

Sermon 3, The Propagation of Divine Life, 1 John 1:1-3a

Proposition: The Eternal Life that was with the Father came to Earth in tangible, visible form, and those who saw and touched it now announce that truth.

- I. Eternal Life was with the Father, v. 2
- II. Eternal Life was manifested to the (apostolic) eyewitnesses, vv. 1-2
- III. The eyewitnesses lived with the Life, vv. 1-2
 - A. They heard it, v. 1a
 - B. They saw it, v. 1b
 - C. They touched it, v. 1c
 - D. They were with it from the beginning, v. 1a
- IV. The eyewitnesses saw the Divine Life, v. 2
- V. The eyewitnesses bear witness and announce the Life to you, vv. 2-3a

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have seen the movement of life from the Father to the Son to the disciples to us in the Lord's Supper as we celebrate it week by week. Christ took bread, thanked the Father for it, and then gave it — mirroring the larger pattern in which He receives all that He has from the Father, thanks the Father for it, and then passes it on to us. Well, that pattern is on full display once again in our text this morning. The Father is the source of Eternal Life, which is nearly personified in this passage. He gives Life to His Son, and that life came to earth in visible and tangible form. Those who saw and touched now announce this Life to you and me.

I. Eternal Life was with the Father, v. 2

Our passage this morning starts from the beginning, and it is clear that the beginning from which it starts is the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, when the apostles saw, heard, touched, and beheld the Eternal Life manifested in visible, tangible ways right here on earth. But really, if you keep reading into the next verse, you will see that Jesus' ministry wasn't the beginning of beginnings, wasn't eternity past; rather, it was a result of what happened in eternity past. In eternity past, John tells us, Eternal Life was with the Father.

Now, throughout the verses of our text this morning, John uses neuter pronouns — “that which.” He doesn't say “The One who,” but “that which.” Is he trying to talk about something different than Jesus Christ? Not at all. Indeed, in the next-to-last verse of this letter, he will inform us in so many words that the Father's Son Jesus Christ is the true God and eternal life. He does not talk about Eternal Life here in the prologue as a way of concealing Christ, as a way of hiding Christ, as a way of getting our minds off Christ. Rather, he talks about Christ as Eternal Life to get us thinking about our Savior in a different way.

What would the prologue sound like if we replaced “life” with “Christ”? Actually, such a substitution is easy to do.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of Christ — the Christ was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal Christ which was with the Father and was manifested to us — that which we have seen and heard we declare to you . . . (1Jo 1:1-3 NKJ)

What difference does this reading make? Surely it’s all still true. Surely it’s all still profound. Yet the difference that most stands out to me is that it’s a little bit detached. Christ is someone outside of us. As much as we love Him, He is a different person. As much as we possess Him, we know that we are not Him.

But when we speak of Him as life, that distance shrinks into nothingness because we too have life. We too are alive. We live. Now, the NT is clear that Christ is our life. Paul said that, and John would completely agree with him. Nonetheless, when we talk about life, we think of it as something that’s ours. When you discuss life, I think “Yes, I know what that is; in fact, I have it. I’m alive right now!” And brothers and sisters, when you hear John say that he’s going to be talking about the word of life, that life was manifested, that he’s going to declare the eternal life — you and I should think of this life as something we have that is a gift from God. Because He lives, we shall live also. And so, rather than speaking of the Son being with the Father already in the beginning, John speaks instead of Eternal life being with the Father already in the beginning.

What does this “with the Father” mean? It means that the Son of God who is life is first and foremost a Son. He cannot be imagined, indeed He cannot even exist, without the Father. Sonship is a correlative, dependent relationship; one cannot be Son without there being a Father to beget.

So the Son who is life was with the Father. Already, John is hinting at the theme of fellowship that he’s going to treat at length in the next few verses. Is there such a thing as life alone? Does the Eternal Life exist all by itself for eons? Never! Brothers and sisters, the Father is never alone because the Son is always with Him — and the Son is never alone because the Father is always with Him. “Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me” (Joh 16:32 ESV). To live is to be with the Father. Isn’t that what the next verse says? And here already we see that the one who is Life Himself was with the Father from eternity. We know that Christ rejoiced with His Father, and that His delight was with the sons of men. Indeed, we cannot go beyond the glory of what begotten Wisdom says in Proverbs 8:

The LORD brought me forth at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.
Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no

depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth, before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. When he established the heavens, I was there; when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man. (Pro 8:22-31 ESV)

That togetherness that the Father and the Son who is Life shared together is a mystery and a glory beyond anything we can comprehend. Everything I've said so far is only the barest hint of the richness and joy that marked this relationship between the Father and the Son.

But brothers and sisters, here's where it really starts to get glorious — because the Christian message is not merely that God is happy and fulfilled and never lonely, but the even greater and more profound truth that God has invited us in to share His eternally rewarding Triune life. That is the the movement visible in our text this morning — first the glorious news that Eternal Life was with the Father, and then the news that the life became visible and tangible, and that eyewitnesses saw it, and then finally the news that this life is for us in some profound sense. From the Father through the Son and appropriated in the church by the Spirit: this is the sequence in which all the benefits and blessings of the Christian life come to us, and this is the sequence in which John presents them here.

II. Eternal Life was manifested to the (apostolic) eyewitnesses, vv. 1-2

So we started by seeing the Life that was with the Father; now we see that the Life was manifested. This word was used in classical times for the appearance of the gods among men. A “manifestation” is the appearance of something that ordinarily would have been invisible. It means to show or reveal. God showed us His eternal Life, and that life was in His Son.

You've seen living creatures, but have you ever seen pure Life? Of course not. Life is a property, not a substance. Life is an activity of an organism, not a thing in itself. At least, so we think. And among creatures, that is perfectly true. But brothers and sisters, life is not just an activity for God. He is life. We've said it before: Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He is not just alive, as all of us are; He is life. And so when John and Peter and the rest saw Jesus, they didn't just see a living man. They saw the Living God, the God who is life.

What does that mean? Theologians have said for a long time that God doesn't have properties, but that He is totally completely what we can only think of as His properties. Thus, He is not just loving, but love. He is not just living, but life. He is not just lit, but light. He is not merely just, but justice. In other words, God does not have parts. He is His own being.

And not only is He life; the point here is that Jesus showed that life. To see Jesus was to see pure Life.

How can we wrap our minds around that? We can't. It's beyond anything we can think of. Yes, to see Jesus was to see a living man. But it was more. How can we express it? Well, the best thing we can do is listen to an eyewitness, a man with a front-row seat to Jesus' ministry.

III. The eyewitnesses lived with the Life, vv. 1-2

John says that the Life was manifested. What does that mean, John?

A. They heard it, v. 1a

First of all, he and his fellow eyewitnesses heard it. We have seen throughout our study of Proverbs a relentless focus on the ear as the organ of life: "The ear that listens to life-giving rebuke will dwell among the wise." Jesus says in John's Gospel that those who hear His voice will live. So John and the other apostles and eyewitnesses heard life. They heard Him talking. They listened to His words, and they knew that in His words was life.

B. They saw it, v. 1b

Furthermore, they saw the Life with their eyes. They had the privilege of seeing Jesus every day, indeed, of living with Him. Now, many people saw Jesus and didn't believe that they had seen the Life. But John and his fellow apostles not only saw, but believed. With the eyes of the body they saw Jesus as man; with the eye of faith they saw Him as the eternally begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. And so they saw the life.

C. They touched it, v. 1c

And, claim of claims! — they touched Life with their hands. John leaned on His bosom. Maybe he got to arm-wrestle Jesus, or shake His hand. And even in this, the most earthy of the five senses, that Life that Jesus was and is manifested itself clearly to John. He had literally touched Life — the force that created the world, the one who sustains it all in being. Thomas Aquinas says that when the sun is shining, the air is filled with light. The air is bright, in other words, because it participates in the brightness of the sun. But when the sun goes down, the air gets dark. It is no longer filled with light, for it is no longer able to participate in the brightness of the sun. In the same way, says the friar from Aquino, God's light shines on every being He has created. They all exist only so long as they participate in His being; were He to stop shining His being upon them, they would go dark. They would cease to be.

Men and women, you who sit before me to hear the words of life this morning, your life would wink out instantly were you to stop receiving life from Jesus Christ. If somehow you stopped receiving the divine life by participation, you would live no longer. Yet the power of God radiates being to everything that is. He overlooks nothing; He never will accidentally forget to preserve something in being. We know that. But the greater and more amazing thing is that the divine life that does all this was enfleshed, could be touched, *was touched*. The God who made the heavens and the earth and who sustains them let Himself be handled by the hands of Peter, James, John, and Judas Iscariot.

D. They were with it from the beginning, v. 1a

Most amazing of all, perhaps, if we can even comprehend this, is that the eyewitnesses to the Eternal Life were with it from the beginning! That's the first phrase of the whole book,

reminiscent of the Gospel of John's "in the beginning," which in turn is reminiscent of the book of Genesis' opening lines.

What does that mean? How could they have been with the Life from the beginning? The answer is that the eyewitnesses were with the life from the beginning of when He was manifested. The phrase is used with this meaning in John's Gospel: "Then they said to Him, "Who are You?" And Jesus said to them, "Just what I have been saying to you from the beginning" (Joh 8:25). This isn't a reference to what Christ had been saying to them since eternity past, but rather to what He had told them since the beginning of His ministry. So here in 1 John, the phrase is a reference to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It was in His earthly ministry as chronicled in the Four Gospels that Jesus Christ was supremely manifested as the Eternal Life who was with the Father.

IV. The eyewitnesses saw the Divine Life, v. 2

And so, at risk of repeating myself, I make once again the key point that the eyewitnesses saw the divine life. They saw it!

Every commentator makes reference to how odd the style of these opening four verses is. What kind of work begins with a "that which" and doesn't get to the main verb until dozens of words and a parenthesis later? But far more odd than the style of these verses is their content. How do you convey the fact that you saw eternal Life? John chose to convey it in this way, by departing from normal literary conventions. He did so, I think, because his message is so far from normal. It's a strange message, and it requires a strange syntax to make it believable. You can't say in normal language "I saw life." You have to make it different so that people actually believe you. Brothers and sisters, the eyewitnesses saw the divine life. John saw eternal life when he saw Christ.

V. The eyewitnesses bear witness and announce the Life to you, vv. 2-3a

Well, we wrap up our sermon this morning with the final movement of this life. First it went from the Father to the Son with Him. Then it went from the Son to the eyewitnesses with Him. Did you catch that movement? It was manifested, and they saw its manifestation. That's the movement from Jesus to the apostles. And now it comes from the apostolic eyewitnesses to us. They bear witness — that is, they testify formally, as in a court of law. They say on oath "This is what we have seen: we have seen that Jesus is eternal life."

And not only do they testify; they announce it. They openly proclaim that Jesus is life. That's what this letter is about. It is about Christ, the Christ who is Eternal Life — not life far away and disconnected from us, but life right in front of us, life seen as profoundly real and profoundly part of us.

Brothers and sisters, do you want to live with the Father? Then listen to the proclamation of John the apostle and eyewitness of the Messiah who is life. Don't ignore it. Pay careful heed to it, and you will live. Amen.