

The Message

1 John 1:1-4

Turn to 1 Corinthians 15. The sermon will be from 1 John, but we'll begin with 1 Cor 15.

What is the gospel?

Let's begin by talking about the word "gospel." "Gospel" means "good news," most of us know that. I usually understand the good news to be that Christ died for our sins and that by God's grace we can be forgiven, and receive the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. That is good news, for sure.

But the NT churches understood the gospel a little differently than that. The gospel was the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the whole story. The Gospel of Mark begins this way: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Then he writes about John the Baptist, and John preaching, and baptizing Jesus.

The book of Mark tells the gospel. The gospel is the story of Jesus. John the Baptist preaching and baptizing is the beginning of the gospel.

I speak to you about "the Gospel of Matthew" and "the Gospel of Mark" and "the Gospel of John." The early church did not do that. They called it "the gospel according to Matthew" and "the gospel according to Mark" and so on.

Do you get it? There are not four Gospels. They would be offended. There is one gospel, the story of Jesus of Nazareth, and we have four different writers writing out the one story, the gospel. By that definition, if we told someone the story of Jesus, from John the Baptist and including his death and resurrection, we would have told them the good news.

The story of Jesus was itself the good news. It could be summarized. We have a short version in 1 Cor 15:1-5 *Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of **the gospel** I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By **this gospel** you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.*

*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance [here is the **gospel**]: that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to [many of his followers].*

Here is the gospel as simple as it gets: "Christ died for our sins, he was buried, he was raised the third day, he appeared to his followers after that."

We are perhaps not sure how exactly that is good news. That does not seem to us to yet the good news yet. That's fine, we can be uncertain about that. Just understand *their* position on this: the story of Jesus itself, especially his death, burial, and resurrection, was the good news.

Paul gives another version of the gospel at the beginning of Romans, and he states that this is the gospel of God, the good news of God. He centers on three events: 1, the OT prophets promised this in their holy writings; 2, Jesus was born in the line of David, in his flesh; and 3, he was declared to be the Son of God by his resurrection of the dead.

Jesus was promised by the prophets, he was born in the line of David, he was declared the Son of God by his resurrection, Jesus Christ our Lord. That's the gospel Paul preaches, and by that gospel he calls gentiles to the obedience of faith. (Romans 1). That again is a summary of what we read in our four long versions of the gospel.

Peter has his version in his Pentecost sermon. Jesus did many miracles, proving that God's hand was on him, he was arrested and evil people did away with him by crucifixion, and also by the plan of God, and then God raised him, because it was impossible for death to hold him.

That's Peter's gospel: God certified Jesus by his many miracles and signs, he was crucified by God's plan, and God raised him from the dead.

Paul gave a real short version in 1 Cor 15, a bit longer at the beginning of Romans, and Peter's gospel here is a bit longer. What we call the Four Gospels are four long and careful accounts of the same gospel, which is the story of Jesus himself.

Now we will turn to 1 John 1, we will see that although John does not use the word "gospel," he's talking about the same thing.

That which was from the beginning

1 John 1:1-4 - That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we watched and our hands have touched—we are talking about the Word of life. The life became visible; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and became visible to us. 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. We write this to make our joy complete.

"That which was from the beginning." That's a peculiar way to begin a letter, isn't it. "That which was from the beginning." 1, 2, 3 John assume the readers have the Gospel according to John, and know how that begins. And the Gospel according to John was written for people who had the OT, and knew how the OT began.

Genesis 1:1 says ***In the beginning**, God made the heavens and the earth.* That's what happened in the beginning. The Gospel of John starts like this: ***In the beginning** was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning, with God.*

What John means in the Gospel of John is: Back in the beginning, when God made the heavens and the earth, "the Word" was already there.

We don't know yet what "the Word" is, but we know that whatever "the Word" is, it was back there in the beginning, when God made the heavens and the earth. In the beginning, when God made the heavens and the earth, the Word was there, and the Word was with God, and was God.

As we go a little farther in the Gospel, we realize that the Word that was in the beginning with God, and was God, actually refers to Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was that Word, with God already in the beginning.

So now, 1 John begins, "that which was from the beginning." So 1 John means "the Word," which was in the beginning with God. He means Jesus, the eternal Word. Let's begin again.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we watched, and our hands have touched—we are talking about the Word of life.

John and his partners say: "we heard the Word, we saw the Word with our eyes, we watched the Word, and our hands touched the Word." Let's translate "Word" as "Message." That might help. In the beginning was the Message, and the Message was with God, and the Message was God.

"That which was from the beginning, the Message, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked at, and our hands have touched—we are talking about the Message of life."

This Word, this Message, is not just something to hear. We can hear this Message, that's true, but we can also see and watch this Message. John emphasizes this, to make clear that he does not mean spiritual sight, he means literal physical sight. We saw the Message with our eyes, we watched it. And, get this, our hands touched this Message. We handled the Message.

We have three senses being used: hearing, sight, and touch. John and others with him heard, saw, and touched the Word of life. He heard the Message, he saw the Message, and he touched the Message. What he heard and saw and touched is the Word of life, the Message of life.

So, what is the Message? The Message is Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, the whole person, is the Message. Jesus spoke, he taught them, and they heard his words. But the Word here, the Message, is not just the teaching of Jesus. The message is also something to see, watch, look at, and something they could touch and feel. Jesus, that person in the flesh, is the Message.

Jesus in the flesh. 2 John talked about many deceivers in the world who do not confess that Jesus Christ came *in the flesh*. 1 Jn 4 talks about the same thing: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come *in the flesh* is from God. Every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. Gospel of John 1: the Word became flesh, the Message became flesh, and lived with us.

What we heard, what we saw with our eyes, what we watched, what we touched with our hands – that’s Jesus in the flesh. Jesus in the flesh is the Message. He did not just tell us the word, the message: Jesus in the flesh is the Word, Jesus of Nazareth is himself the Message.

And what is the Message about? LIFE! 1 John 1, the Word of Life, the Message of Life. I love this! In one word here, what is the Message God sent? LIFE! What kind of life? Every kind of life! The Word, the Message, was at the beginning, and everything was made through him, without him nothing was made. All life comes through Jesus.

All common life that people share with animals, and especially second birth, and abundant life, and eternal life, and resurrection life, life after death – Jesus was the Message of Life that God sent to the world. Human sin brought death, God’s Message brings Life.

This we proclaim to you

The life became visible; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and became visible to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard. (1 Jn 1:2-3a)

John and other eyewitnesses saw and testified, they solemnly tell the truth about what they saw and heard. And they proclaim it to us. They announce it to us. John repeats that. We proclaim to you, he says again, what we witnessed, what we have seen and heard and touched.

Here again he calls Jesus “Life.” We proclaim you the Eternal Life, that was with the Father and became visible to us. Jesus himself is God’s Message to us of Life, of Eternal Life.

We proclaim to you what we have seen with our eyes, and heard, and touched. And now, my brothers and sisters, we are talking about the gospel. John and the other eyewitness of Jesus have only one thing to say: they say, they announce, they proclaim, nothing more or less than what they saw with their eyes, they heard, and they touched.

For John, announcing the gospel takes no creativity whatsoever. No ingenuity. He and the eyewitnesses just report what they heard, and saw, and touched. Jesus of Nazareth, what they heard and saw and touched, is himself the message. This includes the whole life of Jesus, and his death, and his resurrection. All of that they heard, saw, and touched.

John never uses the word “gospel,” either in the Gospel of John or the three Letters. But if he did use the word “gospel,” this opening would be it. These four opening verses are John’s summary of what we have in the Gospel of John. What we heard and saw and watched and touched.

Join us in our Fellowship

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. We write this to make our joy complete. (Vv3-4)

John is saying, we want to have fellowship with you, oneness and partnership, we want to be joined to you, and we tell you what we saw and heard and touched, so you can join our fellowship, the fellowship of the eyewitnesses. We the eyewitnesses tell you this so you can join our oneness, our partnership.

We the eyewitnesses have fellowship with the Father and the Son. (This is remarkable!) We have oneness and partnership with the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ, we have joined their fellowship. That’s why we want you to join us, because it is an unbelievable oneness, fellowship, partnership. We write this to make our joy complete. If you join us, our joy would be complete.

The way John writes here, it sounds like he’s writing to people who are not believers, but if we keep reading we find out that’s not true. He’s writing to a church that is anxious and rattled and uncertain, and he writes to get them back on solid footing. He’s reminding them about the foundation of their faith.

We read in 2:18-19 that a significant group of people left the church, and John is clear that those people left because they were not a part of us, and they left to make clear that they were not really among us.

But the people who stayed, who John knows are true believers, are unsure about themselves, and John begins his letter this way, to make sure they know what their real foundation is.

So he says, “what we heard and saw with our eyes is all we have ever proclaimed to you, and if you’re with us in this, and I know you are, then you have fellowship with us, with the eyewitness of Christ, and that means you join our fellowship with the Father and with Jesus the Son. And that’s pretty good! And that means that you have eternal life.”

John’s starting point – Jesus in the flesh

There are three outstanding minds among the NT writers: John, Paul, and the writer to the Hebrews. Of those, only John was an eyewitness of Jesus. What we need to grasp here is how solidly John held on to Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus in the flesh.

We can sometimes think we should move past the earthly Jesus, leave that behind for higher thoughts about God. John could not have been more opposed to that. As far as John was concerned, all he knew about God he had discovered by listening to Jesus, watching Jesus with his eyes, and touching Jesus.

And if we will accept their testimony about Jesus in the flesh, what they heard and saw and felt (and that's what the gospel is) if we accept that, we have fellowship with the eyewitnesses, and their fellowship is with the Father and the Son, so we have moved into that as well, partnership and oneness and unity with the Father and the Son. And eternal life.

Christmas and Incarnation

This is the second Sunday of Advent. We are remembering the first coming of our Lord. Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit, and gave birth to Jesus. That's when the Message itself became flesh. That's when hearing the Message and seeing and touching the Message actually began.

Let's not ever try to get past Jesus in the flesh. We celebrate Jesus in the flesh, the Message became flesh and lived with us, we trust in that Jesus, and at Christmas we remember this.

“Carnal” is an old English word that means “flesh,” weak humanity. “In-carn-ation” means “into flesh.” John more than another other NT writer grabbed hold the incarnation of the Message. That's the only way God could make himself known.

And we, by embracing Jesus in the flesh, and accepting their witness, and putting our faith in Jesus in the flesh, and following Jesus in the flesh, we have joined the Father and the Son, and the eyewitnesses, in their joyful union. That's our foundation, too. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, we thank you. Thank you for sending us the Word, the Message. Thank you that the Message was Jesus, a person his followers could watch, and listen to, and feel with their hands. And thank you that in one word, your Message was a Message of **Life**. Your Message was **Life** itself, Jesus in the flesh was Eternal Life embodied.

We cannot really get our heads around these things. But thanks for this Scripture, that plants our feet solidly again on real ground, and reminds us what our faith is about. And thank you for the Holy Spirit, that takes these words, and teaches us, and encourages us. Thank you for the Holy Spirit, who witnesses to our spirits that this is truth from you. Thank you for the Spirit who comforts us, and brings us into fellowship with you, Father, and your Son Jesus. Amen.

(response)

BENEDICTION: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage our hearts and strengthen us in every good deed and word. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.