



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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We Shall be Like Him

1 John 3:1-10

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The Bible is the story of creation, fall, and recreation and you and I today are standing somewhere in the middle of that story—somewhere in the recreation part of it. Jesus has died and he has risen. He has dealt a death-blow to sin and set us free. In his resurrection he has set in motion the forces that are making all things new—including us. But the recreation isn't complete yet. The conquered powers of this fallen and redeemed world still have power even if their time is limited. We see darkness all around. And we remember last week's Gospel and Jesus telling us that as the new Israel our vocation is to be salt and light. We're called to charge into the darkness holding high the light of Jesus and drawing the people around us into redeeming arms of our King. It's the vocation of a people who live in the in-between, in the overlap of the ages. It's the vocation of people who follow the King who came not to condemn, but to redeem. But what does it look like to be salt? How are we to be light? In his first epistle St. John's reminds us that we are called to manifest, to reveal the love of God in Christ, but first he calls us to purity. That's what our Epistle today is about. We're a people called to be holy and set apart and through our purity we open a window into God's kingdom and into the age to come. This is no small task, but John gives us encouragement to live in hope. That's what makes all the difference. In 1 John 3:2 we read:

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him,

because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

We are God's children. John explains how this works in the earlier part of the Epistle, but it boils down to our being united with Jesus who is God's Son. Because we are in Jesus we are God's children, and children reflect their parents. But what does that look like? Again, John stresses that it looks like love. He begins Chapter 3 writing:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

We see the Father's love first of all in that he would make us his children in the first place. He created us to be his children. Our vocation—if we look back to Adam—was to serve God and to live in his presence. He created a garden and Adam's vocation was to care for it and to live in his presence. Gardening or farming or whatever the specifics of Adam's duties might seem pretty mundane, not particularly holy, but when done before the face of God and when done in service to him every shovel-full of turned earth became an act of worship and a tangible act of love. It was priestly work. Think about that. We so often think of redeemed vocation as going to heaven where we spend eternity strumming harps and singing worship songs, but the Bible, instead, shows us Adam tilling the soil and caring for animals. Work is divine—or at least it was meant to be and one day it will be again—but even in the present we look forward to that time as we fill our lives and our work today with love, doing everything in service to God. If Adam could serve and worship God in his gardening or farming, we can serve and worship God in our teaching, our excavating, our sewing, our childrearing, our accounting, our lawyering, our doctoring, or our barbering. If that seems strange to us it's only because we've strayed so far from our original vocation. The good

news, John tells us, is that even though we rejected the vocation God gave us, even though we subjected his creation to futility, even though we drove a wedge between heaven and earth, God has never ceased to love us. John reminds us of Jesus and he reminds us of the Cross. In Chapter 1:7 he reminds us that “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin”. In Chapter 2:2 he says that Jesus “is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Jesus gave his life out of love for us. He shed his blood to restore us to our vocation, to bring us back before the face of God and into his presence. To restore us to our position as God's children. And that means to restore us to the people we were created to be. I think of the line from the Christmas carol “Once in David's Royal City”. In the last verse we sing, “And our eyes at last shall see him, through his own redeeming love.” Brothers and Sisters, that's our hope. One day our eyes shall see our Lord and our eyes will see him through the lens of his own redeeming love for us. It's not just that we'll see Jesus. That's something wonderful to look forward to, but the really amazing and transforming thing is to be able to see the heart of Jesus, not just to see his love, but to experience it even more deeply than we have already as we see ourselves through his eyes and finally grasp the full depth of the redemption he has wrought for us. It's that face-to-face encounter that will bring about our final transformation. Right now we strive to be like him, but on that day we finally really and truly will be transformed into his likeness.

John says that what that looks like hasn't yet been revealed. That's why we struggle to be conformed to the image of Jesus. That's why we struggle with vocation and with love and with purity. Until we've met Jesus face-to-face we can't quite fully grasp what that image is and if we can't fully grasp it we can't fully attain it. For now we have to be

satisfied with the life he's given in the Holy Spirit—a down payment on the life of the age to come. But one day...

It's hard to imagine what that day and that world will be like. The Bible gives us glimpses of it, but even then, whether Ezekiel or John or Jesus himself, they could only describe it with symbols and analogies. But the one common theme is that what sin has broken God will make right. Human beings will once again be restored to God's presence as heaven and earth are brought back together. John saw a great city with dimensions that made it a giant holy of holies—the place where God's presence rested in the tabernacle and later in the temple. Ezekiel saw a great temple, perfectly proportioned and from it flowed a river, taking the life of God to the world. And I think it helps to reflect on John's statements about Jesus shedding his blood as an atoning sacrifice.

John's talk of atoning blood is language straight from the Old Testament and from the temple. The tabernacle (and later the temple) was the one place on earth where heaven and earth met, coming together in a place where sinful human beings could go to meet God. There's a reason why the tabernacle was designed to mimic the garden of Eden. That had been the place where human beings had lived in the fullness of God's presence. That had been the place where heaven and earth fully overlapped. But the temple itself was earthly. And so the people offered sacrifices. The blood shed by those sacrificial animals was sprinkled on the worshipers and it was also sprinkled around the tabernacle. It was a way to cleanse and to make holy what was unholy. It was the shed blood of the sacrifices that cleansed the tabernacle and prepared it for the presence of God. Once made holy the temple became the thin space, the intersection between heaven and earth and the place where human beings

could enter God presence. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus shed his blood at the Cross to do the same thing. Over the course of his ministry he declared that he was himself the new temple. In Jesus heaven and earth, God and man come together and by his blood we are made holy and invited in. In fact, by his blood we are washed clean ourselves and incorporated, each of us as living stones, built into the new temple with Jesus as the cornerstone. We are the temple that Ezekiel saw. We are the city that John saw. And as the life of God flows *into* us through Jesus, his life then flows out *from* us to the world. And I think that helps to give us a sense—even if it's again in symbol and analogy—what we look forward to. Our hope is not God undoing or destroying his Creation. His Creation is good. He made it that way. It's just that we've made a mess of it. And so what we look forward to is everything that is good about this world made better. It's this world, but without sickness and injustice, without pain and sorrow, and without shame and tears. It's this world once again united with heaven and God's life flowing through it.

I think of the old works of art that we've been looking at for hundreds of years and that modern technology now allows us to clean and restore. The ceiling of Sistine Chapel is a great example. Think of the famous painting of Adam, reclining limp on the rocks and God reaching down with his finger to give him the spark of life. People who study art thought they knew Michelangelo well. Art historians wrote about how Michelangelo used a subdued colour palette because it meant *this* or he painted things a certain way and it meant *that*. And then the technology was developed to clean almost five hundred years of soot and incense from his paintings and everything changed. The paintings were beautiful before, but now really they've come to life. They're vibrant and full of bright colours and details that had been

hidden and I think that's something of an illustration of the age to come. Earth is beautiful, but when it's rejoined to the life of God it will truly be alive the way he meant it to be. It will still be what it is, but more so.

But John, in our Epistle, is talking specifically about *us*. What will *we* be like? We'll be like we are only filled with the life of God in a way beyond what even the Holy Spirit gives us today. No more sickness and no more death, but more importantly able to live in God's world and to enjoy it without being tempted and seduced into turning his Creation into idols. More important, though, John says that we will be like Jesus when we see him. Think of Jesus on that first Easter. On one hand he was the same Jesus he had always been. Remember, the empty tomb. His body was raised from death. He still bore in his hands and feet the marks of the nails. He still had the wound in his side where the spear had pierced him. It was still really him. And yet he was different. His friends didn't recognise him at first. And as much as he was very much of earth—they could touch him—and shake his hand and hug him, which I'm sure they must have done a lot of—and he ate with them, he was also very much of heaven. Somehow he appeared in a locked room where they were hiding and just as bizarrely vanished with the doors and windows still closed and locked. And forty days later he ascended on the clouds to heaven. But this is just it. In Jesus God and man had come together. In Jesus heaven and earth came together and we see that especially in his resurrection and in his ascension. God's new Creation began in Jesus. By his blood he has purified us so that we can be a part of it. By the Holy Spirit he's transformed us so that we can begin to live it out.

And that's the point of what John is getting at. We can't fully understand today what God has in store for us tomorrow, but we do get a powerful

sense of it in Jesus and that ought to cause us to live in hopeful faith and if we're living in hopeful faith of the day when all things are made new, it should change *everything* about how we live today. This is what John writes in verse 3:

And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

If we truly believe, if we truly have faith that through Jesus—not to mention through the Church—that God is making all things new. If we truly have faith that Jesus is Lord and that his kingdom is breaking into this world, then we ought to be preparing for it. First, if we're proclaiming the good news that Jesus is Lord it only makes sense to be living in the faith that he truly is. If we aren't, we're hypocrites. But we should also be making use of the grace God has given us to prepare ourselves for the future he has in store for us. When I landed my first job repairing Macintosh computers I was what they call a "power user". I knew a lot about how to *use* a computer, but I didn't know much about the underlying hardware. I had a month to learn before I started and I prepared for the job ahead. When you hired me to be your rector I spent the nine months before I moved here getting to know things about the parish and about the community. I tried to get to know as many of you as possible, or at least to get to know about you. I also researched the Comox Valley and read some history books on our community and on British Columbia so that I would be prepared. And think of what it means if we know that our future is to one day meet Jesus himself. He is pure. Should we not be working to be pure ourselves, especially in light of the fact that God has given us means of grace to do just that?

John says that, yes, this is exactly what we should be doing and in verses 4-10 he gives us a challenge:

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

Sin is lawlessness, John says. We're all guilty. And Jesus came to deal with that. He who was sinless shed his blood to wash away our sin. So good so far. But then the challenge: "No one who abides in Jesus keeps on sinning. In fact, if you keep on sinning you have neither seen nor known Jesus! Whoever makes a practice of sinning—John puts it bluntly—is of the devil, not of Jesus."

Some people read this and worry that John is some kind of legalist, but he's not. The key here is his statement that no one who abides in Jesus keeps on sinning. Abiding in Jesus is John's way of talking about the way in which Christians find our life in Jesus. We've repented, which means turning aside from everything that is not Jesus so that we can give him our loyalty and follow him in faith—we let go of everything else so that we can get a firm grip on him with both hands and if we've done that our character will be transformed. God offers his

promise of forgiveness and life in baptism and when we pass through the baptismal water in faith his forgiveness and life are made ours. He purifies us from our sin and he pours his Spirit into us and makes us new—he gives us a foretaste of the life of the age to come. Jesus transforms us from the inside out. Now, John knew that people who abide in Jesus still sin sometimes. Back in Chapter 2:1 he says that he's writing these things so that we won't sin, but he also writes that if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

No, what John is talking about here is our *character*. That's why he talks about whoever *makes a practice of sinning*. That person is still of the devil. If you make a practice of sinning, you're not abiding in Jesus. If our lives are still characterized by selfishness; if our lives are still characterized by following after idols: power, sex, money, or whatever, instead of Jesus we're still dead in our sins. Jesus' people will sin, but our lives are characterized by a desire not to sin and an attitude of grief and repentance when we do—not because we get caught, but because our sin grieves God.

The devil's people play one tune and Jesus' people play another. Our problem is that we know the devil's tune so well. Sometimes I enjoy listening in on Veronica when she's teaching her piano students at home. It's easy to pick up bad habits when you play an instrument and she spends a lot of her time teaching her students proper technique. Usually they do pretty well, but sometimes they mess up and the old bad habits crop up. Their fingers stumble on the keys, but then they recover, remember what they're supposed to be doing and continue on with their tune the way they're supposed to. The occasional stumble belies the fact that old habits die hard, but the good students recover and get back to playing what they're

supposed to be playing. And so the Christians has been given a new character by Jesus. It's a character of holiness. It's a character that shows the fruit of the Spirit. Sometimes the old character we once knew so well crops up, but then the new character recovers.

Brothers and Sisters, it's a struggle. John wouldn't have written about this in his epistle if it weren't. If you struggle to live the new life Jesus has given, if you struggle to bear the fruit of the Spirit, if you struggle with sin, if you struggle to show love, if you struggle to forgive—John reminds us to live in faithful hope. One day we will see Jesus face-to-face. One day our eyes at last shall see him, through his own redeeming love. And when that happens, everything he has promised will be fulfilled. When that happens the struggle will be over, the tears will be wiped away, and we will be made new.

But remember, this isn't just *our* hope. It's the hope of the world, whether the world knows it or not. As much as we struggle to be the people Jesus has called us to be, we are his temple in the world today. You and I are where God and human beings and where heaven and earth come together. You and I, the Church of Jesus Christ, are the thin space where the world gets a glimpse of the kingdom of God. We are the ambassadors. We are the royal heralds proclaiming to the world that the old gods--Caesar and Aphrodite and Mars and Mammon—power, sex, violence, money—have been defeated at the Cross and that Jesus is Lord. We join together this morning to strengthen and to encourage each other. We join together this morning to be fed on God's Word—to be reminded of his promise. And we come to his Table. Here we look back to the Cross and remember that Jesus has died for the sake of the world, here we remember that Jesus has shed his blood to make us clean, and here in the bread and in the wine Jesus pulls

God's future into the present, here he gives us a foretaste of his new creation. And from this place he sends us into the world enlivened by his grace. You may have come this morning struggling with sin, feeling discouraged, unsure of God's grace, maybe focused more on the struggles of life than the promises of God. You may have come this morning, the spiritual equivalent of those glorious paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, a bit dim and dull, covered with the residue of soot and smoke. But, dear friends, don't leave that way. Let God fill you with his grace here—in word, in sacrament, in prayer, in fellowship—and go back into the world like those paintings restored, vibrant, full of colour, and full of life.

Let us pray: O God, whose blessed Son came into the world that he might destroy the works of the devil and make us children of God and heirs of eternal life: Grant that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves as he is pure; that, when he comes again with power and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*