



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## The Life of the Age to Come

### 1 St. John 1:1-4

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When I was growing up I often heard the story of how my grandfather discovered the truth about Christmas. He grew up in one of those houses where the Christmas decorations didn't go up and the presents weren't put out until after he'd gone to bed on Christmas Eve. He would awake to the surprise on Christmas morning and everyone would tell him that Santa Claus had come while he was sleeping. They wanted Christmases to be memorable and fun for him. His father, my great-grandfather, fell off a ladder died in an accident when my grandfather was only two years old. After that he and my great-grandmother went to live with relatives. I expect that at Christmas the older family members enjoyed having a little boy around again—someone who got excited about the season of Christmas. I suspect they probably over-did things at least a little for his sake.

It didn't last, however. A few days before one Christmas my grandfather was playing in the yard and notice a trail of pine needles leading to the basement. Down the steps he went and there he discovered "Christmas", prepared and packed away, ready to be sprung on him Christmas morning, obviously not by Santa, but by his aunt and uncle and mother. He was crushed. Not only was the magic gone, but he realised that people he loved and trusted had been lying to him.

There were Christians in the middle of the First Century who were feeling similarly disenchanted. People who had walked with Jesus, how had heard him teach, who had seen him perform

miracles, who had seen him crucified and then seen him again, raised from the dead, told others who hadn't seen and eventually they were telling the next generation that hadn't even been alive when the events of the Gospels took place. And it was in those years and decades that followed that persecution began to take place. The Jews refused to accept this new way of following Israel's God. If the Christians were lucky they were simply cut off from the synagogues. If they were unlucky, they were stoned like St. Stephen or dragged before the authorities by men like Saul of Tarsus. Some years later persecution by the Romans began, and while it wasn't widespread, it was horrible. Men and women were crucified, they were thrown to the lions in the arena—Nero even covered them in pitch, nailed them to stakes, and set them on fire to light his garden parties. It was hard enough for some who *had* seen Jesus to persevere. Many of those who hadn't seen him questioned. Were the apostles for real? Was their story real? And if it was, where was this new age that Jesus was said to have ushered in? Why were things getting worse instead of better for them. And they doubted. As I said when we began our study of Luke's Gospel, I think it's a strong possibility that the "Theophilus" to whom Luke addressed both his Gospel and the book of Acts, was just one of these second generation converts in whom doubts were beginning to arise. Luke wasn't an eye-witness either—at least not to Jesus. He gathered first-hand accounts and recorded the story for the sake of those who would come after. In fact, all four Gospels were written as the eye-witnesses themselves were aging and realising that word of mouth wasn't enough. The testimony of the eye-witnesses had to be written down.

St. John was part of that effort. John, along with his brother, James, and with Peter were part of Jesus' inner circle. They knew him better than anyone. Tradition says that John also wrote the three epistles we have near the end of the New Testament and that

during his exile on the island of Patmos, he wrote the book of Revelation. In all three cases—in his Gospel, in at least the first of his epistles, and in Revelation—John writes to Christians who are being beaten down by the world. He reminds them of Jesus, of his ministry and of his sacrifice and of his promises, and he urges them to persevere—to persevere in faith, in love, and in hope. In Revelation he repeatedly calls the churches to "conquer"—to stand firm in Jesus and to overcome, interestingly enough, not by responding to hate with hate or violence with violence, but to stand firm in their suffering and in their persecution. As Jesus triumphed over sin and death with the shedding of his blood, so the Church will triumph and will conquer through rejection, through suffering, through persecution, and even through martyrdom. It seems counterintuitive. Many wanted to give up and throw in the towel. But John reminds them—and he reminds us—that this is how God's kingdom works. It's how Jesus overcame and it is how the Church will overcome too.

And so John begins his epistle—an epistle exhorting fellow Christians to stand firm in Christ-like love—by going back to his being an eye-witness of what that love looked like when he saw Jesus displaying it. Again, this is 1 John and our lesson begins at the first verse:

**That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that**

**our joy may be complete.** (1 John 1:1-4)

John begins his epistle by taking us back to Jesus—to his life, to his ministry, to his teaching and preaching, to his death and resurrection. This is what started it all—or, better since Jesus came into the middle of a story that had been unfolding for a long time, this is what *changed everything*. This is what John’s epistle is about. And yet the message of radical love in the epistle is a challenge. It’s especially a challenge for those who weren’t there when Jesus was walking on earth and who now have questions or doubts. Love is sacrificial. That’s a very difficult kind of love to live—especially for your enemies. As John talks about in Revelation, sacrificial love means persecution and martyrdom. And people thought: “How do I know it’s worth it?” So John goes back to Jesus. John was an eyewitness. Not just that, he was one of Jesus’ closest and best friends. He’s saying, “Trust me. The story is true. I and so many others heard him, we saw him—especially the empty tomb!—and we touched the risen Lord. Thomas put his fingers into the holes in his hands. We ate fish with him on the beach. Jesus is *life* itself and this is what we eyewitnesses testify. Testify—put us on the witnesses stand and we’ll swear to it.

And he describes what he and the eyewitnesses proclaim: eternal life. Our English translations don’t capture very well what John is getting at here. The Greek word, *aionios*, means “eternal” but it’s also the word “age”. We get our word “aeon” from it. “Eternal life” tends to come across as otherworldly in English. We start thinking about a strictly spiritual existence, about heaven somewhere “up there”, and many people think about the pop-culture idea of angels floating around on clouds and playing harps. But John, like Jesus and Paul, when he talks about “eternal life” isn’t

talking about the life Jesus brings in otherworldly or non-corporeal terms. That’s how it often comes across, because none of our English words captures the full sense of the Greek word they use. Again, the Greek word is freighted with meaning. It’s not just that this life is “eternal”, but that it’s the life of “the age to come”. Jews looked at history as divided into two ages—two *aeons*. There was the present age, which is full of pain and suffering, injustice and unrighteousness, and then there was the age to come. God would send his Messiah, he would rescue his people, not by taking them out of the world, but by coming in judgement to deal with all the suffering and injustice. God would rescue his people *and* his creation and set *everything* to rights and reign as King *eternally*. It’s this Jewish understanding of history that we need to keep in mind any time we see the New Testament writers telling us about “eternal life”. It’s the life of the “age to come”—it’s life in God’s presence, it’s life in Creation set to rights, it’s life in which God has wiped away every tear from our eyes.

This is what the Jews expected. And it came in Jesus. But as we’ve seen in studying Luke’s Gospel, Jesus didn’t bring it about the way people were expecting. This is what got him into trouble with so many people and with the Jewish authorities. But what John’s saying here is that in Jesus it happened—maybe not the way we expected—but it *most certainly did happen!* Somehow, through Jesus’ becoming one of his people, through Jesus dying, and through Jesus rising from death that future age to come is breaking into the present age. It’s not the clean break that people expected, but it is happening. The present evil age is passing away. Jesus dealt it a death blow. Its days are numbered. And the age to come is breaking in. It *will* come in all its fullness just as everyone longed for it to come—just as so many of us still long for it come. But the world isn’t ready yet. God has

a plan. There’s a reason he’s working this way.

It might help to understand this if we go back my grandfather’s childhood basement where his family was preparing for Christmas. Over weeks or months, presents were carefully wrapped and stashed away in the basement. Boxes full of decorations were already there. A day or two before Christmas the tree was brought home and hidden away. Think of your own homes: presents for the kids stashed on the high shelf in the closet where they’ll never find them, decorations carefully stored away in the garage or the crawlspace, a turkey thawing in the refrigerator. Everything is being prepared, but it’s not out yet. We’re waiting for the big day. And yet I think of when I was a kid. We couldn’t wait. In our house the tree went up early and the presents slowly appeared one by one under tree. For a week or two we shook them and tried to peek through the seams in the paper, trying to figure out what was inside. We didn’t sit down to start opening things until after Christmas dinner. It was a long wait, so we kids were allowed to open *one* present on Christmas Eve—something to tide us over. That one present was a foretaste of what was to come on the afternoon of Christmas Day.

That’s something of what has happened in the ministry of Jesus. The kingdom of heaven—all the wonderful things of the age to come—are being prepared and carefully made ready in heaven in anticipation of the great day when all will be revealed. But Jesus came like a present opened on Christmas Eve. He gave the world a foretaste of the age to come as he preached good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, as he brought healing and forgiveness and reconciliation—and most importantly, as he poured out the Holy Spirit on his people, uniting us to himself, transforming our hearts and minds, and giving as much of the life

of the age to come to us as our broken and unresurrected selves can handle right now.

One day the present age will fully pass away and the age to come will be here in its fullness. One day all things will finally be made new and Jesus will return, bring the life of the age to come with him—and everything that goes with it—restoring Creation, finally conquering evil once and for all time, and setting everything to rights. We often miss all of this. We think the Good News is escape from the evils of the world. But that's not the Good News. That's not the way of seeing history that the Old Testament had established. Back to my grandfather's basement. His family didn't go down to the basement to enjoy Christmas any more than you just celebrated your Christmas by squeezing everyone into your refrigerator to enjoy your Christmas turkey. No. Everything we've been prepared is brought out and our homes are transformed with all the good things that have been hidden away. So with the age to come. The Good News is, at it's most basic, that Jesus is Lord. Not just Lord of heaven, but Lord of all—Lord of this earth, Lord of Creation—and that he will deal with pain and suffering and injustice and unrighteousness and sin and death not by whisking us away, but by coming and defeating evil and its minions once and for all. The vision St. John gives us in Revelation is of the dragon—the serpent, the Satan—being allowed to do his worst. After his beast—Rome—is finally cast down, the Satan whips the nations into a frenzy, encouraging every last vestige of evil to rise up against the Lamb. And with every evil exposed, Jesus conquers it all—and then the dragon, the Satan, is cast into the fire. It's as if Jesus uses the Satan to sweep the dust from every dark corner and from under every piece of furniture into plain view, in one pile for Jesus to deal with—and then, having swept up every last vestige of evil, Jesus throws

the broom itself into the fire. There is no more evil in his restored Creation, which means heaven can come down. And John gives us that image of the New Jerusalem descending to earth—God's realm and our realm, now joined back together as God originally intended. And it can finally happen because the sin that split them apart has been dealt with.

That's the life of the age to come. As John says in verse 2, this is the life that was “with the Father”. In verse 3 he describes this life as “fellowship” and specifically as fellowship *with the Father*. This is what we've been missing ever since humanity's first sin in the garden. The holy and unholy can never be together. Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, out of God's presence. They were cut off from the tree of life and began to die—because they had sinned, because they had become unholy.

This is what was so remarkable about Jesus. He is one of us, but he had fellowship with the Father. They were in communion with each other—it wasn't broken. And people could see this wherever he went. He had power over sin and death, he had power over the minions of the devil, he had power to forgive sins—because he was full of the life that sinners lack, that we reject in our sinfulness. And yet the whole point of Jesus ministry was to bring this life to the rest of us. He lived, he died, and he rose to life to break our bondage to sin, to wash us clean from the stain of our sins, so that we can share his fellowship with the Father—so that we can have the life of the age to come.

And John says, this is what he and his friends had heard and it's what they have proclaimed. This is the Good News. And it's Good News—not just good *advice*. We often proclaim the Good News as if it's something our friends might like to try for themselves—like something from the smorgasbord. Take it or leave it. If

you like it, great! If not, oh well. But, Brothers and Sisters, that's not what the New Testament means by Good News. The Greek word is *euangelion*. It's the word from which we get “evangel” and “evangelical”. In the Old Testament the word is used to describe the good news of victory brought by messengers from the battlefield. Think of Isaiah 52:7 and those familiar words, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings *good news*.” That's the word there. It's the image of a messenger running as fast as he can to tell the people in the city the good news that their forces have been victorious. That's one half of what it means to proclaim Good News. A victory has been won by Jesus against sin and death. Now, think about that. Is that the sort of “news” you present as a “take it or leave it” sort of thing? Not really.

But the other aspect of Good News and one we see especially in Paul's epistles, comes from the way the word was used in the Roman world. When a new Caesar ascended to the throne—often by having defeated his rivals—imperial heralds were sent throughout the empire to declare the Good News: Caesar is Lord or Augustus is Lord or Vespasian is Lord. He has put his enemies under his feet and taken his throne to rule. It was a call for loyalty. If there was anyone still fighting for the losing side off in the fringes of the empire, now was the time to lay down their arms and swear allegiance to the victor.

This is the other side of the Good News we proclaim. Jesus is Lord. He has conquered his rivals. He has crushed the serpent's head. Yes, Caesar pretends at being Lord, but his days are numbered and so are the days of his empire. He's part of the present evil age that is passing away. So to proclaim the Good News is to announce that Jesus has been victorious and it's to call the world to allegiance to Jesus. Again, this isn't a

take it or leave it option. Imagine Caesar's heralds running through the empire to announce that Caesar had defeated his enemies and now ruled Rome—but you can take it or leave it. We often talk about “sharing” the Good News. This is a pretty recent phenomenon that started in the mid-Twentieth Century. But consider how silly it is to think that Caesar’s heralds went through the empire to “share” the Good News that Caesar was emperor. No. This was news they *announced* and *proclaimed*. Judgement would come on any who rejected it. And consider how this is even more the case with Jesus. Horrible judgement came on Jerusalem for its rejection of Jesus and his lordship and that judgement was a small foretaste of the judgement John points to in Revelation that will come on the last great day when Jesus deals once and for all with all those who insist on continuing their rebellion.

So, Brothers and Sisters, proclaim the good news of Jesus’ lordship with power and with confidence knowing what it means. Live in the story and live in the life of the age to come and live in it with joy. That’s why, John says in verse 4, he has written this: so that instead of living in doubt or fear when we face persecution for our witness and proclamation of the love of God in Jesus, for our witness and proclamation of his kingdom, we may live in joy, knowing that Jesus is Lord and that in the Holy Spirit he has given us a taste of the life and of the kingdom that is coming. It’s like the gift we give to our children to open on Christmas Eve, a gift that gives them a taste of the wonderful things still waiting for them on Christmas morning. But, Brothers and Sisters, remember that Jesus came not for the sake of a few, but for the sake of the whole world—to offer forgiveness to all humanity and to call all humanity back into fellowship with his Father. What Jesus has done for us is not meant to be merely a foretaste of the kingdom to encourage us as we face

the ongoing evil of the present age, we ourselves—our transformed lives, the love we live, the hope we have, the Good News we proclaim—is meant to be a foretaste of the kingdom for the people around us. Through the lives of his people—through *our* lives—Jesus lifts the veil and gives the world a glimpse of the age to come. Think on that as you hear the dismissal this morning: “Go out in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, through St. John you encourage your Church, your people, to live the life of the age to come, not in fear or hesitation or doubt, but to live it in joy. Remind us that we do this as we steep ourselves in your Word, in the witness to Jesus, who he is and what he has done, given to us by the eyewitnesses. And give us the grace, we pray, to proclaim the life and kingdom of Jesus as boldly and with as much joy as we live in it ourselves, that everyone around us might hear the call to repent and to believe, that everyone around us might find the same fellowship with you that we have. We as this through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.