

"A Few Well-Placed Embers"

Revelation, Part 5: Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea

Pastor Elizabeth Coleman

Northwest Presbyterian Church

January 31, 2021

Text: Revelation 3:1-22

The church in Sardis had a reputation for being alive. They and others presumed that they were living in accordance with the will of God. They and others believed that their practices were acceptable, and they called themselves Christians — followers of Jesus Christ.

Yet, Jesus, who knew their hearts, their works and their intentions, said to them in his letter sent by way of John through the means of revelation, the "unveiling," disclosed the truth to them: they were a dead church. They had soiled their white garments that symbolized the purity and holiness that they had received at their baptism when they first believed. They had fallen into sin, of which Christ called them to repent.

The church in Sardis needed a revival, an awakening to realize that they had slipped away from the path where Christ was leading them by his example. Their ways were less than perfect before God. They had missed the mark, and had been lulled into a sleepy stupor that disregarded how far away from the path they had strayed.

Jesus admonished this majority of the members of the Sardis church to remember what they had received and heard: namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ that was proclaimed to them, and the promise of salvation and forgiveness of sins. They had received forgiveness, purification, sanctification, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In baptism, they had been born again. The slate of their sins had been wiped clean, and all of their past sins had been forgotten. Their spiritual "robes" had been made white when they were clothed in the righteousness of God through Christ Jesus. But now, they had soiled their clothes with sin, and they did not even realize that they were dirty.

Jesus warned them in his letter that if they did not wake up and strengthen those good aspects of their Christian walk that still remained, he would come to them like a thief, without fore-warning them of his arrival. To wake up meant to open their eyes that had become closed to the error of their ways through the habitual practice of what was for them "acceptable sins." They could no longer see them for what they were, because "everybody was doing

it." Although these sins were not acceptable to God, the effect of the "herd mentality" or doing like everybody else, had over time cause sin to feel comfortable for them. It no longer "felt wrong." It no longer caused alarm to commit these "acceptable sins." Since everybody else did it, too, there seemed to be no need to change. After all, they were all "Christians," and they were the majority of members in the church at Sardis.

Jesus burst this bubble of false illusions by calling them back to the reality of the standard of God. He informs them clearly that they are now a dead church. Those so-called "acceptable sins" had killed them as a congregation, and they were no longer the shining light that could lead others to God. Their light had gone out, and it needed to be rekindled.

But there was a glimmer of hope! There were a few **well-placed embers** among them, and they carried the fire of the Holy Spirit that guided them in the right path that leads to eternal life. They had not allowed the flame of their salvation to go out, but had remained vigilant, watchful and alert to the pitfalls of sin in all of its manifestations — both major and minor. They had not allowed secret sins to sneak into their lives in their infancy when they seemed harmless. They had not permitted minor offenses to go unchecked and had not joined the crowd in committing "acceptable sins."

Instead, they had maintained their faith and their integrity by keeping to the lifestyle of authentic Christianity — showing unconditional love from their heart to God and neighbor by both word and deed. They had remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, in spite of severe persecutions, trials and perhaps even ridicule from their fellow church members who had become accustomed to "acceptable sins."

Jesus commended these well-placed embers, who had maintained the integrity of their Christian walk, and promised that those few faithful members of the Sardis church would walk with him dressed in white, because they were worthy.

The good news in all of this is that Jesus also promised that if the rest of the congregation at Sardis would also conquer their sins by repenting of them, turning away from them, and obeying the directives of the gospel that they heard at first, they could also be clothed in white robes like the faithful few of Sardis. Jesus reassured them that he would not blot their names out of the book of life. Moreover, he would confess their names before God the Father and before his angels.

Jesus also invites us all to partake of these promises, along with the challenge of living a faithful Christian life: "Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Of all the churches, the church in Philadelphia is commended without any mention of fault or failure. Jesus says to them in his dictated letter that he knows their works, just as he had said to the other churches in their letters. But, to the church in Philadelphia, Jesus does not cite anything worthy of rebuke or repentance. Instead, he told them that he was setting before them an open door that no one could shut. Perhaps this alludes to their access into the eternal kingdom of God that no one would be able to prevent.

Jesus acknowledges that the people of the church at Philadelphia had little power, and yet they had kept his word and had not denied his name. Since this was an era of extreme persecution under the reigns of Nero and Domitian, in which many Christians were tortured and mercilessly killed, the fact that they had little power to resist their persecutors made their resistance all the more commendable. They had persisted in their faithfulness to the word of God, and they had not denied being followers of Jesus Christ, knowing full well that their admission of faith could bring about their physical death.

The early Christians had also been persecuted by the Jews, and many Jewish converts to Christianity had fled Jerusalem and its surrounding regions for fear of the persecution by Jewish leaders. Some of them settled in Asia Minor, as well as other regions of the Roman Empire. Some fled to Alexandria, Egypt and to other parts of East Africa. They carried the good news of Jesus Christ with them, and in this way the gospel was broadly spread. Jesus said that he would make sure that the Jews knew that he loved those who had believed in and followed him. He would even cause the Jews to bow down to the Christian believers.

These refugees did not have much worldly power in the lands to which they had fled, but they had tremendous spiritual power and were able to endure persecutions and still maintain their faith and allegiance to Jesus Christ.

For that, Jesus promised them that he would keep them from the hour of trial which would be coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

Since the people of the Philadelphian church were still in the midst of their struggle, Jesus encouraged them to hold fast to what they had, so that no one could cause them to lose their crown. He promised them the reward of

having the name of God, the name of the new Jerusalem and Jesus' own new name written on them by Jesus himself, if they conquer, that is, persist in true faith and faithful living to the end.

Again, Jesus invites us to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches, because the message contains wisdom for us, as well.

To the people of the church in Laodicea, Jesus who knows their works, uncovers their lukewarm faith, and exposes their lack of fervent love and practice of a faithful lifestyle. They were complacent in their economic wealth and worldly success. Because of their physical comfort from all of their human needs being met, they had assumed that their lifestyle pleased God.

Like many today, they equated wealth with righteousness. They thought that their prosperity was a sign of God's favor. Jesus does not allow them to continue in their ignorance, but informs them that they are, in fact, poor, wretched and blind according to his standards. Their error stemmed from the fact that they were neither cold nor hot in their faith. They were in the comfortable middle, not risking anything lest they be persecuted, but not giving up their association with the church, lest they be lost. They did just enough to get by.

They lived safe lives cushioned by their wealth and protected by their silence about their faith. They avoided the martyr's fate by keeping their mouths shut when they were around those who opposed their faith. As long as they prospered in the things of this life, they considered themselves to be in need of nothing.

But, Jesus turns that view on its head by telling them that they are in fact wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. Their spiritual state was the standard that Jesus used, and they were found to be in need of the gifts that only God could give. Jesus reproved them, because he loved them. He wanted them to have the true riches that last forever. He wanted them to have clear spiritual vision and the fervent zeal of the Holy Spirit within them that would set aflame their hearts with radical Christian love. Such a bold faith empowered by the fire of the Holy Spirit would assure them of never being lukewarm again.

Jesus calls the Laodiceans to repent earnestly. He tells them that he is even standing at the door, knocking. This is the image of urgency. Jesus wants so much to come in. He promises them that if they hear his voice and open the door, he would come in and eat with them, and they with him. If they

conquer — that is, endure in fervent faithfulness to the end — Jesus promised to give to them a place with him on his throne, just as Jesus, himself, conquered and sat down with his Father on his throne.

This seems to be the loftiest promise of all. It elevates a human being to the highest aspect of his being, bringing out that spark of God that lingered unnoticed throughout the earthly existence, and affirming the divinity within redeemed humanity. Jesus wants to do that for us, and invites us to hear these promises as our own, if we likewise conquer. A space on the throne of Jesus our King awaits us, if we will endure in fervent faithfulness to the end. Amen.