body and soul, for Himself. This is the gospel, the good news of fellowship in Christ with the Father and the Son and the Spirit.

And friends, we are all invited and so are our neighbors and so are our friends and so are our colleagues. We're all invited for our joy, for their joy, and for God's joy.

[30 : 20] And that's good news worth proclaiming. And that's what we're going to be about here at Christ Church East Bay. Will you pray with me? Lord, would you open our eyes to see joy for what it really is?

Would you open our eyes to see the counterfeit joys that we so often pursue when we pursue sources of life outside of you? And would you restore unto us the joy of our salvation that you said, let there be light again.

You said to us sinners, let there be life again. Even if it costs me my own precious son's life, let them have joy again.

we thank you that you are a God who, although sufficient in and of yourself, enjoying joy apart from us, came to us in the person of Christ to give us a joy that we forfeited.

Strike us with this good news, God, we pray. Restore unto us the joy of our salvation and renew a right spirit within us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.