

The Word of Life 1 John 1:1-5

There is only one man still living who served as an American soldier in WW1. His name is Frank Woodruff Buckles and he is 109 years old and he lives in Charles Town, West Virginia. Born on February 1, 1901, Buckles enlisted in the U.S. Army at the age of 16. He lied to the recruiters, telling them he was 21 years of age at the time, and he left his birth certificate at home in the family Bible. During the war Buckles served in England and France, driving ambulances and motorcycles for the Army's 1st Fort Riley Casualty Detachment. After the Armistice in 1918, Buckles escorted prisoners of war back to Germany. Buckles stated in an interview with *The Washington Post* on Veterans' Day 2007 that he believes the United States should go to war only "*when it's an emergency.*" When asked about the secret of his long life, Buckles replied: "*Hope*", adding, "*When you start to die... don't.*"

I think we could learn a lot of Frank Woodruff Buckles. There is no greater evidence to the reality of some event than the personal testimony of an eyewitness. Historians have always known that the eyewitness account of an event is the most credible source of information they can gather. There's a huge difference between someone seeing something and telling about it, and another person simply reading or hearing what others have said.

John, the beloved apostle, is the author of this letter to the church we are going to be reading and studying over the next several weeks. He wrote these last three epistles (1,2, and 3 John) as well as the fourth Gospel in our New Testament and the last book of our New Testament, the book of Revelation. At the time of writing this epistle to the church, John may very well be the only apostle still living. The only apostle who didn't die a martyr's death. He is the only one to become an old man. So here he is, an old man, perhaps near his death, giving his paternal counsel to a church who very probably never saw or spoke to Jesus.

This picture received a memorable formulation for modern readers in Robert Browning's "A Death in the Desert." Here John, dying in concealment and attended by a few adoring followers, dwells on his survival as one who can testify as an eyewitness to the great events of the gospel story and to the historical Jesus.

When my ashes scatters, says John
there is left on earth
No one alive who knew
- Saw with his eyes and handled with his hands
That which was from the first, the Word of life.
How will it be when none more saith, "I saw"?

How will it be when none more can say, "I saw."? John was perhaps the last person living who saw Jesus, talked to him, ate breakfast with him, lay near him at night with their head on clumps of grass. Wouldn't you like to know what he saw, what he heard from Jesus? Today there's a renewed quest to discover the historical Jesus. Men who never saw Jesus sit in a room and speculate about what he really said and what parts of the New Testament are authentic. Don't you think listening to John, an

eyewitness to the life of Jesus, would be the most credible evidence we could have about Jesus, the Word of Life?

John as Witness

You probably know that John's Gospel is very different from the other three gospels (Mat, Mk, and Lk). Those other three are called synoptic gospels because they are so much alike. They are, in many ways, synonymous. We learn things in John's Gospel that are not mentioned in the other three. John alone tells us about the wedding at Cana of Galilee; of the coming of Nicodemus to speak to Jesus in the night; of the woman at the well in Samaria; of the way Jesus washed the disciples' feet the night before he was crucified, and his teaching on the coming of the Holy Spirit. We hear dialogue between Thomas and Jesus in John's Gospel and no other. But, perhaps more significant, John gives us details about Jesus' life no other gospel writer mentions. Did you know that in the story of the feeding of the loaves of bread and fish to the 5000 only John tells us these were barley loaves? When Jesus came to the disciples as they crossed the lake in the storm they rowed between three and four miles. There were six stone water pots at the wedding at Cana. It is only John who tells us there were four soldiers, not just "some soldiers," who gambled for the seamless robe of Jesus when he died. He knows the exact weight of the myrrh and aloes used to anoint the dead body of Jesus. He remembers how the perfume of ointment made the house smell in Bethany. Think about this. These are really unimportant details. Who cares if there were 6 water pots exactly or that the loaves of bread were barley loaves as opposed to wheat loaves. These details are really inexplicable unless they are the memories of a man who was there. John tasted the barley loaves. He saw the four soldiers gambling for Jesus' clothes. He smelled the perfume that was put on Jesus' feet. He heard Thomas say to the resurrected Jesus, "My Lord and my God."

So it is this John, by now an old man, the last man living who ate with Jesus, saw him die, entered the empty tomb, and saw Thomas place his hand in Jesus' wounds, who writes this letter to the church. He begins, "*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.*"

Jesus: The Incarnation

Ironically, John begins his testimony with something he didn't see, couldn't have seen. He begins, "*That which was from the beginning.*" Here he echoes the words he had used to begin his gospel in John 1:1, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made.*" This old eye witness is making an astonishing claim at the outset of his epistle. This man he talked and walked with was God in the flesh. He was in the beginning before any of us were here, before the creation of the world, before anything at all was made. He is the great I Am. As Paul put it in his letter to the Colossians, "*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation*" (Col 1;15). Now how would John know this?

How do you know something about the dawn of the universe when you weren't there?

The only possible answer is that Jesus told him. He heard it from Jesus. And everything that he saw confirmed the truthfulness of Jesus. Of course, any lunatic could

claim that he was with God at the outset of creation. There have been many messiahs who have claimed to be God or Son of God or some kind of divine force. What made Jesus' claims compelling were the powers he demonstrated in the presence of John. John saw him turn those barley loaves into bread enough to feed a multitude. John was there when the once dead Lazarus came out of the tomb. John was in the boat when Jesus calmed the waters. And most importantly, John saw, touched, and ate breakfast with the resurrected Lord. The one with whom he ate breakfast was the same one who created all things. Jesus was God.

This is our fundamental teaching and belief in the Christian faith. The theological term for this doctrine is the incarnation. God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. We cite John the beloved apostle as one of our primary sources of evidence. And like John, we proclaim this as truth, we testify to it as ultimate truth, and our joy won't be complete until we have shared this good news. And so we preach it from our pulpits and we testify to it over a cup of coffee at Starbucks. We don't claim to be able to prove it scientifically. We simply believe the evidence is credible which supports our claim and we base our lives on its truth.

Incarnation vs. Relativism

Of course, many people today have a different doctrinal belief. For example, suppose you are having a conversation with John Doe and you say, "John, I believe Jesus is God and that you should believe in him as your Savior. This will complete my joy if you do." Today, John Doe is likely to say, "Nobody can know anything definite about God. And secondly, you should not try to persuade other people to see things your way. That's not right. You shouldn't try to push your religion on me." When John Doe says, you can't know anything definite about God, what is that? That is a faith position. That's not scientific. That's not empirical. It's a belief. And secondly, when he says you mustn't try to push your religion on other people, you shouldn't try to convince other people your take on spiritual reality is the right one, he at that moment is trying to say to you, "You ought to see it my way." In other words, he's saying, "I have a relativistic take on spiritual reality, and you ought to take it." He's doing the very thing he's forbidding as he's forbidding it.

You see John Doe has a faith position. He has doctrines he believes in. He's betting his life on it and he wants you to adopt his religion of relativity. John Doe has bet his eternal destiny on the idea that nobody can know anything definite about God. When you bet your life on Jesus Christ, you and John Doe are contending for a particular faith. Here's the difference. You are being openly doctrinal. You are being frank about your doctrine. John Doe is not. John Doe is in denial.

We Christians are followers of John the Beloved Apostle, not John Doe. John the Beloved Apostle was an eyewitness to Jesus. At the end of his life he is sharing with the church he has seen spread to 3 different continents that Jesus is God in the flesh. John the Beloved Apostle is saying the invisible has become visible, the incorporeal has become corporeal. In other words, God has become human. The absolute has become particular. The ideal has become real. The divine has taken up a human nature. He is saying that eternal life is found in him. This is why he calls Jesus the "Word of Life."

Word of Life

Jesus is the one who is life, who created life, who sustains life. Life is found in Jesus. Does this mean that those who don't believe in Jesus don't have life? Are they dead? The Christian message is that all humans are dead in their sins. This separates us from God. It separates us from the fullness of life that God intends us to have, wants us to have, sent his Son so that we might have it. It is through Jesus Christ that life comes. And by this I don't simply mean "immortal life," life after death. In fact, if man has not found life before he dies, he most certainly will not find it after he dies. Eternal life is life already with God.

The greatest need of man is not for more years, but for richer, fuller years. Someone has said many modern people long for immortality who wouldn't know what to do with themselves on a rainy afternoon. Our need is not for more days on earth, a body that will not age, a mind that remembers as well as it did when it was 20, but a heart that is in tune with God.

The proclamation of the Gospel, the word of life, is the ongoing first priority of those of us who have discovered eternal life in Christ. We proclaim the word of life because it has given us life. We proclaim it, because it has grabbed a hold of us in such a powerful way we can't avoid sharing it. We proclaim what we have heard and seen in Jesus Christ. And our joy will not be complete, until all people join us in this eternal life experience.

Conclusion

And so John concludes his introduction to his epistle with the words, "*We write this to make our joy complete.*" John shares the good news of Jesus Christ in order to complete his joy. This implies, of course, that he already has joy. When Christ comes into our lives he brings us joy. We have the joy of our salvation, the joy of having our sins forgiven, the joy of having fellowship with God. But the joy is completed, like joy is always completed, by sharing this good news with others. Isn't that what we instinctively do with good news? We get pregnant and have a baby and we have to tell people. We don't keep it a secret. One of our children graduates from high school or college and we put it on Facebook. It's not enough to simply know they have graduated. We have to share the good news. We get our first car and we want to drive it to our friend's house so they can see it. Our joy is multiplied when we share it. And so it is with the Gospel. It's not enough for us to know that Jesus is the Word of Life who has given us eternal life. We have to share it, we need to share this with others so they too can have fellowship with us and know the joy of being in Christ.

So we carry on the message of this old man, who ate with Jesus, watched him perform miracles, saw him die, and heard his voice after it was given new breath by the resurrection. He was there. He saw it. He recorded it, so we would know about it. Now our task is to carry on the work, to share the good news, and tell people how Jesus has given us unending joy. Will you believe and have fellowship with us? This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Believe in him and receive eternal life today.