

TO LIFE!

by Steve Zeisler

In February I received a CD for my birthday from a good friend. It was Bonny Raitt's most recent album, Longing in Their Hearts. Here are the lyrics of the title track:

Let me tell you 'bout a friend of mine
He's a short order cook
Long on speed, short on spice
He reads his customers like a book
He's seen this, and he's done that
Now he's makin' fried eggs an art
But there's one thing he can't fix no how
There's a longing in his heart

He's tried for years to work it out
At the grill and at his home
Well he talks to his friends, talks to himself
He talks the chicken right off the bone
Talks to his woman and she understands
You know they're always eye to eye
She runs the joint, they live out back
Small house under a big sky

And even the stars at night agree
That the sky is falling apart
She knows cause she can feel it too
There's a longing in her heart
A longing in her heart
Longing in her heart

Well now you and me, we're just like them
We never wanted to be alone, so we
Made a pact, sealed with desire
For a happier house and home
Only to find it doesn't untie
The knot where feelings die
There's a longing deep inside our hearts
And no one to tell us why

Our friends aren't looking for anything new
They wouldn't know where to look
Well her, she likes running the joint
And he likes being a cook.
Together they're doing very well
They're mighty glad they could
But there's a fire burning towards them now
Coming from a distant wood

And even the stars at night agree
That the sky is falling apart

We know 'cause we can feel it too
There's a longing in our hearts
A longing in our hearts
Longing in our hearts

What these lyrics are attempting to do is reach back to the Garden of Eden, where a man and a woman do honorable work in an honorable way. They are not in a gritty urban environment with drugs, gangs, AIDS, violence, and misery. The cold machinery of the technological world is nowhere to be found. This is the song of a couple who love each other and see eye-to-eye. They live in a small house under a big sky, kindly human beings-the salt of the earth. It's an honest song, and that's the reason it made an impression on me. No matter how hopefully we would like to talk about Eden, about good people living a simple life and finding answers, they don't find the answers. That's the problem.

"But there's one thing he can't fix no how
There's a longing in his heart"

The writer of Ecclesiastes said something similar in looking at the human condition: "He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end." We cannot stop longing for what we cannot find.

The reign of death

It's important to raise these issues this week because we have just seen the worst kind of thing that human beings can do to each other: paranoid bombers destroying the lives of innocent children. But there is a continuum from the bomb in Oklahoma City through all the exaltation of the gutter that we see so often in the media and everywhere else, the unraveling of civilization, which some do deliberately and some do without meaning to, to the sad longing that so many feel. The Bible describes all those sorts of things in the statement, "...Death reigned from the time of Adam..." (Romans 5:14). This is one of two announcements that in many ways gather up the world view of the Scriptures. The reign of death will be experienced by people whether through bombs in Oklahoma, addiction, dysfunctional relationships, violence, loneliness, self-destructive behavior, or even just a longing in their hearts that can't be answered by anything they can do.

But the other great announcement is the marvelous insistence of the word of God that life has appeared in the midst of the reign of death. Life-the Easter word. The grave is empty, the final enemy has been conquered in Christ. And it is this second truth that we must focus on now. Acknowledging the first, that there is nothing we can do by ourselves to fix things, we can still live out the marvelous call of the empty grave-life has appeared!

In this message we're going to take the first four verses as an introduction to the book of 1 John. Twice in verse 2 the Greek statement *zoe ephanerothe* occurs: Life appeared, was made manifest, broke through, staked its claim, or made itself plain. Verses 1-4:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life-and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us-what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write, so that our [or possibly your] joy may be made complete.

I've used the New American Standard because it retains some of the awkwardness of the Greek text. The NIV and some other modern translations add a concrete verb that isn't really in verse 1. There's a series of clauses that are left hanging, followed by a parenthetical announcement beginning in verse 2 that life was manifested. John describes himself as both witness and preacher ("bear witness and proclaim") of the life that broke in on him. Then we finally get the complete statement in verse 3: "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also...." We'll consider the reasons for this choppiness shortly. When John begins to bear witness to what he

has seen and heard, it is as if he is swept away in the telling.

Let's pause and put this book in perspective for a moment. The author is not introduced to us in the book itself, unlike most of the letters of the New Testament, in which the author and the recipients are mentioned right at the beginning. I believe that both traditional and modern scholarship are persuasive in concluding that this is a letter from the apostle John, one of the twelve who followed Christ in his ministry on earth, and probably the youngest of them. He was the brother of James, one of the sons of Zebedee, or one of the Sons of Thunder as they are called at one point by the Lord because of their fiery personalities. It was this man who wrote the Gospel according to John; the three letters 1, 2, and 3 John; and the Revelation.

First John was probably written in the 90s A.D. John was the last of the apostles still living. He was well into his eighties by then, the last man who could say of Jesus what he says here: "I heard him and saw him and touched him." There are some who argue that this is in fact the last document written in what we call the New Testament. He very likely wrote his gospel before this letter. There is some question as to when he wrote the Revelation and the two short letters that follow. But there is at least one well-known scholar who says that this is the last document he wrote and therefore these would be the final chapters of inspired Scripture.

First John is a book of basics. John is not interested in intricate, complicated new theories on the Christian message. He is interested in saying again the central, eternal, foundational, unchanging things. He is committed to the premise that every Christian truth is always to be associated with every other Christian truth. You cannot isolate one biblical idea from another biblical idea, emphasize one and minimize another. That is not permitted. Everything must be held together. So if we would speak of the Spirit, we must also speak of the body and the tangible world. If we would speak of our standing before God, we must also speak of our behavior in life. If we would speak of truth, we must also speak of love.

Lastly, this book was probably written to the environs of Ephesus. The first three chapters of the Revelation mention seven churches in that region that were to receive the Revelation. This letter was probably also written to the Christians in that area, where John was bishop at the end of his life.

The apostle's memories

Why is the introduction written awkwardly in Greek? Why are these initial clauses left hanging before we finally come to a concrete verb in verse 3? John is writing (as an old man now) to a group of people who are under threat from deceivers who are trying to ruin their faith, and he begins with this testimony: "What began before the beginning but entered the human sphere, I've heard him, I've seen him, I've touched him-" And John, instead of being able to finish the statement at this point, is taken over by what he remembers.

He begins to think of the words of Christ that he was privileged to hear for three years of following him. He remembers the parables of the Lord that were so compelling, mysterious, and marvelous and that dealt with such deep issues in the heart. He remembers the powerful preaching of Jesus, decrying unrighteousness and calling out words of hope. Even his enemies, as well as his friends, would say of the Lord's teaching, "No one ever spoke as this man speaks." John remembers not only the powerful preaching of Jesus but the personal words of encouragement to a leper, to a blind man, to a little girl who had died in an upper room whom he embraced and brought back to life, to a woman who was caught in adultery-"Neither do I condemn you." He remembers all those things that the Lord said to people, and his mind is filled with the words of Christ. He is in his eighties now and his physical sense of hearing may have diminished, but what he can hear in his heart as clearly as on the first day that he heard them are the words of Jesus.

Not only that, he says, "We saw him." The "we" is the apostolic community of which he is the last member. "We saw the miracles, we saw the waves stilled, we saw Lazarus come out of the tomb because Jesus said he should come out, we saw the paralytic rise from his bed." John was one of three people at the transfiguration. He stood on that mountain when Jesus was displayed as who he really was in a blaze of glory. But it is not only the miracles and the show of power. John must remember Jesus' tender embrace of children: "Let the children come to me." And when everyone else was lying down to sleep, he saw Jesus get up and go off to a place to pray because he could not survive without prayer. John remembers the Lord when he was indignant at the unrighteousness of the money-changers and twice banished them from the temple.

Jesus' touch

"We touched him." He may remember the day when Jesus reached out to Peter, who was drowning in the waves and about to go under, and grasped his hand and put him in the safety of the boat. He would remember the night before Jesus' execution, that he was privileged to lie back on the Master's breast at the Last Supper, and hear his heartbeat. He may remember coming to the Lord and being given from his hand just a few small fish and barley loaves and told to go out to the crowd and feed thousands with that; and coming back time and again and having Jesus place in his hands more fish and more bread so that all had enough. And he remembers those same hands (now scarred from crucifixion) at a breakfast after the resurrection in which Jesus took bread and fish and fed him again.

And John is swept away with his memories. That is why he cries out. Verse 2 is parenthetical shout between verses 1 and 3: "-and the life itself was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us-"From before the beginning, the eternal Word of God was made plain, and John finds himself crying loudly in his letter, probably dictating it to someone who is faithfully writing down the words, "This man was Life!"

If you have had the misfortune of watching any of the O.J. Simpson trial or other events in which witnesses are called to testify, you know that modern witnesses tell you almost nothing when they are on the stand. Their testimony is ripped to shreds by one set of arguments, and then the next group of lawyers gets up and rips that to shreds. You come away wondering if anyone can establish anything about what happened in any setting. But John's testimony is different. He is quite clear as to what he has heard and seen and touched, and he draws conclusions about it. "Let me tell you what it means," he says, not waiting for a judge or attorney to ask him questions. "This one was the Word of God himself. This one was Life made plain. This one was eternal Life from the Father."

Jesus was sent into a world in which death had reigned from the time of Adam. This is the answer to the longing in our heart, to the awful violence that leads people to destroy innocent lives and destroy their own in the process. This is the answer to the slavery that fear of death causes so that we become addicted and foolish, we run from life or embrace what is lifeless. This is the answer to the reign of death.

We will never collect enough human beings together to make life happen. Every one of us has a disease. The answer has to come from somewhere else. It has to come from Christ, the one who was before the beginning, who was the Word of God himself-the intention, the speech of God. He didn't just accidentally stumble onto the planet, but he was the purposeful announcement of God that life can be found in him. It is life that lasts forever, John says. This Life that was manifested was together with God, and was spoken into the world.

The Word of Life

Frederick Buechner wrote about the phrase "the Word of Life" in 1 John 1:1 and the phrase, "the Word became flesh...." in John 1:14:

When God speaks things happen, because the words of God aren't just as good as his deeds. They are his deeds. When God speaks his word, John says, creation happens. And when God speaks to his creation, what comes out is not ancient Hebrew or the King James Version or sentiments suitable for framing in the pastor's study. On the contrary, "the Word became flesh," and that means that when God wanted to say what God is all about and what man is all about and what life is all about, it wasn't a sound that emerged but a man. Jesus was his name. He was dynamite. He was the Word of God.

John says, "I'm an old man now, and I'm the last one who can say this, but I was there. And the one I knew in Galilee and Judea of old was Life itself, sent into the world. He was before the beginning, and he lasts forever. And in him the reign of death is over."

In addition to being a witness, John is also a preacher. That point is raised in verse 2 and again in verse 3: "...What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you...." And verse 4: "These things we write...." which is

the same idea. Two marvelous things are offered to John's readers, who did not themselves see the transfiguration or hear Jesus' preaching or touch his hand, but are offered that life by faith. These things are fellowship and joy. Look at verses 3 and 4: "...what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete." If life is going to be experienced by people who believe the things that John is able to preach about, there are no more wonderful ways to experience it or measure it than in fellowship and joy.

Fellowship is the certain conviction, based on the biblical announcement, that we will never be alone. If we know Christ, we are part of a community of people who all share the same life. We are all wanderers in the wilderness who have come and sat next to one another around the same fire. The reason we're together in fellowship is because we're all related to the Father and to his Son Jesus Christ; we have all found life in him. We belong to each other, we have come to the same source of life. We are part of a family. And however lonely we may feel, however cut off, however frightened, however much at a loss, it is never true that we are alone. God's presence, even when it feels infinitely far away, never changes, never diminishes, and never goes away.

The fellowship and joy

The last couple of years have been the hardest years in the life of my family. I think I'm the only one in that time who hasn't been in the hospital. My mother-in-law died at Easter two years ago, and since then we have had to deal with epileptic seizures, cancer, and surgeries of other kinds. Various levels of threat and uncertainty have come one after the other. There have been plenty of times when I have felt sorry for myself, complained to God, and in general wished it were happening to someone else. But there has never really been a time that I felt abandoned. I may have temporarily cut myself off from people and not have been able to emotionally connect with brothers and sisters, but I've known at some level of my Christian life all along that I belong to the people who belong to Christ, and I belong to the Father and the Son, and that we do not have to go through this life alone. We were never meant to.

The second thing John preaches is that joy should increase and become fuller and fuller. Let me make clear here, too, that joy, like fellowship, is not an emotion that washes back and forth as we feel better or worse. Joy is not happiness or emotional overflow. Joy is something deeper. It is a settled conviction that underneath it all, as Moses says (Deuteronomy 33:27), are the everlasting arms of God, that in the end God will wipe every tear from our eyes and there will be laughter and embracing. It is the conviction that when all is said and done and all of God's purposes in all of history are accomplished, we are going to sing his praises together and enjoy every note, be drawn as near as we can be to each other and to the Lord. In the end, joy is greater than every difficulty or tragedy of the moment, every attempt to destroy it. That too becomes an underlying conviction for us.

So John is saying, "I'm preaching to you now. I want you to understand what I have witnessed and the conclusions I have drawn from what I have witnessed. And I want you to believe what I am telling you so that you may have fellowship with the Father and the Son, and so that your joy may increase." The aim of all this is fullness of joy. This book is going to stand foursquare against any effort to take it away. "Nobody is going to be permitted to," says the last living witness, the old man with arthritic hands, liver spots on his skin, and hair gone. He doesn't look much like a Son of Thunder now. But he is going to fight for the truth. If death reigned and life has now appeared, the horrible tragedy is that someone could take away the answer. If you have a terrible disease and the doctor prescribes medicine that will fix it, the worst thing that can happen is that someone tamper with the medicine. If a treasure map would lead you to treasure -indeed, riches forever-and someone is permitted to ruin the map and turn it into a lie and send you off in the wrong direction, then all is lost. So we must not permit the answer to the longing of the human heart to be destroyed by its enemies. And John is going to fight, and that is what this book is largely about. There is a longing deep inside our hearts, and it is life in Christ that we are longing for.

Many of us go back to the Bible at Easter and read the accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection. I was captivated this Easter, as I have been many times, by one story that always seems to stand out for me. It is the story of Mary Magdalene. John's gospel, in fact, records Mary's story. She knows the tomb is empty, but she

doesn't know why. She goes and tells the disciples, then returns to the garden tomb weeping, where two angels ask her why she is weeping. She says poignantly, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

There is not a sadder notion than that. What if you have found Christ and the answer to the longing of your heart has been made available, the reversal of the reign of death has in fact been your experience-and then someone takes him away? That is what John is fighting here. No one can take Christ away so that we don't know where to find him. No one will be permitted to ruin the Christian gospel, to repaint the image of Christ that John has spoken of here. No one will turn him into a lawgiver or a destroyer. And, of course, Mary's story in the garden ends beautifully, too, when a man she supposes at first to be the gardener approaches and says to her, "Mary!" and her tears of sorrow turn to tears of joy.

If someone can destroy our Christian faith, can take away the real Jesus and give us some substitute in return, then woe is us. That is why I appreciate the old man with his memories, his preaching and his witness, who is going to take on the deceivers, tell us what is really true, and bring us back to basic Christianity, to life itself manifested in Christ.

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1 John 1:1-4
First Message
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