

Get Real – A Sermon

So I'm in my car. Sitting in the parking lot and yes, they have done it again. The Secretary of State has committed one of the worst atrocities known to humankind. They have renewed Jeff's driver's license. Seriously. I try hard enough. I think. But I'm lost a lot, and get distracted by the outside world.

Some folks get all offended by back seat driving. I welcome it. Back seat, side seat. Bring it. I need all the help I can get. In my family we call this "driving by committee." Daddy, brakes brakes brakes. Got it.

Actually wait, it's kind of a ministry. I like to call it autovangelism. My driving inspires other people's prayer life! And I know it's working. It must bring people close to Jesus. Because everywhere I go I hear people yelling his name at me! Some people even raise one finger toward heaven.

Perhaps not.

This is why I do not have a fish on my car. I don't want people to associate the risen Lord with the guy who just cut them off. I think it's that. Maybe it's I don't want to be associated with the other fish drivers because they are so hypocritical. You know, because I'm not.

Or maybe it's because if I had a fish on my car, I'd need to drive differently. I'd need to park differently. What happens when I'm late and there is someone broken down on the side of the road? What do I do with a fish on my car with the dude holding the cardboard sign. "Hungry. Help." Yeah. I don't want to have a fish on my car.

Our scripture this morning, a little sermon or tract hiding in the back of our New Testament speaks precisely to these concerns. **"This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth."** Or if we drive in darkness. Or work. Or go to school in darkness. You get the idea. The biggest problem people have with Christians, when asked? Acting like a bunch of hypocrites. So let's try not to do that as much.

1 John speaks to this on a deeper level. It's a subtle distinction, but an important one. God's light shines. Covering the entire world. **"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."** Living an authentic life of faith comes not from fear of being hypocritical, or guilt or obligation. It comes from a shared joy, knowing that God's love is everywhere. For everyone. For everything.

Atonement is a big word. But not really. Did you know it is the only major theological jargon that has its roots in English? You know what I mean. Usually it's like "blah", comes from the Latin blah blah which is related to the Middle French "blah blah blah blah" or whatever. But **atone**. Do you see it? At. One. God calls us and draws us near. As we become at one with God, we become at one with ourselves, our created nature. As we become at one with God and with ourselves, we cannot help but invite others to do the same.

It's why we're here. No, not in the existential sense. "Why ARE we here, Jeff?" I mean literally. My family. Why are we here? We were looking for a church home. We heard of some folks that have a closet, a large room actually, in their church with clothing for families with foster kids. We heard of a church that was called to the difficult task of getting a little closer with their brothers and sisters across town as two congregations became one. As a result they had to decide what they should do with their building. Now Family Promise has a home. Yeah, those people. Those are the kinds of people we want to be part of. There is light shining in the darkness. Let's go be a part of that.

How we doing so far? Doing ok? Let's put our seatbelts on for a bit and get a little uncomfortable.

"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 testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life."

If I didn't know any better...is he talking about evangelism? And so Jeff's shortest sermon ends as he is chased out of town. It's been a good run.

When I ran rough, really rough, versions of this sermon by friends and family and some in our church family, you'd have to see it. Body language changes. Proclaim? Testify? Tell people about Jesus? What are we Evangelicals? There were some of my friends who physically shifted in their chairs. Wanna know a trade secret....? I was uncomfortable too. We were always just good, you know Christian people. Do the right thing. Isn't that better anyway than always talking about it?

Ok, who knows this one? **If you're gonna talk to talk...(walk the walk).** This is true; we need more of this. It's called integrity. Mary 's going to tackle that one in a couple of weeks.

But if we learn anything from the community of 1 John this morning, it is my hope that we remind ourselves that there is another side to the precious coin of living in Christian fellowship.

If you're gonna walk the walk. Talk the talk.

We came to be part of this beautiful faith community because someone told us about what you all were doing. And they didn't hesitate to tell us it was church people doing it! For Jesus!

How about this one? Usually attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach the Gospel at all times...(if necessary use words.) Very true, but if you find yourself more readily agreeing with this statement than being challenged by it, I would flip the challenge around. Can we get a little more comfortable using those necessary words? If, no...WHEN we are articulating our faith, we are charged with doing it through Love, which means naturally, which means relationally. The best proclamation is conversation.

"This we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life." Ok...I know some of you are like "man I hope Jeff starts speaking Greek to us..." Oh ok, since you're twisting my arm.

Jeff's first rule of Greek...you know more Greek than you think you do. So here we go.

The word that is translated as "**proclaim**" is **apangellō**, Do you see it? Do you hear it? We spent this past advent encountering all kinds of angels. Messengers of God. We are called to speak God's good news for the world to everyone we see and everywhere we go.

Testify is related but a bit different. The word for testify also comes directly into English and it is one you'll recognize. **martyreō**. Told you to get the seatbelts on! Christian witness, bearing witness, testimony is by definition costly. We are not called to be simply messengers. We are not asked to just forward the meme on Facebook on God's behalf. We are called to have skin in the game in whatever ways our circumstances, our talents, our weakness, our environment dictates. It's the pig talking to the chicken about breakfast.

So what are some of the costs of testifying? We're not being strung up by the emperor or fed to the lions any more last time I checked. I remember when I was in college, one of my friends felt called to street evangelism. In Muncie, Indiana. For Jesus. When this worked out about as well most of us would expect, he was being encouraged by Rick our college minister.

"I was being persecuted because I'm a Christian!" "No, you weren't being persecuted because you were being a Christian. You were being persecuted because you were being a jerk." Except Pastor Rick used a different word for jerk. I think sometimes we don't want to put Jesus' name on the good things we're doing because we don't want to be associated with, you know, those people. The one's on TV. Or the guy with the literal bullhorn that camps out at VanAndel sometimes.

I don't want to drive around the greater Muskegon area and have people think I am one of those guys. Not that I am ashamed of Christ. I'm ashamed of some Christians sometimes. Maybe I could get a little asterisk decal and put it next to the fish. And have some fine print that says "I'm not a jerk really." Maybe use a different word for jerk.

But there's something else going on here. Step one in sermon preparation is to do your own translation from the original language. Here's my paraphrase. "Yay! Jesus. Joy! Eternal life. Light! Yay! ...confess our sins....yay." Ok, so personal confession. I'll start then we'll go around the room (kidding). But seriously. A confession. Part of me doesn't want a fish on my car, because then I have to drive better. That person I just cut off and didn't even know it. Now Jesus just cut them off. I would have to drive better, and I'd have to BE better. You can't do a brake check when there's a fish on your car, can you? We are not only called to like Jesus. We are actually called to be like Jesus.

So I'm in my car. Driving home from seeing my brother in Kentucky over Christmas. I see a truck with the hood up and hazards on. A mile down I see a guy bundled up walking in the direction of the nearest exit. I swing over, "Hey dude, you ok?" "Oh yeah, man, Ran outta gas." Hop in. So I drive him to the exit. Fill up a little tank with gas. "I'm going in to pay, want anything. How 'bout a hot cup of coffee."

We're driving back and he's cradling the warm coffee. "Thank you so much. People were just driving by. Why did you do this?"

Now I wish I had that fish on my car. "Oh you know it's Christmas and everything." And I felt my heart sink. Why am I tap dancing around it? So I give it a shot. "You know that whole Jesus thing you hear about? I just try to do what all that says. You know make the world a little better here and there."

Accountability is part of it. And fear of being associated with the Six Flags over Jesus types is part of it, too. But let's say I cleaned up my act and became a better driver. No really. It could happen. Don't we believe in miracles? And let's say I got to know people in the coffee shops, waiting in line at pre-school, the gym, wherever. And the fear of being pigeonholed evaporated.

To get real this morning, talking about my faith, especially when it is following or part of doing good things for Jesus is scary because it raises the level of intimacy. Our faith elevates our situations and circumstances and is contagious. And that can only result in knowing and in being known more fully. We are not only called to follow Jesus. We are called to continue Jesus' ministry and presence. And that means getting close. Getting hurt. And sometimes hurting others. And asking for forgiveness and extending grace.

We had just wrapped up communion and prayer and I was ready to head out and the wonderful woman I was visiting turned to her husband briefly and then back to me. "Jeff I wasn't going to say anything until we got to know you. You seem like someone who could take this to heart though."

Well this can't be good... "When you left your voice message before coming over here, you said "I'll see you guys soon." "We're not guys. I know you must be calling on other people our age. Many of us do not like being called 'guys' by waiters, people on the phone. It's everywhere. I just wanted to tell you that so you know that for others that you see."

I was talking to Pastor Mary afterwards, checking in. "I say 'guys' all the time!"

You see the model here though. Once we knew each other a little bit. There was some trust, then vulnerability. Then maybe shedding a little light on a situation. Makes me wonder what I'm saying up here that's offending you guys.

One of the things that is striking when we read the first part of this short message that is 1 John is that it is written in the first person plural. "We have heard...we have seen with our eyes...we have looked...our hands have touched - this we proclaim." It is very sensory, almost visceral. It is also very personal and intimate. Later in the passage, the author writes to his audience, "My dear children, I write this to you."

Wanna know something that'll blow your mind...? A lot of the people who are experts on this stuff tell us that John may not have written this. That this letter, well it's not really a letter if you look at it. Wait, wait. I'm preaching on authenticity from the first letter of John, that probably isn't a letter and may not have been written by John. Awesome. Mary is not allowed to go on vacation like ever.

But stay with me on this. This gets really, really good. So there's a good chance these are the words of second generation Christians. People who had talked to people who knew Jesus physically when he walked on earth. But look at the language. "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us." So what's going on here?

This is the Bible I got from my grandmother when I was in high school. It's got that feature where the words of Christ are written in red. You know what I'm talking about, right? Let's read a few.

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." This is from the book of Acts.

"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star." That's from the book of Revelation.

This is what the community of 1 John is reflecting. They did see, hear, feel. They knew and were known by Jesus in a way no less tangible, no less real than that experienced by Matthew, by Peter and the other disciples. The miracle of the opening words of 1 John is that if they can experience that level of connection with Jesus, we can too.

Well after Jesus' death and resurrection, people had intimate and authentic encounters with the risen Lord. They had their red letter moments. What are the red letters being written into your life?

We experience authenticity through an authentic connection with God. That's why we need both sides of that coin. Authentic Christian practice flows from an authentic experience with Christ. Authentic Christian proclamation invites others to join in both experience and that practice.

It's someone who is in a GriefShare group. Well, actually in two GriefShare groups. They found the experience so valuable, supportive so genuinely helpful, when a close friend was walking through a similar valley, they couldn't stop themselves from finding a group for them closer to their hometown. "You have to go. I'll pick you up and take you." That is authentic proclamation. "You have to go. I'll pick you up."

"We write this to make our joy complete." The joy that this fellowship brings to the community in 1 John is a joy they didn't just experience themselves. They shared it with others. Anyone got their Bible this morning? Anyone see the little footnote? What does it say? Right! This is cool I got to dig around some Greek texts and translation notes this week. I know, I'm a nerd. But this is one of the things I love about how God works. If it was clearly and only "our joy" would we know if the author meant the joy his group experienced or something bigger? If it was clearly and only "your joy" it might be seen at arms reach or even paternalistic. The fact that we have both, one nuances the other. The our becomes inclusive, bigger. It's everyone.

God's light illuminates our lives. It touches everything. Not just for us. For every person and every thing. To be authentic is to become a better version of yourself. Shared authenticity is inviting and empowering others to become better versions of themselves. Even and especially when that is an authentic version of something very different from us. Because the light is everywhere.

We know clearly and certainly that the "our" here is a joy shared beyond just their community. It is an open invitation to everyone. It is even bigger than that. Let's hit rewind one verse. **"And that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete."** One of the comments on a footnote I was reading puts it this way: "The writer of John's joy was incomplete unless his readers shared it. The very spirit of Jesus would not be happy in heaven without us." The joy literally radiates across heaven and earth between all of us and God. Everywhere.

"This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." We bask in this light. It shines on everything. It permeates everything. And this makes a really big difference.

So I grew up on 8 tracks. Here's a favorite from John Denver. "Sunshine on my shoulders, makes me happy. Sunshine, in my eyes, can make me cry." C.S. Lewis reflected on this a bit more explicitly, "We believe that the sun is in the sky at midday in summer not because we can clearly see the sun (in fact, we cannot) but because we can see everything else."

This is what walking in the light, as he is in the light looks like. When we do this a lot of our fears and personal misgivings begin to fade away. We begin to see differences between us, ethnic, religious, economic, even and especially differences in ability and differences of opinion literally in a new light.

So I'm in my car, well actually Pastor Andy's car. He was my pastor and supervisor during my internship in California. We're driving over to Santa Anita to meet with some engineers about the orphanage our church was building south of the border in Rosarito. I'm kind of the observe and report guy at this point, right? I'm the intern. He gets a call. He starts conversing in Spanish concluding with a "uh huh, of course, yes."

"Ok, so...I need to meet with the engineers and Jim. Do you have your passport?" It's in my apartment. Nancy can pick it up from Teresa and get it to you. We need you take my car, drive down and meet Alejandra in the parking lot of the Home Depot in Tiajuana. Give her this yellow envelope."

Sure thing. LA traffic. Pastor's car. Over the border. Yellow envelope. Got it.

We're still headed over to Santa Anita and he catches me looking. "What? What are you doing there Jeff?" Learning to drive a stick.

God's light is in Santa Anita, in Mexico, LA and Rosarito. God was with us and we knew it. I knew Andy was meant to do some things. And I was meant, or at least available, to do others. God even performed a miracle! He protected Andy's transmission from my driving.

This I what walking in the light looks like. It's taking the risk of relationship. It's the Coopers. Signing up to drive for Family Promise. Why? This is good stuff here folks, take notes. So that Jen could get to know them throughout the week, build rapport, and be able to ask the dangerous question, "So we signed up for the last meal this week. Sky is the limit. What would each one of you like to have for dinner? Steak, anything. Name it." Here come the steaks. The teenager saying, "Do you have any idea how long it has been since I have had barbeque ribs?"

We came here because of the Kid's Belong closet and Family Promise. Let me show you why we stayed.

When we showed up that first Christmas Eve no one knew us from nobody. We're coming in the door and see the kids running around in costumes. Oh they must have one of those pageants.

"Lillian, is it? Would you like to be an angel or a shepherd?" They had opened up the back and any child who wanted to dress up could. You didn't need to be a member. You didn't need to have come to rehearsal. Come on in. As you are. Stay. As you are.

And now I am sitting in Edna Gilbert's living room. Oh my daughter used to sew. She sewed the costumes they used to use for the children's pageant a long time ago...

God's light flows from generation to generation to generation.

The light. It's everywhere. It's for everyone.

So I'm in my car. And...I'm thinking about it. Putting a fish on the back. Maybe it'll help me drive a little better. Maybe it'll remind me to tell people why too.