

Welcome to the New Life Podcast, a ministry of New Life Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, New York. Today we have this week's sermon, preached by Tim LaCroix, our senior pastor. Join us for worship each week at 10 o'clock at 950 Danby Road, Ithaca, New York. You can also visit us on our website, www. Now here's this week's sermon.

00:43

A reading from the first epistle of John, chapter 1, verses 5 through 10.

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This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

01:19

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. This is the word of the Lord.

01:39

I read a piece in the New York Times recently, and it was an Ask the Ethicist. They have these opportunities to write in and ask the ethicist questions, and they have various philosophers and ethicists who will answer their questions according to the common understanding of ethics today. What caught my eye with this particular, and I always like to read them just to see what the ethicist will say.

02:05

because I usually have a slightly different opinion. But this one caught my eye because the person, because of the person's question, it was very interesting. It wasn't like a lot of the other questions. Most of them are like family stuff, relational stuff, work stuff, you know. This one was a little different. This is what the person wrote. They said that they, the person said that he grew up Roman Catholic but he no longer believes.

02:31

In fact, he would describe himself as an atheist. But this is what he said. He said, boy, oh boy, do I love the artistic output of Christianity. Box B minor mass, the Fari Requiem, St. Paul's Cathedral. Now I'll have to take issue with St. Paul's Cathedral. I think it's just a little too cold for my taste. But anyway, he likes it. St. Paul's Cathedral, he says, all these lift my spirit. I love a beautiful Christian service. Where else will you hear an organ like that?

03:00

Actors talk about working from the outside in, in which a physical position unlocks inner emotions. For me, kneeling does this. I don't pray, but the act of kneeling creates humility and gratitude. It does me good. That's kind of the purpose of it. And then he says, there's the lovely sense of community in a congregation. He says, I'll never be converted.

03:23

So I guess I'm lying when I turn up at a service and recite the Creed and sing the hymns as lustily as anyone else. Am I hurting anyone by doing this? Is it for want of a better word, a sin? I didn't actually read what Ephesus said on this one.

03:39

I was interested kind of more in what the comments would say. So I went to the comments. And most of the comments were kind of what you would expect. Of course, it's not wrong. What's the point of church anyway but to go and listen and hear the word and participate? Some of the more overtly religious people may have said, it's certainly OK if you go. Just let the priest's leadership know that that's your situation and don't take communion. But this one response was different from those.

04:08

And it certainly caught my attention. This is what the comment said. It said, you need not subscribe to religious magical thinking to enjoy and honor the art and music such thinking has brought forth from humanity. This is.

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kind of a version of our reform principle of all truth is God's truth, but the opposite, you know. You know, we all often say all truth is God's truth, all beauty is God's beauty, even if the person doesn't believe in God is still God's beauty. This is the opposite. Even if you do believe in something, you can still appreciate it. You don't have to believe in what they believe in in order to appreciate it. But

then he continues, or I don't know the gender of the comment, or the person continues, should you wish to participate, reciting the creed, etc., what does it matter?

04:53

In this context, there is no such thing as sin, because God does not exist. Joy in humanity does. Now that got my attention because I knew I was going through 1 John, and I knew, as we saw last week, one of the main issues that the false teachers were teaching is that there is no sin. Right?

05:13

And you probably are familiar with this way of thinking if you were here two falls ago in the fall of 2023, because we went through some of these questions and one of the things that we discovered is that for those who are atheists, the atheistic writers like Christopher Hitchens and others, those that draw atheism to its logical conclusion, who are consistent in their atheism, would admit that without a creator there is no meaning, there is no purpose, there is no right, there is no wrong, there is no good, there is no evil.

05:43

is no sin. This is sort of what this commenter is saying. God doesn't exist so there is no sin. Do what you want. It doesn't matter. The text today, we have an assertion about reality that is different from the one I just read. We have an assertion and we find it here in verse 5 and the assertion is this that God is light and in him there's no darkness at all.

06:12

The assertion is there is a God, that God created all things. In the first four verses, as we saw last week, John claims to have seen that person, to have heard that person with his ears, to have touched that person with his hands, that that person is Jesus and he's the word of life. And he says here that there is a God, there is a God who created all things, and that God is light.

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and in him there's no darkness at all. This is probably the theme of the entire book of 1 John, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

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This is a claim, this is a truth claim, against the claim that there is no such thing as darkness, not physical darkness, but moral darkness, that there is no such thing as good, there is no such thing as evil. In fact, as we discovered before when we talked about this, there are some atheists who are naturalists and believe in science and study in the fields of neurology or biology who believe that there's even not even such a thing as free will.

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that all the decisions that we make, all the choices that we make, are just chemical reactions and they're the result of the randomness of the universe. And so those folks would say, we don't have free will either.

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And the moral implications of that are vast. Because what that means is, is not only is there no good or evil, but if I don't have free will, if my choices are not chosen by me, but by chemical reactions in my brain, then there's no way I can say that any choice that I do is good or bad. There's really no way to say that the worst things that humanity have done are really the fault of anyone. The genocide.

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child sexual abuse, the worst things we can imagine, that's not their fault, it's just random biological chemical reactions in response to stimuli. John's claim is drastically different from that. He says there is light, there is dark, there is good, there is evil, there is a God.

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For most of us, most of us in our culture, even in our country today, aren't that strict of a kind of an atheist, right? There's very little.

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The minority of people who would say that they are the atheists and they have that sort of logical consistency, scientific consistency. Most people would describe themselves as agnostic or spiritual and what most people would recognize is they do believe in a creator. They do believe in a creator. And John's claim is that if there is a creator, that God is light and in him there's no darkness at all. That's his claim. If there is a creator, if there is a person who created all that we see.

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And the more we learn about the universe, the more we learn about the universe is vastness, the immensity of it, the number of stars, the number of galaxies, the amount of power that is contained in this universe.

09:12

The entity that created that had to have been immense, bordering, at least bordering on infinitude. That is a massively powerful being that created all the things that we see. This is John's claim. If there is so much light in the universe, John says it comes from God. God is light. And if God is light, there is no darkness in God at all. Now, he is making a claim against.

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the false teachers, those who were teaching a different kind of belief, something similar to what we now call Gnosticism. There were versions of this teaching going back millennia that basically said the world was created by an evil god. This is one way to deal with the problem of evil, the problem of...

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of how a loving God could allow evil in the world is to say that actually the God who created this world is evil. And we are actually trying to escape this evil world to come in contact with the true God who is good.

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John says, no, the world, the God who created this world is light. The world, the God that created this universe is good. This is one of the foundational claims of the scripture from the very beginning, that the God is good and he created the world good, that it later fell because of our own sin. And so John stakes this claim not only about God, but he draws this implication out to the world of light.

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a moral claim and a relational claim. And if you look at this text, verses 5 through 10, all three of these things are intertwined. They're interwoven in these verses. The idea that God exists and He's pure light, pure holiness, pure radiance. This means that we have fallen short of that glory. We fall short of that light and that's called sin. And then also the idea of fellowship is bound up in it, interwoven in these verses to say that this is how we have life.

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So I want to try to unweave it a bit and draw out some of the points here today so that we can understand a little bit of what John is saying and what he's claiming. So the first thing, the first point is this. God is light. In him there's no darkness at all. Therefore there is such a thing as good and there is such a thing as evil.

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the idea of light and darkness. And the notion of God being light and all light coming from God, God being the source of all light, is his claim then that God is pure light, and in him there's no darkness at all. It's a claim not only of physical physicality, it's a claim of morality. I once heard this story about.

12:03

this basketball player, his name was Brian Scalabrini. Now Brian Scalabrini was a very mediocre NBA basketball player. He played for 11 years. They called him White Mamba.

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If you know anything about basketball, Kobe Bryant's nickname was Black Mamba because he was sleek, he was skillful, he was deadly. This is the white mamba. He's six foot nine, he's awkward, you know. This guy put together an 11-year basketball career of basically riding the bench. His career average, I think, was about 10 minutes a game. His career average was about three points a game. And so people kind of like...

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made fun of this guy and he later got involved in talk radio media so he helps call games for the Celtics, one of the teams he played for. And guys, you know, they would get bold and they would make this claim that they could take Scalabrini. They could take him, you know. I'm good enough. If we had one-on-one, I could beat him. Scalabrini, he bristled at this. He was annoyed at this. And so he basically issued a challenge. They made a portmanteau and called it

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Scalabrini challenge. And what that was is he said, actually, he made this claim. He says, actually, I'm closer to LeBron than you are to me. Therefore, I will take on anybody in the Boston area.

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And so they had this challenge, this radio program. All these people had to send in videos of them playing basketball, so they wanted to pick four really good basketball players. So they chose four. One of them actually was formerly a bench player for Syracuse, so had some college basketball experience. So these four guys, they're like,

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the best rec players that you could think of. Some of us played intramural ball, and there were guys that we knew that played intramural ball that we knew could walk onto the team. That's the kind of players that they, average joes that are really good at basketball for an intramural rec league kind of guy. So they're gonna play one-on-one, they're playing two-eleven, by ones and twos you have to win by two. The total score of all four games was 44 to six.

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The first game, Scalabrini started playing. The guy got three points on him before he got his legs under him, and then he ratted off 11 points in a row.

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won the game. The next guy beat 11-0. The next guy beat 11-0. So 33 straight unanswered points against the first three. By the fourth one, he was getting a little tired so the guy got out two shots but then he beat him also 11-3. Four guys dispensed two without scoring at all. Two by managing to get two buckets in. 44-6. Now, what's the point of this story? You know, the point of this story is that there is a vast difference between the average guy and even Brian Scalabrini, right?

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The point of this story is that a lot of us will look at God and think about God and maybe shake our fist at God and maybe ask God why and say, why is this? Who could you be? How could you be? And when we do that, when we challenge God, when we question God,

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We think that we are somehow closer to God. We're kind of like these average Joes that think that they can even, they can dispense an NBA basketball player. But if the difference between a really good basketball player and Brian Scalabrini is huge, what's the difference between them and LeBron? What would happen if they played LeBron?

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Well, they'd probably be injured in the hospital because he would so forcibly dunk on them that they would be done. The score, the game would be over. It would be a massive difference. But if the difference between that and them is great, great enough for us to laugh at and think, oh, that's a major difference. What is the difference between the light that we create, a light of a light bulb, and even the light of the sun? The light of a light bulb that we have in this room is about the light of the.

16:00

direct sunlight is 2,000 times brighter. We could stare at a light bulb, we could stare at it for a couple hours, maybe we'd get a headache because these bulbs are fluorescent, so they kind of resonate. But how long could you stare at the sun?

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You should not stare at the sun more than a second or two, because why it's going to burn your eyeballs. The sun's light is so bright, it's 93 million miles away. But it's so bright that if we stand in its light, unprotected, it will kill us. The difference between this light and the sun is so vast. And yet this sun is only one sun, only one star, amongst trillions in our universe.

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There are stars in this universe that are up to 300,000 times brighter than the sun. So if our sun would appear in front of these super bright stars, it would look black. It would look like polka dot. John says that God is light. If the source of all the light and all the power in the universe is God, in comparison to God, even the brightest person will show up like a polka dot against the brightness of God.

17:09

God is light, and in him there's no darkness at all. What does this light do? This light does three things. The first thing is the light reveals sin. This is the definition that John wants to give forth for sin. Sin is the difference from the light that is revealed by the light. You know, when a painter is painting a wall, and if you've ever painted a wall,

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especially if you're trying to paint over a wall, maybe repair the wall. What a lot of painters will do is they'll get a really bright light and focus it on the wall. Because what happens if they do that? If they shine that super bright light at the wall, they see all the imperfections. All the imperfections. So they're able to fix them, they're able to paint over it and make it look well for normal light. God's light is like this as well. When God's light shines on us, it reveals all of our imperfections.

18:04

Like, you know, they say that being on TV adds 10 pounds or whatever. When you see someone in the light of day on H, especially high definition TV, you see all their imperfections, right, in the studio, because there's much more light. Light reveals sin. What is sin? John's claim is that sin is what is different from the light. That it is not light. It is darkness. How we define sin in our tradition.

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and the Westminster Catechism is sin is any lack of conformity or transgression of the law of God. In other words, John's claim, and our explanation of it, is there is a moral standard. It is set by God. God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. Therefore there is a moral standard. God has rules. God has a law. Now, it is very clear that John's opponents were claiming there was no sin.

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And they were probably singling in, they're probably narrowing it down on individual things, whether they were sins or not, because that's what we tend to do. I think it's interesting that John doesn't do that.

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Nowhere in his letter, and not that it's wrong, because Paul does it in other places. But nowhere in this letter does he list out various sins. John wants to really drill down to the fundamentals. He wants to draw us away from the things that would distract us from thinking about the true truth. And the true truth is that God is light, and in him there's no darkness at all. The true truth is that sin is anything that is not light and is revealed by the light. And if we accept that claim,

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that if there is a God that created all things, that God must be infinitely vast, that God must be, that created such beauty and goodness in the world, must be infinite in goodness and glory, then anything that deviates from that God is what we call sin. So John says in verse 6, if we have fellowship with him while we walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

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And then he says in verse 8, if we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. And then in verse 10, if we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. All of this is related to the light. The light reveals our sin. The light shows that there is such a thing as sin.

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And so John wants to make sure that he makes this very clear, that there is such a good thing as good and evil, and there is such a thing as sin. Now why is this important? This is important because the source of evil and pain and sorrow in this world is often our own choices. The ethical implications of a strict atheism that says there's no free will even at all.

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I think even most of us can grasp the implications of such a system. That there's no way to hold anyone accountable for what they do, even the worst possible things. And if we acknowledge that there is at least some things that we would call sin, how we define that then comes into question. John's claim is we define it by the light. God is light and in him there's no darkness at all. If we do anything that is in darkness, that's sin. So the first point is that light reveals our sin.

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The second point is that the light cleanses us. So God doesn't leave us there. We may think that that's what religion is about, strict religion, pointing out sin, leaving us there to grovel in our shame. God never stops there. You go back to the very beginning in Genesis chapter 3, after Adam and Eve sinned against God. What is God's first response? What would our first, what would my first response be?

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If one of my kids had sinned in a way that broke the whole world, I'd probably go and say, what are you doing? Why did you do that? What is God's response in Genesis chapter 3? Where are you? God seeks them. God looks for Adam and Eve. His response is not to throw lightning bolts and destroy them. His response is not even to shame them. His response is to find them because he wants to forgive them. He wants to cleanse them. Yes, he does hold them accountable.

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He does hold us accountable for our sin. There are consequences for our sin. But God's first response is forgiveness and mercy. He goes and finds them so that he may forgive them. And in context of what John is saying, is that the light cleanses. He says in...

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In verse seven, if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his son cleanses us from all sin. The light cleanses. He then says in verse nine, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. As we've been saying in our confession of sin, light cleanses. It not only reveals, it cleanses. If you leave something out in the light, it cleanses.

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cloth, or something that has color to it, it'll bleach it out. You can leave things out in the light to disinfect it. The light will kill it. It will kill things that are germs and other things. And so the light of God not only reveals, it forgives, and it cleanses. God doesn't leave us in the situation where we're wrestling with the shame of our sin.

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He makes a way. And of course, John's claim is that way is Christ who shed his blood, John says, to forgive our sins. He gave his own life so that we could be forgiven. But the third thing that's in here, and I think this is perhaps one thing that we don't usually think about from this passage, is that the light brings fellowship. The light.

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reveals the darkness, the light brings cleansing for our sin, but the light brings fellowship. Fellowship is bound up all in this passage. He says in verse 6, if we say we have fellowship with him, God, and then in verse 7, if we walk in the light, we have fellowship with one another. And then obviously, if we confess our sins and he cleanses us, that fellowship is restored. There's an aspect of light.

24:13

So long as we're not afraid of it, so long as it's not a danger to us, a harm to us, there's an aspect of light that's inviting.

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Think of the campfire. We're drawn to the campfire. We love to look at it. It draws us in. We gather around it, and we're brought into fellowship with each other. Think of just a simple example of moths to a light. Bugs are drawn to it. Light draws people in. I thought it was interesting when talking to the kids about being afraid of the dark. A little nightlight can make you feel safe. A little nightlight can draw you in, because it takes some of the darkness away. There is a warmth to God's light.

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warmth to his light that draws us in. And once we have acknowledged our sins, and once we have been cleansed and forgiven of our sins, we are welcome to come into the light. It is no longer a danger. We love it. And we have fellowship with God and with each other." So John's claim is not simply moral. It's not simply existential or metaphysical. It is also relational. He says this brings us life.

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And I think this is where it really hits home for all of us. How many of us, how many of us are seeking life? How many of us are seeking intimacy in life? And John's claim is that intimacy and life come through fellowship, rich fellowship with God and fellowship with one another. That life, John will continue to say, comes from Christ, but the light brings it and God is that light.

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You know, when I moved here, let's just put it this way, before I moved here, I didn't think I needed sunlight.

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You guys already know what I'm about to say. You know, I prided myself in being the dark, having a dark office, and in grad school, there would be days I never came out. I'd stay in this interior office and be there all day till the dark came again. I didn't think I needed light. Well, man, I found out last winter I needed it. It hit me like a ton of bricks. I started feeling the darkness, feeling it. Isn't it interesting? Because we are children of light. We need this light.

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In the summertime, the light, you know, it's ubiquitous. We don't have to seek it. I was talking to my therapist, and she advised that I go out before noon. She said, even on a cloudy day, it's still a lot of light coming through. And just take a 20-minute walk. Spend some time in the light. Your face absorbs it. You feel better. You know, God created us as children of light. We need that light. How much more do we need the light of God? This is a metaphor, a reality, right?

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that we need like, just like our souls need it. John is not getting into the specifics that people want to debate.

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He is drilling down to the essence, the core of our being. He's saying, God is light, you need this light. This light will bring you life, this light will bring you light, will bring you joy, this light will bring intimacy into your life. Pursue that and everything else will take care of itself. That's John's central message. And that's the message we'll be exploring over the next few weeks. Let's pray.

27:33

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