

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – April 8, 2018

1st John 1:1-4 (1:5-2:2)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

Reflection Questions on 1st John 1:1-4 (1:5-2:2):

1. This letter opens with a “prologue” indicating the purpose for writing – that purpose being “so that you also may have fellowship with us” (v. 3). Does this letter feel like such an invitation to you? What in these first verses draws you in and makes you feel included? Are there ways in which something in these verses might have the opposite effect as the letter’s stated purpose?
2. Check out v. 4. in the NRSV (linked above). Notice the footnote after the word “our” – other ancient authorities read “your.” Is there significance in which is chosen? How would the intent and message of the prologue be different if the writer wrote so that “your joy may be complete” instead of “our joy”?
3. Scholars are generally agreed that the letters of John come from the same author or at least the same community as the Gospel of John. Given that understanding, where do you find resonances in these verses with the opening chapter of John’s gospel? Dissonances? How does knowing/assuming the Gospel of John influence how you understand and hear/read these verses from the first letter?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?

Commentary on 1st John 1:1-4 (1:5-2:2)

(From the *Homiletics* archive; "A Titanic Lie" – April 15, 2012)

Because 1 John has no characteristic epistolary greeting or farewell, there is no internal evidence that precisely identifies either the writer or the recipients. However, the themes and language of 1 John strongly suggest a connection, arguably to the author of the gospel of John, though more likely to a shared tradition. And while 1 John names no particular congregation, the author clearly has in mind a type of congregation, if not a specific one.

The type of congregation is an early Christian community that is experiencing internal conflict over both the nature of Christ and the content of a faithful response to Christ. 1 John 1:1-2:2 sets the tone for confronting this conflict in three significant ways. First, the author recalls and reiterates testimony regarding God's redemptive purposes in Christ (1:1-4). Second, attention is given to Christ's message that God is light, which calls for the commitment to walk in that light (1:5-10). Finally, the passage concludes with a focus on the atoning work of Christ that overcomes our sinfulness (2:1-2).

1 John 1:1-4 opens with the writer's reassuring readers by reminding them that the testimony they are receiving goes back to original sources, "from the beginning" (1:1) of the Christian witness to the person and work of Christ. The reliability of these witnesses is undergirded by imagery that strongly conveys how the writer's testimony about Christ is based on having directly "heard," "seen with our eyes" and "looked at and touched with our hands" (1:1). This continues with "we have seen it and testify to it" (1:2) and "we declare to you what we have seen and heard" (1:3). Jumping forward to 1:5, we find the dynamic appears one last time with "we have heard from him and proclaim to you." A lively sense of tradition unfolds as, in each of these verses, the past moves dynamically into the present via the testimony of firsthand witnesses. This is reinforced in the Greek text by the repeated use of the perfect tense, wherein action accomplished in the past has continuing results in the present. The joy of having initially witnessed the sacred is made complete by sharing testimony about the encounter with others (1:4).

Another important factor in 1 John 1:1-4 is that the person and work of Christ correspond to "word of life" (1:1) and "eternal life" (1:2). Christ is the word of life who reveals, and through whom we experience, eternal life from God. Eternal life is not only a matter of the quantity of life in terms of time, but also the quality of life in terms of blessing. Crucial to the blessing of eternal life is how it draws us into fellowship (κοινωνία) with humankind as well as "with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1:3).

With such fellowship in mind, we turn to 1 John 1:5-10, where in 1:5 there is the message from Christ "that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." Here, our fellowship is centered in God who both gathers us into and *is* light. The authenticity of our participation in this fellowship is inextricably linked to our walking in light. Beginning with 1:6, a series of conditional statements emphasizes the ramifications associated with being in true fellowship. Talking about being in fellowship is negated whenever we walk in darkness (1:6). Yet this is balanced by the expectation that walking in the light results in fellowship, plus being cleansed from all sin through the blood of Christ (1:7). The pervasiveness of sin is recognized, along with our self-deception if we say we are free of sin (1:8). Yet this is balanced by the expectation that if we confess our sins, we will experience the forgiveness of Christ (1:9). The conclusion of 1:5-10 reiterates for good measure that there are grave consequences for not acknowledging our sinfulness. But here, unlike 1:6 and 1:8, no verse immediately accompanies 1:10 to balance the ominous plight it depicts. It is as if at this point the seriousness of sin is left hanging out there like a dire warning.

Which is perhaps why 1 John 1:2-2:2 provides the reader very specific guidance in the matter of coping with sin. The writer wants the reader to avoid sin. Yet if sin does occur, the writer then wants the reader to know essentially how to move from darkness back into light. The key is turning to Christ, who has already been described as the word of life and eternal life, as well as the one who cleanses us from all sin, who is faithful and just, who will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Now in 2:1-2, Christ is identified as "an advocate" (2:1), "the righteous" (2:1), and "the atoning sacrifice" (2:2). An advocate (παρακλητοϋς) is one who, literally, can be called in to come alongside somebody to provide good comfort, counsel, encouragement, or help. Christ's role as advocate likewise includes interceding with God

for our forgiveness (compare with John 14:15 and 26, where *παρακλητοζ* refers to the Holy Spirit). Along with Christ's being righteous (*δικαιπζ* -- also translated "just"), his redemptive purposes restore us back to a right relationship with God and humankind, as well as justify us before God. As for atoning sacrifice (*ιλασμοζ*), no matter what our view of the atonement, Christ's crucifixion is integral to and inseparable from a central biblical understanding of salvation. Of further significance here is the understanding that the redemptive purposes of Christ cover not only our sins, but also the sins of the whole world (2:2).

While 1 John 2:19 pinpoints a break in the community to which the letter is written, we are left pretty much with having to surmise the specifics only from the author's side of the argument. A good deal of 1 John is cast in stark, contrasting terms having to do with who walks in light or not, who is sinful or not, what spirit is from God or not and who has life in Christ or not. From the standpoint of 1:1-2:2, it is clear that the author seeks to present authentic and trustworthy testimony in order to underscore how the redemptive purposes of Christ reveal the eternal life and light of God, unite us in fellowship with God and humankind, call us to the ethical imperative of walking in the light, alert us to the prevalent gravity of sin, and point us to Christ as our way out from sin by way of his own sacred commitment to serve God and humankind, wherein he did not duck suffering or death. Whether individually or in combination, any of these issues is worth exploring together with Christians who, with both certainties and reservations in tow, continue to grapple with what it means to believe in the revelation of God in Christ and to follow this Christ, even to a cross.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.