

The battle shall continue, but... A sermon preached at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC on November 13, 2015 by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons: PSALM 46

I JOHN 2:18-29

The theme of this first letter of John's is that placed as we are in this difficult and trying world, We must never forget that the great thing we have as God's people is fellowship and communion with God, God the Father, and God the Son through the Holy Spirit ((1:3)

John then goes on to remind his readers of certain things that may rob them of that fellowship.

We have looked at these over the past few weeks.

Failure to keep the commandments

Or to love our brothers and sisters in Christ

Being too much in the world – to the point of side barring

God and his ways in every aspect of our daily lives

John though does not stop there in listing the things that can compromise that fellowship with God

The dangers we face following Jesus,

Standing upon his promises,

Come not only from within ourselves – our thought life, our tongues, our actions or reactions to things around us and how we react to people around us within the community of faith and beyond it.

A great danger says John is found in the very atmosphere in which we live as believers.

Indeed, the danger which John highlights in this morning's reading arises in and from the life of the Church herself.

In other words,

Not only do we have certain things about which to be vigilant in our own lives as Christians,
 As a community of the faithful,
 We also have to be wary and vigilant about common general dangers that may well emerge from within the community itself

In this morning's lesson John outlines the danger – the battle.

But and of critical importance, he also points to how the battle is to be fought,
 How we are to engage in the battle.

First, let's unpack a couple of words and phrases that are bound up in the battle, the spiritual struggle before us as God's people

Children, it is the last hour

Is this declaration a literal one?

Certainly as one reads the early letters of Paul – especially his two letters to the Thessalonian church there are words and phrases that say Paul and his audience truly believed that they would see Christ's earthly return in their lifetimes. The later correspondence is not as filled with such expressions, but they do speak of Jesus' return.

We are now close to 2 millennia since Jesus' ascension and we are still waiting!

Is John's phrase empty rhetoric?

No, most certainly not

Jesus himself said

a) He would return

b) We would not know the specifics of when.

Our Old Testament professor at Knox and mentor, Stan Walters once said in relation to all the hype around a collection of end time books being written in the late '60's

and into the 70's – "We may still be among the first Christians – though closer than when John wrote the letter.

So, I believe the phrase '**it is the last hour**' refers to that time between Jesus ascension and his actual return. In other words, the NOW, the present.

What John is saying then in verse 3 is" there is a sense of immediacy in this matter

Listen up – this is important.

Be serious and vigilant.

Another phrase or word that needs to be unpacked is found in verse 18

As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come (vs. 18)

Antichrist is a term only used by John

To whom or to what is John referring?

From this text, it is I believe clear that the antichrist is a person, a believer who denies the full deity of Jesus

Or makes Jesus out to be less than He declared Himself to be when he claimed to be God Himself.

The antichrist then is a person, who denies that Jesus is God's Son,

The appointed Saviour of the World.

AND proceeds to tell others within the community that this is the case.

Look,

No matter what else such a person or such people may know, if they err on this most essential of all truth,

They will be living a lie and misleading the people about the absolute truth of life

Anti – Against – Christ

So antichrist is not a force from outside the community – it is a sometime reality that rises up from within the community of faith.

Such people certainly existed with John wrote his letter – read first century history.

This though is now Herb – surely people who fit the definition of antichrist do not exist today do they?

Yes, they most certainly do.

And for many, it all begins so innocently and subtleties as believers begin to question things like the virgin birth, or the miracles, or the healings.

And the questionings and doubts do not lead to seeking out answers and being content that the answer may be “this is part of the mystery of God”

Rather, the doubts and the questionings lead to greater doubt about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit being active in our lives, in the world today

Out of this doubt there arise beliefs like – Jesus was a good man, a moral teacher, but not divine.

--God really
is not interested in our everyday lives

Shortly into my ministry, I overheard a Sunday school teacher say to his class that while Jesus did die on a cross, but because he was the Son of God, he really did not suffer or feel pain!

At the time, I knew there was something wrong about what he said – but couldn’t put my finger on it.

I had to go home,

Pull out my Williston Walker, History of the Christian Church – then the basic history text at Knox College

Look under heresies and there it was – 1st and 2nd centuries – Gnosticism

Matter is evil said the Gnostics

Therefore Jesus could not be true God and true man because Christ as God's son cannot be evil.

Jesus therefore only appeared to be a man, but his humanity was an illusion

Jesus as the Son of God therefore did not really human pain on the Cross.

Gotcha! I thought. My Sunday school teacher was teaching wrong doctrine, anti-Christ beliefs to the children. But sometimes knowledge can be a dangerous thing, for the teacher was well respected in this little community and congregation.

How does not tell someone – who was a preacher's kid – that he is teaching heresy!
He is an antichrist!

I shall spare you all the details, but suffice to say that the Sunday school teacher stepped down.

After a time, he and I spoke about our respective faith journeys

Though he never publicly stated again that Jesus did not suffer pain on the cross,
I still wonder whether he really changed his belief.

The point is,
Antichrists have always been part of the life of the community of faith.
Often they do not start out determined to be heretical,
But through circumstances and experiences and perhaps because no one counsels them to think carefully and be discerning,
They devolve into a theological framework in which God is not centre,
Jesus and the Holy Spirit not even considered.

Heresy and the reality of antichrists is not a Bible times only reality.

It can be and often is a here and now reality

Really Herb?

Yep – let me give you some modern day examples of heresy

How easily the antichrist can infiltrate the community of faith.

As well as Gnosticism which denies the humanity of Jesus as God's Son, what other antichrist ideas emerge today

The prosperity gospel – the belief that financial blessing is the will of God of all believers.

Not wealthy? Something wrong with your faith

Pelagianism – a term describing a heresy of the 4th century – but one that still makes the rounds today – the belief that each of us are capable of choosing good or evil without God's help or involvement.

Arianism – denies the divinity of Christ – good man, great teacher, but not divine

So there remains the battle against these teachings gaining an upper hand, and battle it will be and is!

BUT

We as God's people – individuals and community are not without resources to deal with, guard against, defend ourselves in God's strength and prevail against such things.

John spends the rest of chapter 2 outlining these resources.

First, be under no illusion or misunderstanding – a battle does rage between the church of Jesus Christ and its members and the world.

In last week's reading, remember, John spoke about the love of the world and the love of the Father.

How even though the world and its desire for it are indeed passing away – their voices remain strident, strong and constant – to pull us away from the love and care of the Father.

It has been said more than once that the greatest enemies of the faith are noise, busyness and hurry

That is so true isn't it?

For each of these things noise, busyness, hurry separately and together prevent us from listening carefully to God, let alone each other.

And when we stop listening to God, other voices will definitely take His place – make no mistake!

BUT...none of us face this battle solely in our own strength, by our own native wit, charm or cleverness. It is when we think there is no battle or what battle there is we can handle all by ourselves – thank you very much that we are in over our heads very quickly.

²⁴Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵And this is what he has promised us,^[a] eternal life.

²⁶I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. ²⁷As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.^[b]

²⁸And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.

There will be times and seasons when we are given to panic or a sense of despair.

There will be times when we ask – what next?

For example, very few have been left untouched in their emotions and feelings as regard to the American Presidential election and President elect, Donald J. Trump.

But even in the immediate of our own lives, there will be times of feeling overwhelmed by circumstances. Being pulled in too many directions, Our ears and eyes filled with too many voices and too many visual images.

Or, we will feel as if we are walking or standing in the midst of a fog so thick we cannot see our hand in front of us – wondering if we should even move or knowing we have to move.

It is for such times as these,.

It is for all times in fact that God's Holy Spirit will help us – this is what John declares in verses 24-29

Read it again

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Wonderful and hopeful words – yes?

Still having some doubts – go back and read again John's gospel – chapters 14-16 the promises Jesus makes about the Holy Spirit – not just for his first disciples, but for the faithful of all time.

The Miracle of Pentecost when the Spirit is released guarantees this.

Highlight some of the things the Spirit will do and is doing today

Spirit of truth – 14:11 – God’s truth – true truth as the late Francis Schaeffer would say

Teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you (14:26)

He will testify on my behalf (15:26)

Prove the world wrong about sin, and righteousness and judgement ((16:8)

He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you (16:14)

We do live in a world that for the most part thinks that God’s people are sort of like the water boys and girls of the game of life,

Good time Charlene and Charlies who are perhaps to be tolerated,

But not really relevant nor of much use today.

The great danger for the church today is to begin to believe that is the case – that we really do not have an alternative way of living,

A message to share with the wider world

As John’s first letter has clearly reminded us thus far, Living out the Christian life – with our brothers and sisters in Christ will not be easy – never has been by the way.

But in God’s strength and by His Spirit, it can and must be

For as John and others in scripture and in experience remind us the world and its desires are indeed fleeting

They will not bring meaning, purpose or contentment to our souls – they just won’t!!

We who seek to follow the way of Jesus need therefore to be vigilant in answering three questions:

- ✓ Why would we allow ourselves to abandon or turn away from the way of Jesus?
- ✓ How can we ensure that this does not happen?
- ✓ What message can we actively share with a very needy for meaning world?

AMEN