

I. Introduction

A. T.S. Elliot, the 20th century poet and playwright, famously claimed that April is the “cruellest month.” This week I did some reading to find out why and learned that he was mad at April because it teased us with hints of Spring but often dashes them just as quickly. In Chicago it can still snow.

B. I think December is the cruellest month for a handful of reasons:

1. There is often a disconnect between the persistent, engineered cheerfulness of the season and the reality on the ground. It seems as though 21st century Christmas makes promises that it can't full – and sets people up to be disappointed.

a) When you are five or ten years old, a present might change your life for a few days, but probably not for more than that. And by the time we're twenty, we now it's not going to change much.

b) Additionally, Christmas tends to be one of the times of year when people reflect, and that often highlights the fact that things have not necessarily improved. “I am still in the same job;” “I'm still single;” or “Our marriage is still troubled;” “I'm still caught in a cycle of sin or addictions.”

c) And of course Christmas draws attention to those who are no longer around.

2. Early in my tenure as Senior Pastor I came to realize that the week between Christmas and New Years was often filled with lots of drama. Because people would be depressed, they'd be drinking too much, there would be stress over debt, there would be fights between extended family, depression and domestic violence.

C. And while I'm depressing you – while I am rehearsing the bad news – let me note that this year Christmas is again unfolding in a world that is plagued by violence and war and poverty and rancor.

1. Shrill political speeches fill the media. There are pain-laden protests over racism in the streets. The paper is full of reports of terrorism and fear. Millions are homeless. Refugees keep looking for a safe and welcoming place to call home.

2. All of which makes today sound a lot like the first Christmas. After all, Jesus was born into an outcast community of Galileans. There was suspicion about the legitimacy of his birth. His parents were poor. Shortly after he was born they had to flee political tyranny and live as refugees in another country. His homeland was under military occupation.

D. There are and there were problems in the world. And this time of year seems to underline them. As I said, I think December is the cruelest month. But with that in mind, I am excited for us to lean into some good news. Game-changing good news. It has to deal with one of the big, overarching promises found in the Bible.

E. This series is framed around various names for Jesus. There are five sermons – one for each of the weeks of Advent plus Christmas Eve. As we were meeting to map this out, someone advanced the idea that we should use the word Peace to highlight various names for Jesus.

1. Last week Anson took the letter P – the first letter in Peace – and talked about the Prince of Peace.
2. Next week we'll turn to Revelation and look at A, with the title Alpha and Omega.
3. The C will be used for Christ, which means Messiah
4. The final E is for Emmanuel.
5. The problem all along was coming up with a second name for Jesus that starts with the letter E. I couldn't come up with any and went back to the team and said so. At which point Garth said, "What about Eternal Life."
6. I thought, what about it? It's great. I'm for it. Jesus secures it for us, but it's not his name.
7. At which point he said, "Yes it is. Read I John 1:2"
8. So I did. And he's right.

F. I knew eternal life was a big theme in John.

1. In John 3:16 we are told that God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.
2. In John 5:24: "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.
3. In John 6:27: Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.
4. In John 10:28: My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.

II. I John 1:1-4. As you are turning there let me note a few things:

A. There are Christmas passages that describe what took place on that first Christmas. They deal with shepherds and angels and stars and wise men. That is not what we are looking at today. In I John we are looking at why the things that happened happened.

B. I John was written by the same person that wrote the Gospel of John. He wrote the Gospel of John to persuade people to put their trust in Christ. He later wrote I John to help those who had made a commitment to Christ but were confused or disappointed at how their life was unfolding; and also to address one of the first big challenges to the church, a heresy called Gnosticism.

C. One of the bad ideas that spread throughout the early church was something called Gnosticism. The Greek word Gnosis means “knowledge” and the Gnostics were the first to try to undermine Christmas. Some of you got mad at Starbucks for changing their Christmas cups – how dare they!

A. Gnosticism took many forms. The specific form that they were up against was Docetism, which said, Jesus didn’t really become a man, it just looked like he did. He did not become one of us and he did not die in our place. We are not saved by his substitutionary death, we are saved by secret information, which we have. (It’s weird for us to think about it much today because almost no one argues that Jesus was God but not man. Those who want to argue claim that He was man but not God.)

D. Well, the Gnostics argued that the incarnation itself didn’t happen. God did not become man. Which is the big idea that undergirds everything. Jesus was God from eternity past. At the incarnation he became a man as well.

E. The Old Testament opens with the idea that God made us in his image. The New Testament opens with the idea that He then took on that image in order to rescue us. He added divinity to humanity. Somehow while remaining fully God – albeit with some of his attributes on some sort of hold – he became fully man. Not half God and half man. Not man some of the time and God some of the time. Not God in a human shell. But fully God.

B. Anyway, John is writing this letter to shut down Gnostic thinking.¹

¹ Today we have other forms of Gnosticism in play – that is, people are always making these false divisions between the sacred and the secular; Sunday and Monday; things that God cares about and things he cares less about. As I have said before, God is not particularly interested in your spiritual life. He’s not. He is one hundred percent interested in one hundred percent of your life. A different kind of Gnostic thought invades our world today.

III. **V1: That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.**

IV. So, John opens stating: **That which was from the beginning**

A. He is referring to Jesus, whose life didn't start at conception, but who has always existed. He is God – fully God, equal to the Father.

V. **V1: That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.** Two things to see here:

A. First, the statement, “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched” – is a direct attack on the Docetism. John says, I heard him, I saw him and I touched him. The Gnostics are wrong.

1. As an aside, Bob Yarborough – a New Testament scholar – argues that, “The variety of verbs correspond to the variety of witness attestation in ancient jurisprudence. When John writes ‘we saw him with our eyes, heard him with our ears, touched him with our hands,’ he is not making conversation but virtually swearing a deposition.

2. John is saying, it really happened. God really became a man. Christmas is not a fantasy. If it is you are on your own. But it's not. Jesus showed up to rescue us.

3. By the way, I occasionally hear people say something crazy like. “It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. Doctrine doesn't matter. What matters is that you live a good life.” I try not to get too snippy when they say that, but what I want to say is, “You do realize that you are talking nonsense, don't you. When you say doctrine doesn't matter, that's a doctrinal statement, right.”

a) Now, what I think you mean is, you think you're good enough on your own to earn your way to heaven. Good luck with that. This is called salvation by works. I do not believe that it works. And I think that if you slowed down long enough to think this through you'd realize that one of two things is going to characterize the rest of your life. Let's set Jesus aside for a moment, because you are not paying attention to His many claims. You are heading down a path that says, “I can earn my way.” Which will lead you to live in fear that you might fall short, or to be pretty deluded.

b) You will either be full of fear and insecurity. You will either realize that you are not getting it done and be fearful. Or you will be full of pride and disdain for others because you think you are better than everyone else.

B. The second thing to note is that John and 1 John sound a lot like, especially in their opening. This is not surprising. It has the same writer so he uses many of the same words.

1. In John 1 he opens with that magisterial, “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

2. And Word – logos. John was writing to the Greeks and they loved ideas and theory and philosophy and logos was one of their favorite words. It referred to the logical, rational principle that governed the world – this invisible, intelligent, integrating force behind the universe.

3. Biblical translators have struggled to figure out what English word to use to convey this idea. John Calvin wrote about Divine Speech. I read one New Testament scholar who said that if John were writing today he might have translated logos as “higher power.”

C. In I John, John uses the same word – logos – but he adds to it. Now we read about the “word of life.”

VI. Reading on: That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. V2: The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

A. In John 1, Jesus is “the Word.” In I John 1:1 He is the “Word of Life.” And then here in I John 1:2 He is called Eternal Life.

1. Please note, right here we are not being told that He has the life or that He gives eternal life, but that He is eternal life. Men and women, this is one of things that makes Christmas unique. In every other religion the founder is a sage – they are a prophet of some sort that tells us what to do to gain eternal life. Do this and this and this and you will gain it. In John 14 Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” And here he says that he is eternal life.

2. This is dense. John is packing a lot of big ideas in just a few words. Jesus is God. Jesus is life. Jesus is eternal life.

3. We do not simply follow his example and hope that by doing so we can get where we want to go. We do want to follow His example as best we can – but we need more than a path to follow, we need his help. To quote Augustine, “the Son of God became a Son of Man so that we might become the sons and daughters of God.

B. One of the things to note here is that eternal life means is that love really matters.

1. The secular world says, “this is all there is.”

a) Francis Crick, the Cambridge professor and Nobel Laureate who – along with Watson – cracked the double helix code for DNA (I’ve eaten at the little pub in Cambridge where they made the announcement of their discovery.) Crick wrote: “You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and ambitions, are all no more than the behavior of a vast collection of nerve cells.” There is no such thing as love, it’s all chemistry. If this life is all there is, Crick is right. Many say this is true, but virtually no one lives that way.

b) If what we see is all there is, then Macbeth is right when he says, “life but a shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour on the stage and then is heard no more. Life is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury and signifying nothing.”

2. If we are just the accidental exhaust of space plus time plus chance then life has no meaning. But John is saying, “No. There is a logical, rational, intelligent and loving power behind the universe. And he showed up as one of us in order to provide a way to eternal life.

3. Christmas tells you that what your heart tells you is true is true. Love is not just a chemical response. Love pre-existed the world, created the world and redeemed the world.

VII. Reading on. **The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. V3 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.**

A. It is possible to enter into a relationship with Jesus now. And this is part of what is meant by eternal life. Let me be clear – those who know Christ are promised heaven and heaven – a world that works as designed, where God is present, the place Jesus said he was going ahead to prepare for us – should shape every moment of every day. We know how this ends. It will likely get harder before it gets better. But it will get better.

B. If you have been around here long you've heard me jump on this soap box. We need an eternal perspective. We need to live today in light of forever. We need to focus our eyes past the horizon. What we see is not all there is. Heaven is more real than earth. Not the cartoonish clouds where you sit practicing the harp, but some transformed, remade earth that is full of the glory of God. It is real.

C. But the way Jesus talks about eternal life is bigger than that. There is an opportunity to lean into that reality now – there is a quality of life lived in communion with God now that is greater than we generally experience. There is a sense in which eternal life starts now. The point of this life isn't to die so we can go to heaven. It is to start embracing the promise now and living in light of the values of the kingdom of God now.

D. We need to drink more deeply of those promises – when we do, the world looks dark but it's not depressing. It comes into focus as a place in desperate need of the hope and love that comes from God and we see that we have a chance to share that with others. And that ushers in its own joy.

VIII. Men and women, it is not enough just to believe in God, Christmas means God has gone to infinite lengths to be near to you. And that you will be fully restored in his presence in the age to come. Let that be your key Christmas thought.

IX. I recently began reading a Dorothy Sayers novel.

A. Sayers was a friend of C.S. Lewis. She was one of the first female graduates of Oxford. She was a gifted writer, of mysteries. And one of her most famous characters was Lord Peter Wimsey. Well, at one point, Sayers introduces a character into the series – a woman named Harriet Vane, who was one of the first female graduates of Oxford and a writer of mysteries and who falls in love w/ Peter Wimsey. And she cares for him. Most Sayers scholars agree, she wrote herself into the play in order to take care of a character that she created and loved.

B. The love who created the world and created us and knows we are in a mess and he has loved us and wrote himself into the play. And when we embrace him we gain eternal life – that doesn't start when we die, but starts now and plays out forever.