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Welcome to the New Life Podcast, a ministry of New Life Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, New York. Today we have this week's sermon, preached by Tim LaCroix, our senior pastor. Join us for worship each week at 10 o'clock at 950 Danby Road, Ithaca, New York. You can also visit us on our website, www. Now here's this week's sermon.

00:43

A reading from the Apostle John's first epistle, chapter 1, verses 1 through 5. That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerning the word of life, the life was made manifest and we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life. That which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.

01:14

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us. And indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. This is the word of the Lord.

01:47

In the spring of 1999, those who were my age, young adults at the time, many of us were expectantly awaiting the premiere of the very first movie of the new Star Wars trilogy. It's called The Phantom Menace. I remember standing in line to get tickets. It was something that we had been waiting for for 20 years for a new Star Wars movie.

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But I have to confess to you, I was slightly annoyed because there was another sci-fi movie that was kind of stealing Star Wars thunder. It was called The Matrix. The Matrix also came out in 1999 and it became wildly popular. If you're not familiar with the story of The Matrix, it's the basic story is that the world that we are living in is not real. We are living in a fantasy world that is created by sentient machines. And the reality is that...

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We are plugged into little bubbles of liquid. We have respirators and feeding tubes shoved down our throat. And the machines are using our body heat and electricity as a source of power so they can

move. In other words, we're like living batteries. And so in the movie, everyone who exists is in this fantasy world that's created by the machines. Now, the story centers on a person named Thomas Anderson.

03:09

During the day, Thomas Anderson is a respectable business person, but at night he is a notorious hacker named Neo. One night, Anderson, Neo, is doing his hacking and on his screen, another hacker appears and sends him a message named Trinity. Trinity invites him to come to this place where he may find out more about the Matrix. And so he goes and he meets someone named Morpheus. Now all these names are just very ham-fisted with their meanings.

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Morpheus of course is the god of sleep and dreams. So he meets a person named Morpheus, and Morpheus tells him that he can, he tells him about the matrix, he tells him about reality, and he tells him that you can escape this reality if you want. He gives him a red pill and a blue pill. He says if you take the red pill, you will wake up in reality, and we will come and get you, and you will escape this fantasy world. If you take the blue pill,

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you won't remember this conversation you go on living in your fantasy world so he gives him the pills, of course Neo played by Keanu Reeves takes the red pill he wakes up in this little liquid pod the pod ejects him out and Murphy's ship comes and gets him and takes him away there's a lot more to the story and if you haven't seen it I encourage you to to watch it but what was interesting at the time is that there were many Christians in churches who

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thought that this was a very strong analogy for the Gospel. And they would use the movie, they'd show the movie, in evangelistic fashion, to talk about the good news of the Gospel. Basically, the idea that the world that we're in is not real, and we're trying to escape this world, and the way we escape it and get to the real world is through knowledge of the truth and a red pill. I could just see the youth group later.

05:03

the red, the blood of Jesus. The problem is, is the matrix is not an analogy for the Christian gospel. It is actually heresy. The ancient heresy called Gnosticism.

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Gnosticism teaches that this world is not real, that this world is evil, it was created by an evil God, and the way we escape this world is that this representative from the true God who we can't know comes to us, that's Jesus, Jesus wasn't really a flesh, he wasn't really incarnate, he only appeared to be, Jesus gives us a message and with that message we can escape this world into reality. That's not Christianity. That's Gnosticism and that's heresy.

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Today we come to the Gospel of John, and the Gospel of John is written to a similar heresy. We don't know exactly the heresy that John is writing about. The reason is because he does not describe it. We can sort of try to construct it from the things he tells us we should believe. A lot of people think that the heresy that was

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that it split the church and that false teachers were trying to pull people away from John's church was something like Gnosticism. But whether it was technically the ancient Christian heresy of Gnosticism or one other version of it, because this same idea has been around pretty much since the beginning. The idea that the world is evil and we're trying to escape it, and the way we escape it is through detachment and special knowledge, nirvana, whatever you want to call it. Almost all the religions of the world have this aspect.

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And one of the features of world religions is a pyramid. We have pyramids in Mesoamerica, we have pyramids in Asia, we have pyramids in Egypt, and perhaps the first pyramid was the Tower of Babel. The Tower of Babel was most likely a ziggurat, which is a stepped pyramid. The point of the Tower of Babel was not literally to try to reach God. I don't think they really thought they could do that.

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but that by moving up in levels of this temple and acquiring levels of secret knowledge, they could attain the knowledge of reality and escape the world. That's what some people think that the Tower of Babel was all about, and many religions, false religions, that is a central premise, is that you can escape this world through detachment and special knowledge. If we try to reconstruct what

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people were believing in pulling people away from the church in 1st John, we have a few features that we can go on. First of all, John emphasizes that the incarnation is real. So from that we can infer that people were teaching that Jesus wasn't really in the flesh. We also see him talking about that sin is not real. Sin doesn't exist. There's this quote at the end of chapter one that says,

08:01

Apparently these false teachers also were saying sin isn't real. It's an aspect of these dualistic religions where reality and earth and heaven are just radically separated. It's a feature of them that many of them deny the existence of sin. And we talked about this before. But if you believe that the world is not real and you're trying to escape the world to what it really is real, that means this world doesn't matter. And if you believe this world doesn't matter...

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you have basically two conclusions you can draw. The first conclusion is Stoicism, that if this world doesn't matter, I'm going to discipline my body and punish it so I can escape and get to the reality. Or Epicureanism, which says if this world doesn't matter, I'm going to do whatever I want because it doesn't matter. Apparently, there was some form of that in the false teaching that John is trying to combat. They were saying there is no sin, there's no such thing as sin, because this world isn't real.

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So from this we can kind of see what the teachings were. And I think it's important, scholars and biblical commentators will point this out, that John doesn't get too specific, why? Because we are able to apply it to a variety of contexts which have these basic features. That Jesus Christ either wasn't real or he wasn't fully God and fully human. That this world is an evil place that we're trying to escape. That the reality that we have, we need to change it or augment it, et cetera, et cetera.

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It is true that in the church, Western Christianity has been subject to these notions for a long time. The idea that the creative world is evil and we're trying to get away, that our bodies are evil, that the pleasures of the body are something we need to avoid or abstain from. These are all notions that plague our faith. But there's also, we see also in the prevailing cultures, different aspects which I'll be pointing out. So.

09:57

Today we're going to look at three points. We're going to do a little bit of backgrounding, give a little bit of biography on John. We're going to continue to cover some of that. But the first point is this.

John is asserting the authority of apostolic eyewitness. The reason why he is doing this, apparently, is that the false teachers were saying that what he was saying

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combating what he was saying with a false message and discounting his authority. If we look over to 3 John, and just to give you a little background, 1, 2, and 3 John are most likely, and I think, a packet. 1 John is a sermon that John preached in his home church of Ephesus because it had been ripped apart by this false teaching, this heresy. But John also knew that other churches nearby needed to hear it. So 2 John is a cover letter which was sent with 1 John.

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to send the, so that they could also hear this message. But then 3rd John tells us that the person who it was sent to did not receive it. 3rd John is written to another person named Gaius. And so 3rd John is the second attempt to get this sermon to that church and it was successful, we assume. But in 3rd John, as John is writing to Gaius, he says that there is a person and his name is Diatrophes. This is 3rd John verse 9. And it says,

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who likes to put himself first does not acknowledge our authority. This is one of the key aspects of what John is saying. He has apostolic authority. And in the first four verses that we read here, we see that that apostolic authority is built on the fact that John is an eyewitness. He says, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, we have looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.

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That word is literally epiphany, it's shown. And we have seen it and testified to it and proclaim it to you, the eternal life. John is asserting that he saw these things. That he saw Jesus, that he heard Jesus, that he touched Jesus. We know that from the text that we read, the Gospel text that we just read, he was close enough to Jesus to lean back against him so he knew what Jesus smelled like. He had the sensory experience of Christ.

12:21

John's point is that the eyewitnesses to Jesus have the message. These eyewitnesses were given authority by Jesus to be apostles. And the church must be founded, the grounding of our faith must be upon the authority of apostolic witness. Now the reason why this is a big deal is because of the historical context of where we are at the writing of this letter.

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probably the last letter that was written in the Bible, first, second, and third John. In the course of John's life, where we find ourselves, is I think after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, if all the other books of the New Testament were written before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, I think this is the only ones that are written after. The reason is because of some of the historical clues and what we know about the history of the Roman Empire at this time.

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Tradition tells us that after the fall of Jerusalem, many Christians were scattered before the fall and after the fall. Many Christians were scattered and dispersed away from Jerusalem. John was supposed to have gone to Ephesus with Mary. If you remember when Jesus was dying on the cross and Mary was there, John was also there. And so he said, Behold your mother, behold your son. And so John took her into his house and took care of Mary.

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So according to tradition, and the tradition is testified to by people who lived shortly after, one of the disciples of John was Polycarp and Papias, Irenaeus was one of their disciples, and he writes these things down about 70 years after, well, more like 100 years after they occurred. But apparently, John moved to Ephesus, he lived in Ephesus, at some point he was exiled to the Isle of Patmos, maybe during the time of Nero, he spent 15 or 20 years in exile slash prison.

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Then after the mission, one of the Roman emperors was assassinated. The next emperor named Nerva released people from their exiles, and so he was able to go back to Ephesus. At this time, he is the last living apostle, likely. He is very old, 90s, maybe older. And so, as a last living apostle, and someone who was getting on in age, the crisis of the church at this point and what followed...

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is a crisis of leadership. Who is going to lead the church? In the apostolic era, it's the apostles. As the apostles are dying, the question is who will lead the church and what will the church be founded upon? These false teachers are taking advantage of that crisis in order to spread their false message. And so here comes John at the end of his life with this definitive statement.

15:07

that the church must be grounded on the authority of the apostolic witness. Writers that came just after them affirm this. The very first Christian text we have outside of the Bible is called the Didache. It was written about 80, 90. The Didache wrestles with the fact who can we trust who has the message. So they're wrestling through the truth of the message. Two other writers, Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Rome, write around the turn of the first century, around the year 100.

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They reference Peter and Paul and they are working through this crisis of what is the church founded upon and how will the church move forward without the apostles. John's assertion, Peter also has this same assertion, so does Paul, but John is the last one to have to make it. John's assertion is that the church has to be founded upon the authority of the apostolic witnesses.

16:02

And this is essentially John's version of what we will later call Sola Scriptura. If you're familiar with the history of the Protestant Reformation, one of the five slogans of the Reformation is Sola Scriptura, which means Scripture alone. What John is saying is that our faith must be founded upon Scripture. It has to be Scripture. It has to be the writings of the apostles. There's more to it than that. I believe it was organic connectivity, which I'll mention in the third point.

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to the apostles. But at least it has to be the teaching of those who saw Christ, who witnessed Christ, and put this down in scripture for us to read. And on the basis of that, John says you should listen to him and not listen to those who are spreading false teaching because he is the one who saw Jesus. He is the one who touched Jesus, he is the one who heard Jesus, and he has the apostolic authority to bring this message forth.

17:01

So the second point is this, John's apostolic authority, his eyewitness authority, asserts the fact of the incarnation. John asserts the fact of the incarnation. This is the most important thing to John in this text, that Jesus Christ really was incarnate. It's not as clear in 1 John that he makes some statements.

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that come close to saying it. If you look in 1 John 5, 11, and 12, it says, whoever has the son has life, whoever does not have the son does not have life. But in 3 John, it is very clear that what he is talking about is the incarnation of Christ is what is being denied.

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Let's see. Maybe it's in, actually it's in 2 John. OK, here we go. 2 John, verse 9. It says, everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teachings of Christ. Sorry, verse 8. Where is it? It's verse 7. Keep going back.

18:18

He says, 2 John, verse 7, For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. This is what they were saying. Such a one is a deceiver and the antichrist. This is one of the only places in the Bible that mention the word antichrist. What is the antichrist? Someone who denies Jesus came in the flesh.

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He says, watch yourselves so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teachings of Christ does not have God. Whoever abides in the teachings has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching that Jesus came in the flesh, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. John is asserting the fact.

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of the incarnation because that is what was being denied. This is why in 1 John 1-4 that we read today, there is so much emphasis on the physical, sensual reality of Christ. John says, I saw him, I heard him, I touched him, he was not a ghost, he was not an apparition, he's real, he came in the flesh. And this is of utmost importance for John.

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in combating the teachings of these false teachers. In other words, the message of Christianity is not that we're trying to escape this world and Jesus comes to give us the truth, the secret to escape it. The message of Christianity is that God himself took on the stuff of this world, entered into it and gave his life to redeem it, and he came so that we could stay here. Jesus didn't come so we leave here.

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Jesus came so we could stay here. And this has all sorts of implications for our life and for the way we, for our ethics and our morals. But John asserts the fact of the resurrection. He asserts, sorry, of

the incarnation. And he says, Jesus is real. Jesus came in the flesh. And this is what I am proclaiming to you.

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There's a quote on page 3 that I think puts this very well. This is from a covenant seminary professor who wrote a commentary on the letters of John named Robert Yarborough. He said, in Jesus Christ, what is eternal and transcendent has become palpably imminent. In other words, tangible, palpable, here, present. This is John's point. Christ is real.

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He's a real person and this is our reality. We're not trying to escape this reality. We are here in this present reality. And this is where God has created us and this is where God wants us to be. So John is asserting the authority of apostolic witness. John is articulating the fact of the incarnation of Christ. And thirdly, John is proclaiming the source of life and joy.

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and fellowship. This is what he says the letter is all about. He says, we have seen, we have heard, we have touched concerning the word of life. The word of life. The life was made manifest and we have seen it. And we proclaim to you the eternal life which is with the Father and was made manifest to us. The source of life is in the incarnate Christ.

21:54

The source of life is in the word of God, which is revealed to us through His chosen instruments, the apostles and the prophets. This is the source of life. He also says this is the source of joy. In verse 4, we are writing these things so that our joy can be complete. The lesson here is that there are all sorts of things which purport to give us life. There are all sorts of things that purport to give us joy. You know...

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One of the applications of this, I think, is that we are not trying to escape our bodies. One of the things that the culture tells us, and is very prevalent in the culture, is the way to achieve life, the way to achieve life and joy is to escape our bodies. We're reminded of this this time of year with all the advertisements for gyms. You know, we're told that we need to escape our bodies, we need to make our bodies better. Of course, many people...

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undergo plastic surgery in order to change their bodies and to escape their bodies. You know, there are folks, apparently, I read about this week, everything in the 90s is coming back, including eating disorders and anorexia. There are young women who end up being ultra-skinny, and they talk about it on the internet. They obviously have an anxiety and a disorder and a sickness, but they're buying into the idea that they need to escape their body. Their body's not good enough.

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And this is not the teaching of scripture. The teaching of scripture is not that our bodies are evil when we need to change them or we need to escape them. The teaching of scripture is that our bodies are created by God and they are good, but they are fallen. And so we're not trying to escape our bodies, we are patiently awaiting for the resurrection and the remaking of our bodies. That's not to say that we should do anything to change our bodies, but the idea that we would need to...

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to augment them, to escape them in order to have life and joy is engaging in an idolatry that John is trying to combat. If we're unhappy with our bodies, which I think many of us are, we patiently wait for the return of Christ where our bodies will be glorified.

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and we will be made new. That is the message of the apostolic witness. We're also told that we can have joy through all sorts of things. We're told that pursuits of different pursuits will give us joy, that would give us fulfillment, that will give us meaning, whether it's substances that we can take that would give us joy, pursuits that will give us joy. As we enter into a new school year, perhaps we are being bombarded by the idea that our academic performance will bring us joy in life.

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That also is a false reality. Yes, our academic performance can give us this great sense of satisfaction. And I'm all for it. Achievement. Wonderful. But it's not the source of your life. The source of your life is found in pursuing the incarnate Christ. But the last thing we see is that the source of life and joy is found in the fellowship between God's people and with God. The horizontal and the vertical.

25:02

You see, it's not just enough to know things, and hear things, and understand things. Part of finding life and joy is to have fellowship with each other and with the triune God. This is also apparently one of the things that the false teachers were teaching. That they didn't need the fellowship.

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points out that the false teachers were denying the sacraments. They said the sacraments weren't real, they weren't necessary. I guess it makes sense if you don't think that Jesus was incarnate in His flesh and blood, you wouldn't eat the meal of His body and blood. And so part of what John is saying, I think, is that we need fellowship with one another and with God. We need His sacraments which draw us into Himself, feed us with Himself, and we need the fellowship of each other. This word fellowship...

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You know, we may think of potluck fellowships when we think of it, and those are great. We love to have those here. We're going to have one in a couple weeks. But the reason why we have a potluck fellowship meal is because we are trying to cultivate deep fellowship, which is what the Greek word here is used, koinonia, which is closer to the word communion. Deep communion with each other. And so, the source of life and light is not in anything else.

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but gathering together with God's people to hear the apostolic witness being read and taught and being connected to the organic church, the church of Christ which organically goes back to His apostles. This is essentially what John is saying, we cannot forgo these things and the world, the flesh and the devil will tell us all sorts of other things will give us life and joy than these things. I'll close with this.

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We've seen them come full circle from the matrix in 1999. Because there's a thing out there, and you've probably seen it if you're online, these extremely online people, they talk about red pilling. You ever seen them talk about red pilling? And what red pilling is, it means all sorts of things. And I'm not even sure if I know what all it means, especially when you talk about white pilling and black pilling. But at any rate, red pilling essentially refers to having the cover removed.

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understanding that the world we're living in is staged and buying into the world of conspiracy theories and so forth. It can also be an entryway into alt-right hyper-masculinity and those kind of

worlds. But it's something that people talk about, taking the red pill, entering into another reality. So this idea is still around, that we need to enter another reality, a real reality, that we need to see that everything around us is fake.

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But the lesson we have in Scripture is, and I'm going to go youth group on you, we don't need to take a red pill because we have the blood of Christ. We don't need to escape this world because the blood of Christ redeems this world. His blood is shed and covers this place. We don't need to seek an alternate reality. We don't need to seek another body. We don't need to seek another world because His red blood has been applied to all of it. And He is making all things new.

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So let us adhere to the apostolic witness and let us maintain his fellowship in Poinonia with each other. Let's pray. Thank you for listening to this week's podcast. Please rate and review us on your podcast service and share with anyone who may be interested. The intro and outro music for the New Life podcast is provided by Sandra McCracken with

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please visit her website at sandramacracken.com. We'll see you next week.