

“Don’t Go In The Basement”  
1 John 1:5-2:2  
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The Second Sunday of Easter

First John is a tiny little letter. Just 5 short chapters long. It is so brief a piece of correspondence that if you are not careful you will skip right over it. Many Christians do. Skip right over it. It is not just that 1 John is hard to find. It is also that the content of 1 John is so hard to take. The letter reflects poorly on the early Christian church. If scholars are right, the church is still in the golden age of its infancy when 1 John is written. Paul has been scaring up new churches all across Asia. The gospel narratives about Jesus’ ministry are making their way through the Greek and Roman world. House churches are popping up in the most inexplicable places, even Rome itself. Bands of Christian prophets are roving through Asia and Europe carving out Christian congregations. We are not yet 50 years into this dazzling new era of God’s in-breaking into the world...and, all of a sudden, this little letter rains on the resurrection.

This, probably, tiny house church is involved in a significant enough squabble that it is trending toward schism, threatening to break up over some issue, about which we are not very clear. It IS clear, though, that a community of people that once loved each other is cracking, and the people on one side of the fault line have little good to say about the folk they once cherished on the other side. In fact, Christian brothers and sisters have taken to calling each other antichrists. 2:18-19 gives us the context: “Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that the antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists *have* come.” In other words, many of the people who used to sit next to you in this little house church have turned out to be the first coming of the anti-christ. They had us fooled. We thought they were with us. Clearly, they never were.

The letter goes on to say: “From this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they *had* belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that *none of them* belongs to us.” Sounds like a church split to me!

I suspect this similarity between our American context with their Asian context is one thing that drew me to 1 John. We love community. We *crave* community. And yet, for some reason, time and time again, across the years, we fail to hold community together. I preside over a seminary community that I endeavor to hold together as we tackle difficult issues semester in and semester out. I worship in a national Presbyterian community that I pray will hold together even as the stress of theological differences threaten to pull us asunder one congregation at a time. I preach in large and small congregations where believers who love each other also have such different spiritual and political beliefs that they find it hard to sit together in the same sanctuary or break together the same bread of the one body of Christ. I live in an American community that is so divided that I read op eds declaring that we are spiraling down into the breakup of our body politic. I wander about in a country so devastated by its racial divide that I sometimes wonder if we can ever truly be one nation, under God. I wondered if, way back there at the end of the very first century of our common era, the unnamed author of 1 John had a helpful word on the matter not only of *building* but also of *maintaining* community. What did he think? What did he say?

Well, for one thing, the author of 1 John realized that how we *believe* has a direct bearing on how we *live*. Our theology grounds our sense of community. If we cannot agree on our theology, there is little hope we can live together as one people. The author of 1 John saw the truth of this up close and very personally. Apparently, it was competitive theologizing that brought about the troubled situation in which the people of his once united community found themselves. The battle over whose way of believing was the most appropriate way of believing was as silly and sad as a childish playground squabble. The outcome, though, threatened eternal consequence.

*My theology can beat up your theology because my theology is better than your theology. Oh, yeah, well if you are not going to agree with my theology I am going to take my theology and go home. AND, when I get there, I am going to start up my own house church with my own inhouse theology that is far superior to your trashy out house theology. And, one day you will see and you will understand that the way I believe is the right way to believe. When the last day comes and Jesus starts going door to door looking for his people, he will walk right by your shack and into my theological palace. Because **you** are a sinner. **I** am saved!*

The author of 1 John is troubled. From where ever it is he sits, writing this letter, he knows that one of the problems in this church is that the people do not rightly understand the meaning of sin, sin's relationship to salvation, or sin's role in building or breaking a Christ community. So, he writes to explain.

I know! I know! My sermon has taken a turn toward the awkward. Back during the Great Religious Awakenings in frontier periods of American history, or even the more contemporary hell fire and brimstone sermons that once fanned the flames of revivalist enthusiasm, sin had a place. The specter of being everlastingly stained with the stench of some salacious sin successfully scared many a slouch, slackard, and sleazebag straight into the sanctuary screaming for some sliver of salvation. Sin used to be all the Christian rage. Now, though, we mature, contemporary, sophisticated Christians no longer wallow in the vocabulary of sin. We have dumbed it down and thrown it out. Silly. Childish. And if it perhaps really does turn out to be real, it sticks on others much more than it could ever possibly stick on us.

I will admit it. I do not like talking about sin. I find ways around it. Until I spend some time reading a piece of correspondence like 1 John. There have been times when I have been reading 1 John and, dispirited, I have put it aside. But I keep coming back. Keep working through this hard letter and its hard topics like sin.

The author of First John does not approach sin as either little things you do wrong that God frowns upon or big things that entire communities do that God abhors. ***For him, sin is that thing which disrupts the fellowship with God that ought to be possible because of what Jesus did for us.*** Sin, in other words, is that thing, however you define it, that breaks up our communion with God, makes it impossible for us to be in community with God. It is not surprising that, set adrift from God, God's people lose relationship, lose community with each other.

Read 1 John. And when you do, make note of the places where the word sin occurs. He uses the word 17 times. In those 17 uses there are three primary stresses. First, sin is a devastating break from relationship with God. Second, sin is something that Jesus forgives and God forgives through Jesus. Third, and this is very important for the situation that is so concerning for the author of 1 John, sin is not just an individual, personal, spiritual thing. It is not just a break between me as an individual and God. Sin is social. 1 John connects it to lawlessness and injustice and . . . broken community.

Sin breaks up community with God and other people. Salvation, on the other hand, represents community with God and other people. But because sin and salvation are such theoretical, theological concepts, they are hard to comprehend. The author of 1 John therefore does not begin his discussion with them. Instead of starting with sin and salvation, he begins with darkness and light. Even a little child who has not yet learned language understands darkness and light.

Unlike sin and salvation, we can *see* light *and* we can *see* darkness, so we understand them instinctively. Indeed, darkness and light are so palpable, we can *feel* them. Every human being at one point or another knows what it *feels* like to be in the dark.

Light, 1 John associates with God. Darkness, not so much. This does not mean that darkness is bad, just that it presents opportunity for being frightened and lost, realities that 1 John does not associate with God. In fact, in the creation stories, God tames the darkness, as God tamed the sea, by naming it and confining it to a particular time.<sup>1</sup> 1 John therefore associates God with the reality of Light that overcomes darkness. As commentator Judith Lieu notes, In a world like the first century when 1 John was writing, a world without multiple possibilities of artificial light, light comes to represent life, hope, blessing, and that which is not ashamed to be seen.<sup>2</sup> Even today, light has this effect of hope and life. I have heard stories from those who have traveled to places in India and Africa, where electricity is in short supply and is often rationed so that it is unavailable to huge segments of a population during the night. I cannot imagine that because for me the darkness has been tamed by the powers of our science and industry. We flick a switch and the hope of seeing that goes along with the light arrives instantaneously.

1 John is writing to people for whom darkness has not yet been tamed. It competes with light and sometimes overwhelms it, runs it off, until light has the wherewithal to regather itself and reappear the next day. Light therefore came to represent the good. It reveals all. It is clear. It makes visible. It shines. It is not a color; it is a quality. And sometimes it even operates in the dark. It does not shine in the darkness so that you see only it and no longer darkness. The darkness remains even as the light cuts into it. The light exists *in* the darkness. Like a virus. Even in the darkness, there is *some* light. Infesting, germinating, spreading, . . . waiting.

But the flip side of this is also true. Darkness also inhabits the light. Infesting, germinating, spreading, waiting. Darkness, too, is a force. Not a color. Not a time of day. It conceals. It frightens. Because when you cannot see, you cannot trust.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Lieu, Kindle location 937-8.

God is light. The first century Jewish philosopher, Philo, declared that God has no need of any light to see because God sees by the light of God's own self. Indeed, God is the very origin, the father of light.<sup>3</sup> In the Gospel of John, the image of light is common. Jesus declares that he is the light of the world and that his followers should work in this brief period while the presence of his light is with them. In the Book of Revelation, in the new Jerusalem, the people will need no artificial nor natural source of light like the sun and the moon, for God will be their light, because God is light. The letter of James likewise identifies God as light, but then helpfully explains what 1 John also understands: God is the origin of light in whom there is no shadow.<sup>4</sup> In other words, darkness always resides in light, except in the case of God. In God, there is no darkness at all.

We, however, are God's people, and darkness streaks through us like a comet. It **IS** in us, right? The darkness. We come here to church hoping it's not. Hoping that we're "saved" in the company of other folk who are "saved." The apostle Paul says that in Jesus' dying and rising, the power of sin has been obliterated in us. That we are saved. He told that to the Corinthians, you remember. You're saved. And then, almost immediately, it seemed, the Corinthians started doing unsaved—like stuff. They were saved into the light. But there was darkness still embedded in them.

We are infected by a virus the way light is infected by darkness. That virus is like any virus; it disrupts our make up at the cellular level. It goes deep. When you get a cold virus, you are beholden to it. You cannot **not** have a cold. You are enslaved to the virus that is the cold.

We have the anti God virus of darkness in us. No matter what we do, we must live out the consequence of the virus. We sneeze human hatred. We cough congressional congestion. We vomit vicious vendettas against people who disagree with us. We are fevered with the frustration of foolishness, our own and that of others. Some of us even die due to the distresses that destroy the fabric of our health, our home, our country, our world. No matter what we do, we are caught up in it, swallowed by it, the way a child whose flashlight batteries gives out gets swallowed up by the darkness. There is no hope because the virus has you.

That is how it is for us. **Was** for us. Before Christ came, there was nothing we could do. But **with** Christ, the reality of our vulnerability was transformed. We are no longer only vulnerable to the virus of sinful rebellion against God. We are vulnerable to God's voice, God's call upon our lives. But that means we are caught up in a war. Open to two very different viruses, if you will. Darkness. The virus of rebellion. Against God. Light. The virus of response. To God. Where once we could only go one way, because we were enslaved to the virus of rebellion; now we can go one of two ways, because the power of that virus has been broken. By Christ's dying and rising. We can now respond to God. **Or not!** The Corinthians, and the believers in the tiny house church of 1 John, given the vaccine of resurrection, made the choice NOT to respond to God. The darkness, the virus of rebellion was in them, even though the virus of responding was also in them. They were saved. They were vaccinated. And yet, they chose to rebel. They let the ember of darkness spark to vicious, community destroying life within them. That is sin.

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<sup>3</sup> See Lieu, Kindle 941-944.

<sup>4</sup> James 1:17.

I come to think about sin this way because of all these commercials scaring me to death about the dark threat of shingles. I have never had shingles, but now I am told, since I am over 50, I am liable to contract them. Why? Because as a child I had chicken pox. You have chicken pox as a child. Every child in my generation did. It was a rite of passage. If you didn't get it, some parents thought of exposing you to it, so they and you could get it over with. I remember in some big families that when one child got it, the parents often exposed all the children to it. So, it wouldn't be chicken pox one month, then pox another month, then pox the next year and so on. There would be a pox on the house, the whole house, and then it would be done. Because once you got it, you didn't get it again. You were SAVED from chicken pox forever. There is something theological about that, isn't it? Once you had chicken pox, you could go take care of other children with chicken pox and not have to worry about catching chicken pox, because you were SAVED from chicken pox. Once enslaved to the fear and reality of chicken pox, the sin of chicken pox, the darkness of chicken pox, as it were, now you were set free, because chicken pox had died in you and now you were reborn free of its threat. You were in the light!

Except there is darkness in the light. Except, I've come to find out now that the virus mutated in some form or fashion and remains forever in your body. So, that while you can't catch chicken pox, you can catch shingles from some mutated form of that same virus. You're still vulnerable to the pox, even though you've been saved from the pox. The dark power of sin, rebellion against God, works just like that. You're free of the chains of chicken pox, but the threat of the shingles remains, because the virus is still in you. You have been freed by the power of light. But you are still vulnerable to the menace of darkness, because the virus of darkness is still in you.

What this means is that you have a choice. According to the commercials I see, because you know that the shingles virus lives inside you, you can choose or choose not to inoculate yourself against it. Knowing that darkness infests you, you can choose to run toward the light. But we don't. People don't. Churches don't. Nations don't. For some reason, we are drawn to the dark. This is how sin works.

In no scenario is darkness as haunting as it is in a good horror movie. Darkness is as much a horror prop as any ghoul or goblin. I don't go to horror movies anymore because I only like to go to good movies and a good horror movie messes with my head too much. I have enough things to think about that keep me awake at night; I don't need to add to what is already in my head some scene from some slasher, monster movie. But when I did go to such movies, I marveled at the lunacy of the imperiled character who always had a chance to run for the light or head into the darkness and inexplicably CHOSE to head for the darkness.

Something like this! The character is poised on the outskirts of some dark forest and hears or sees something in the shadows and is tempted to go see what it is. Or, and this is my favorite, some hapless man or woman, trembling visibly, is at the top of a long, steep, dark stairway down into a hellish basement from which there are emanating these strange sounds. The woman opens the basement door, hollers into the darkness: "Is there anybody down there?" I'm thinking, "*Of course*, there's somebody down there. Go call the police, fool! At least, go gather up the children and head for town." But, nooooo. She hollers down there again, this time, threatening to start down the stairs: "I said, who's down there?" To which I answer: "*It doesn't*

*matter.* This is not going to end well unless you run.” Even if the basement is well lit the moment she starts going down, we all know that as soon as she gets down there the door to the basement is going to shut behind her and the lights are going to go out.

And yet, amazingly, instead of running, she picks up an umbrella, the only weapon nearby, and heads toward the first step. And I’m saying over and over, “DON’T GO IN THE BASEMENT!!!!”

It makes absolutely no sense. And yet, that is precisely 1 John’s point. Even though we know it makes no sense, we CHOOSE to go into the dark basement. It makes no sense what is happening to his church, this community of light, walking headlong into a determined darkness. 1 John is saying: We do not have to split up churches. We make a choice to do that. We don't have to hurt other people. We make a choice to do that. We don't have to be unkind or ungracious or meanspirited. We make a choice to do that. We don't have to have a divided politic where one side tries to destroy the other side. We make a choice to do that. We have been inoculated from the virus of sin by the reality of the resurrection. We are not trapped in the darkness anymore. We are not enslaved to sin anymore. If we go sin our way down into the basement, it is because we chose to do so. We didn't have to do so.

In 1 John’s time, in our time, never let anybody convince you that the church has to split because of theological difference, or that one believer cannot live in community with another believer because that other believer doesn't believe the same way I do. We have been vaccinated against that kind of virus. We have been set free from that way of destructive living. We are now as vulnerable to God, to building community with God and with each other, as we are vulnerable to tearing God's community and God's people apart. 1 John is making the point that if we tear apart God's community, it is because we CHOSE to tear apart God's community. Because of what God did in Christ Jesus, we are no longer bound to sin. ***We do not have to go down into the basement.*** So, why, knowing what we know about the darkness that resides down there, do we so often go?!

Don't choose it any more. When the opportunity for descending into the basement rears itself, run for the light instead. You remember those famous words from Joshua to the Hebrew people. This day I put before you life and death, choose life. 1 John saying the same thing in a different time, in a different place, to a different group of people struggling to follow God, now through Christ. This day, he is saying, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God puts before you light and darkness. Choose the light. For God's sake, don't go in the basement.