

Sermon – April 7, 2024

Pastor Dan Hollis

1 John 1:1-2:2

My grandmother loves lighthouses. She collects photos of lighthouses all around the world, she's put up more than a few lighthouse *ornaments* over the years, and in her traveling days she made sure visit as many as she could. And she's not alone. People drive for *miles* just to see the Nubble lighthouse here in town. When I visited my grandmother in February, she made sure to ask if I was gonna be doing another Easter Sunrise service at the Nubble, and when I said yes, she told me to get a good picture and send it to her. Which, I must confess I *forgot* to do because it was cold and I was too focused on the job at hand, so if anybody here was *there* for the sunrise service and wants to send me a picture from it, I'd be really grateful. *Mea culpa*.

One thing I love about the sunrise service every year is the people it draws out. Even at 5:30/6:00 in the morning, in *Maine* March—which is, let's face it, a bit different than March in other parts of the country—you get like fifty people standing out on the bluff, cold wind blowing in off the sea, singing praise to God and rejoicing in the good news of Easter.

Some people are from First Parish Church, some are from Union, there are even a few from other churches that don't have their own sunrise service... and there are folks who come every year who don't even *go* to church. This year, I met someone who had started coming out to eat breakfast and watch the sunrise every day, and when he got there Sunday and saw us all gathered looking at the lighthouse, he couldn't help but come join us to see what was going on. And he loved it. Loved the service, loved the message, loved the feeling of community. How great is that?

That's what lighthouses are for, right? The light's supposed to draw ships safely in from the darkness. And I think that's what *church* is supposed to be for, too. So an Easter service at a lighthouse? That's like three metaphors for the price of one.

Like a lighthouse, I think Christianity-done-right is a beacon that draws *in* people who are... out there, alone, lost, or maybe just in need of someone to eat breakfast with. And the best beacon we have, the way I see it, is the light of Christ's love. If we don't keep *that* lamp lit, well... then things start to fall apart.

Our reading today was written in a community that had sprung up around the apostle called John in the decades since Christ's death and resurrection. This specific book of the Bible—which is known as *First* John (not to be confused with Second John, Third John, or The Gospel of John)—it was written in a fractious time for that community. You

see, a significant number of Christians from the community had taken to professing a kind of Christianity that basically... ignored the life of Christ. That may sound like a weird way to put it, but I think the rift that was growing among John's people *then* is something you'll recognize very quickly today.

See, this group that decided to go its own way, they *believed* in Christ. They believed in *God*. They shouted from the rooftops their faith that Jesus was the Son of God, the instrument of salvation, come into this world to bring humanity into right relation with the Divine. The thing is, these people didn't seem to care much about what Christ did *after* he came into the world. To them, the life of "Jesus of Nazareth" was incidental. The things he *did* and even the manner of his *death* were nothing more than proof if proof be needed that the Messiah had come.

For them the baby Jesus could have gotten... eaten by a wolf, or... grown up to run a barbecue joint and died of heart failure at 62... it wouldn't have changed anything; all that really mattered was the *incarnation*. The important thing to *them* was that Christ was real, Christ had *happened*, and to *believe* in him is to be adopted as a child of God. What Christ did *after* his incarnation was far less important... and *thus* what *they* as *Christians* chose to do *after* their *salvation*... wasn't important either.

What the people of John's community were seeing in this new breed of Christian weren't "Christ-followers" at all. They called themselves Christian, claimed God's favor... and then went on *doing* things that ran *counter* to the example and teachings of Christ's earthly life. Behaving in ways that would make the Savior we see revealed in the pages of the Gospels hang his head in shame.

Is any of this starting to sound familiar? Today it's hard not to notice how many people there are who call themselves Christian, whose faith is centered around *believing* the right thing, but whose lives, actions, and words run at cross-purposes with the humble, selfless, counter-cultural carpenter's son we know Jesus to be. People who take very seriously the *first* half of Christ's Great Commandment—love God—but *ignore* the *second* half—love your neighbor.

It's easy to take the term "justified by faith" too far to the extreme. First John is very clear to say that of *course* a relationship with God through receiving Christ's forgiveness offers salvation from sin and death... but that is not license to then live a life of evil. God's love for us may be a "get-out-of-jail-free card," but it's not a "get-out-of-*sin* free card." The things we do in our lives can't *earn* us salvation, but that doesn't mean they don't *matter* to *God*.

Christ's earthly life, his choices and his teachings, were important because they show us how important *our* lives can be if we allow our faith in Christ to actually *transform*

us—on the outside as *well* as the inside. If we allow ourselves to *forget* or *overlook* Jesus' *example*—who he was and what he did and who he helped and *how*—we *lose* what it *means* to be God's children.

This splinter faction in John's community may not have spared a lot of thought for what Christ did or said in life, but I believe the *Gospel* of John that they first *built* themselves around *included* the life story of Jesus for a *reason*, not just as a historical footnote. John Chapter 8 recounts the story of a woman about to be stoned by a crowd for a sin she had committed. Remember this? Jesus said, 'let he who is without sin cast the first stone.' When no one could, Jesus said to her, 'Has no one condemned you? Neither do I. Go and sin no more.'

Being "saved" doesn't make what we do *after* unimportant. If anything, it makes it *more* important, because now we're on God's team. "Christian" isn't just a stamp on our heavenly passport—it's an ongoing relationship with God. God's forgiveness doesn't free us from sin or from the responsibility to fight *against* sin... it only frees us from the eternal consequences of sin. If we want to be worthy to call ourselves Christian, we have to strive to live up to the love God gives us *freely* as best we can, even though we fail. "If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;" but First John reminds us that Jesus doesn't intercede for us so that we can sin *more*. Christ pulls us out of the darkness... so that we may live in the *light*.

First John also recognizes how dangerous Christian hypocrisy can be. A hypocrite says one thing but does another—as our reading puts it, we say we have fellowship with God while walking in darkness—and living a life of hypocrisy starts to feed into itself. In time, we start believing our own press. That's what gives Christians the reputation of being "holier-than-thou," right? We're Christian, so we're *better*. Godlier. *Beloved*.

So we start lying to *ourselves* about how holy we are, while continuing to act selfishly and prop up *systems* that steal and harm and oppress, all the while convincing ourselves we can do no wrong because God is on our side. The politicians that *represent* us start to *justify* their actions in the *name* of God. Before too long *everything* we say and do makes a *liar* out of God, and we end up where we are today... *nobody* wants to become a Christian, because the loudest Christians *out* there aren't anything *like* the Christ they say they believe in.

But if *instead* of hypocrites paying lip-service to the light while walking in darkness, we wish to be in *fellowship* with Christ and *all* God's children... we cannot allow ourselves to forget or overlook who Christ was, what he did, who he *helped*, and how he loved.

Seek God, revealed to us in the work and word of Jesus Christ. *That's* something that should feed into itself! The good that Christ did in his life *should* draw people closer to God, and a relationship with God through Christ *should* make people *live* more like Christ, and then a bunch of people *living* like Christ *should* attract even *more* to *seek* what it is they're missing in their lives.

*That's* what will build our churches and spread God's light to *all* who need it. Not threats of hellfire, or selfish promises. Not acts of hate disguised as piety. Not trumpets of war in the name of God Most High.

Growing up my Sunday School teacher told me, "The word Christian means Christ-like," and *that's* what builds sacred community, from the days of John to the days of today. Being Christ-like. "They will know we are Christians by our love" *used* to *mean* something, and if we want God to mean *anything* to *anyone* these days, we have to reclaim what it means to be Christian. To face the same struggle John's community was dealing with head-on, to remind each other and the world that Christ's life matters. Not just his birth, and not only his death and Easter resurrection... the stuff in between is *just* as important.

In life, Jesus Christ made sure the hungry had food, that the sick received care, that foreigners were treated like the children of God they are. He empowered the powerless and stood beside the marginalized. He told people to leave "judging others" to God, and to never stop loving even those who would seek to do them harm. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you; serve others and show compassion for all; love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.

God's grace has saved us. *Now*, in *response*, as-a-result-of... we should seek a closer walk with Jesus, and in so doing shine a beacon of love for the whole world to see.

A lighthouse that emits only darkness is no good to anyone, and will draw no ships safely to shore. But a lighthouse that blazes with the light of *love*, that's a lighthouse worth driving miles to see. So in the spirit of First John, let's strive build a better and brighter lighthouse on the cornerstone of Christ: let us build out of Christianity a sacred community where there is no room for hypocrisy, no room for selfishness or greed, no room for violence or hate. A faith where we grow in love, striving to live up to Christ's example, with the comfort of knowing that when we fall short—and we will—Christ will pick us up, dust us off, and guide us back on track with a pat on the back and a thousand-watt smile.

May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.