



03/03/2021 - Lent 2021: John's Witness to God's Beloved Community

P We gather tonight in the name of the Father, and of + the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Responsive reading: (from Psalm 90:1-4, 11-12; LBW pg. 258)

P Lord, you have been our refuge, from one generation to another.

C Before the mountains were brought forth, or the land and the earth were born, from age to age you are God.

P You turn us back to the dust and say, "Go back, O child of earth."

C For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night.

P Who regards the power of your wrath? Who rightly fears your indignation?

C So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.

Opening Hymn:

"Abide With Me"

(LBW 272)

1 Abide with me, fast falls the eventide.
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.

2 I need thy presence ev'ry passing hour;
what but thy grace can foil the tempter's pow'r?
Who like thyself my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, oh, abide with me.

3 Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
change and decay in all around I see;
O thou who changest not, abide with me.

4 I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless;
ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if thou abide with me!

5 Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes,
shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;
heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

P Let us pray: O God, from whom come all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works: Give to us, your servants, that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey your commandments; and also that we, being defended from the fear of our enemies, may live in peace and quietness; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, God forever. **Amen.**

Holy Scripture: 1 John 3:11-18

L A reading from 1 John 3:11-18

¹¹ For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ² We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. ¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

L The Word of the Lord.

C **Thanks be to God.**

Lenten Reflections: “John’s Witness to God’s Beloved Community”

1 John 3:11-18 ~ “A Death or Life Situation”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tonight’s reading calls us to ponder two key questions:

- 1) What should a Christian expect from life in this world?
- 2) How do we define that word, “life”?

It sounds like this second one should be easy to answer. But sit down sometime and write the word “life” on the top of the page. Then define it, precisely, *if you can*. Is it merely the sum total of biological functioning? *We’ve got a pulse!* Something like that seems to be the consensus, definition through reduction to the bare minimum. If we’re OK with that solution, then this evening’s reading from God’s Word will leave our heads spinning, as it should.

But let’s take the two questions in order, for, as we’ll find out, they are fundamentally related. 1) What should a Christian expect from life in this world? Flowers and warm sunshine all the time? Or how about the other extreme, drudgery and trouble around every corner? Or maybe a mixture of the good and the bad? The fact that Christians in the early church had to be reminded that opposition was to be

expected tells me that they weren't persecuted all the time. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been "surprised" when it came. They must have had normal days of productive labor, fair weather, and the blessing of Christian fellowship. After all, even if trouble threw the occasional punch, it was still the Heavenly Father's world. He made it and blessed it from the beginning. Even so, it's also true that the Fall from grace had taken its toll. There's a destructive power of evil that's opposed to every good thing. So, we have before us verse 13:

13 Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.

We get the sense that this letter arrived and was read by people who were stunned at what was happening to them. Had they misunderstood the nature of Christianity? Had they misunderstood the very nature of the world, itself?

Imagine if you called up the local fire department to report a fire and the dispatcher answered by saying, "What? An actual blaze? That's terrible! What are we going to do?" "*This is the fire department, right?*" "Yes, yes, but we didn't really think that the phone would ring!" A perplexing response. The Apostle John must have felt something similar when he needed to remind his brothers and sisters in Christ that they shouldn't be surprised at the world's hatred.

Many New Testament passages counsel Christians not to seek unnecessary controversy, riling things up for the sport of it. We are to live in peace where possible. It's true. But when, in the course of faithfulness, trouble seeks us out, so be it. The Great Commission compels us to bear witness to God's Word of truth and love in a broken world, and to discern when such opportunities are at hand, knowingly taking risks along the way. Some negative reactions, even persecution, shouldn't come as a big surprise, not if we understand that this world is contested ground. Tension is inevitable where the corruption and compromise of Heavenly goodness is demanded in order to gain a measure of worldly peace. There are times when Christ's Kingdom must be affirmed no matter the cost. Consider what our Lord had to endure before he won the final victory! What if he hadn't bothered because the strain was too much?

Additionally, when it came right down to it, our Lord showed us that mere physical death wasn't the greatest of enemies. Within that sacrificial witness, our Lord was telling us that the definition of the word "life" means more than we usually think. Which brings us to the second question for tonight: 2) How to define "life"? Listen carefully to these verses:

14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.

15 Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. 16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

“Brothers,” in these verses, is short-hand for “all Christians,” of course. In a world that was showing its hate toward followers of Jesus, it was crucially important that brothers and sisters in Christ loved each other, formed a sanctuary of refuge and refreshment, fellowship in the Holy Spirit, so that the spiritual battle could be faced with courage and strength. The trouble was that tension had formed in the community of faith, itself, as we talked about last week. John wanted them to know that the degree to which they allowed hatred to form, they would no longer be abiding in life, for love would be missing, and where love is absent, so is life. As one Bible teacher put it, “Hatred partakes of *the character* of murder...” (Amos Wilder, pg. 262, The Interpreter’s Bible; Vol. 12; my emphasis added). It was Jesus who first made the point: “*But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement...*” (Matthew 5:22a). Christ loved his enemies, a world in rebellion. He expects his people to live by his power to overcome obstacles that would otherwise be impossible.

The sacred epistle before us this evening is very clear in its distinctions. There are two powers at work: Satan, working death through Cain, who took life, thereby losing his own “life,” as Biblically defined. This was darkness and distress. On the other side is Christ, who showed the true nature of love by laying down his life for us. He revealed Heaven’s goodness and Light. He defined “life.”

To borrow a phrase from a Bible scholar (Leander Keck), we’re talking here about “spheres of influence”. One can “abide” in death, existence defined by the ongoing nurturing of resentments, feuds, and ultimately, hatred. Or one can “abide” in life, setting one’s heart and mind on the love of Jesus for all of us. In other words, one can, as Scripture says, “abide in death,” while still maintaining a biological pulse. It’s a kind of *living death*, a soul centered in itself, needy and suffering, but not repentant, all-too-willing to extend suffering to others. On the other side, if there’s a kind of living death, then there must also be a kind of *dying life*. Our Lord taught us what such a paradox looks like. It’s in the shape of a cross. Was he not fully alive as he died for the redemption of the world? “Abiding” in that sort of “life” flows out in love for each other.

On a final note, it’s interesting to see how specific the instructions were at the end of our reading, that if a brother or sister is going hungry, help them. Remember that last week I mentioned the Gnostics, a group of people who emphasized the spiritual and put down the physical aspect of life. It seems that some may have become conceited with their supposed spiritual superiority to the point where they didn’t need to worry themselves over physical matters at all, including the very real needs of others. There was a sense of pompous detachment. John reminded them that God, who made this world and the people in it, was still very much concerned about their physical well-being. *Life* is enhanced as *love* is shared, flowing down from Christ, then out to each other, and even unto this broken world. When we abide in the love of Christ, we also abide in the life of Christ, drawn out of ourselves and into a deeper fellowship. Hopefully none of this comes as a “surprise.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

Hymn:

“Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service” (LBW 423)

- 1 Lord, whose love in humble service
Bore the weight of human need,
Who upon the cross, forsaken,
Worked your mercy’s perfect deed:
We, your servants, bring the worship
Not of voice alone, but heart;
Consecrating to your purpose
Ev’ry gift which you impart.

- 2 Still your children wander homeless;
Still the hungry cry for bread;
Still the captives long for freedom;
Still in grief we mourn our dead.
As you, Lord, in deep compassion
Healed the sick and freed the soul,
By your spirit send your power
To our world to make it whole.

- 3 As we worship, grant us vision,
Till your love’s revealing light
In its height and depth and greatness
Dawns upon our quickened sight,
Making known the needs and burdens
Your compassion bids us bear,
Stirring us to ardent service,
Your abundant life to share.

*P Let us pray: Gracious Lord, we give you thanks for the day, especially for the good we were permitted to give and to receive; the day is now past and we commit it to you. We entrust to you the night; we rest securely, for our help is in you, and you neither slumber nor sleep. Hear us now, as we pray as Jesus taught us: **“Our Father, who art in Heaven...”**

***Sending Hymn:**

“The Day You Gave Us, Lord, Has Ended” vs. 1,3,5 #274

- 1 The day you gave us, Lord, has ended;
 the darkness falls at your behest.
To you our morning hymns ascended;
your praise shall hallow now our rest.
- 3 As to each continent and island
 the dawn leads on another day,
the voice of prayer is never silent,
nor dies the strain of praise away.
- 5 So be it, Lord; your realm shall never,
like earth's proud empires, pass away;
but stand and grow and rule forever,
till all your creatures own your sway.

Text: John Ellerton, 1826-1893, alt.

***P** The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, + the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless
 and preserve you this night and always.

***C** **Amen.**

***P** Let us depart in the peace of Christ.

*[Note: * denotes standing. Portions from LBW pg. 151, 158, Evening Prayer and Compline.]*