

LETTERS ABOUT LIFE

Scripture Lesson: Revelation 2:12-29

Text: Revelation 2:12ff

Songs: "Baptized in Water;" PH94 1,4; "Prepare our Hearts;" F33;

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus Our Lord,

Last week we ran out of time to touch adequately on the hologram of Smyrna turned toward Sully. Verse 10 speaks of persecution and the need to remain faithful even to death. The persecution we face in our culture is ridicule for our Christian convictions. Each congregation I have served has been as actively pro-life. Many in this congregation have been active in a politically unpopular, but very Biblical, position of pro-life. We commend you. You are "the faithful, even to the point of death." God in His grace will give you pro-life activists "the crown of life." We salute you soldiers of Christ's cause—especially on a baptism Sunday!

We should celebrate that this baptism Sunday. We cultivate a culture of life. We rejoice at birth and baptism. We are saddened that in the first week of the Obama administration the gates of abortion on demand have opened. Yet we are happy that we can continue to celebrate with God in the formation of each new life. We who cherish life that God gives must also work together to enhance the quality of life of each child of God. That requires we take seriously the vow we made this morning that we will assist Randy and Jodie in being the best Christian parents they can possibly be to each of their three children. Treasure this day of baptism.

Now let's move on to the next two letters. People look forward each weekday to get a letter in their mailbox, but instead most often it is just bills. When we go to the mailbox of Revelation 2 we discover the same thing. We hope for nice mail, but what we get is admonition. That is because we have a perfect God working to get us to live as He does. He is training us to live with Him in eternity. These are God's letters about the Christian life we are to live now in preparation for eternity. Tilt the hologram so we see not only history, but Sully.

V. 12. Remember the description of Jesus in chapter one? In verse 16 we read, "Revelation 1:16." Jesus is speaking to the church in Pergamum--and to us!

V. 13. The reason the Holy Spirit has John write this verse is that Pergamum had a hill outside the city covered with pagan temples and Pergamum was the official center of Emperor Worship in Asia Minor. This pagan, secular culture was determined to stamp out Christianity. Antipas was the first martyr in Asia Minor. He refused to worship the Emperor Domitian, so the Emperor had him slowly roasted to death in a bronze kettle. This happened in Pergamum--where Satan lives and has his throne.

Now you might say, "Pergamum and Sully are totally opposite. Sully is where Christian culture still prevails." You are right. Yet Sully is an exception in our culture. Where does Satan live? Not Africa. That continent is turning to Christ at a phenomenal rate. That is just great! We can say the same for many parts of Asia. Where is Christianity in retreat? In Europe, the continent of the Reformation, and in North America! Our sister churches over there are having a hard time. The Netherlands has always been very open. Remember where the Pilgrims went first? When they could not worship in freedom in England, they went to the Netherlands because it had an open society. They left the Netherlands not because they were persecuted, but too many of their sons were falling in love with cute Dutch girls. All of us who married a Dutch girl know why those English teenagers finally made their parents sail for America. The Netherlands is still a very open society. So our sister church really needs our help. If we are a chain of churches as Revelation pictures us, we will hold hands with them and help them all we can. People who want to sever relationships with those Continental churches miss

the whole point of the letters in Revelation. Christianity is slipping fast here in America. We are still a strong Christian community, for which we thank God, but beware because Satan can set up his throne here.

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V. 14. Balaam was a false teacher. He is a prototype of corrupt teachers who lead people to compromise the Christian faith. What a responsibility we teachers have: Christian school teachers, professors and pastors who are teaching elders. We must be sure that what we are teaching is really right with God's word. These teachers can be a wonderful help to Randy and Jodie as they instruct their children—or they can drive them away with the wrong words. Pray for the teachers, professors, and pastors who will meet Colby, Tysen, and Jessa needs.

V. 15. Pergamum had become lax. Remember what Jesus said to Ephesus? "Revelation 2:6." No mention of hating the practice of the Nicolaitans. Jesus does not tolerate compromise. Those who compromise the Christian faith are in danger of being cut up by that double-edged sword that comes from Christ's mouth.

"V. 16." "Repent therefore!" With an exclamation mark! How necessary that is for all of us Christians, including us at Sully. We struggle with the sin of compromise and our pride gets us into trouble. False pride is just as sinful as compromise and requires the same repentance.

"v. 17." Now we get into some of the symbolism of Revelation. The Israelites were fed with heavenly manna. That is celebrated in the Psalms. "Psalm 78:24." The hidden manna is in contrast to the unclean foods people ate the advice of "Balak who enticed the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols." Christians today are fed with the manna of God's word, a manna hidden from the sinful culture in which

we live. Speaking of eating, a white stone is mentioned. There are seven common ways of explaining the white

stone. The one that I favor is that in Pergamum stones were used as banquet invitations. A bright, white stone would be brought by a servant a few days before a wedding banquet. Those who had that special white stone were admitted as guests. On this invitation is a new name, the new name "Christian". No longer are they pagans, but now as members of the family of Christ they are Christians. In that culture people prized a new name because it indicated a change in character. That seems to be the custom John writes of in this verse.

"V. 18" Thyatira is the smallest and least significant of the seven cities, yet receives the longest letter. It indicates that what is important to people is not important to God and what it is important to God is often what is unimportant to people. As Stated Clerk of Classis I see the Classical Agendas first hand. I ask myself, "Which of these are really important to God?" I have my opinion. I think God cringes at some of the issues we debate and rejoices when we discuss and decide other issues. I must make sure that my thoughts are tested against God's word. Since I could be wrong I must treat each church and each concern with equal care in case their issues are really God's issues.

This is the only place in Revelation where Jesus is called the Son of God. He wants His heavenly majesty to be clearly understood before he gets to the body of the letter. That is also why the Holy Spirit through John describes Jesus having "eyes like blazing fire" and "feet like burnished bronze."

Perhaps the boys and girls, and certainly the young people, recognize the name Thyatira. That was Lydia's hometown, the seller of purple who was converted through Paul at the river in Philippi. Thyatira was known for its trades and manufacturing. It was the "Detroit" of the cities in Revelation, a place where unions were strong. Thyatiran trade unions hurt the spread of God's good news to the city by their insistence on groupthink.

"V. 19." There is improvement. We all are for improvement. One of the challenges that we lay before our young people is to improve. There are many things about church life that I think are vastly superior to the time when I grew up. I think of Facing Your Future, retreats, 412, and the involvement of youth in church life. Each

is a great improvement. I challenge young people today to make another improvement in their generation. The church should--and can!--get better and better! Can you imagine what Colby, Tysen, Jessa Kay and their friends will be able to do for Jesus in their generation?

“V. 20.” To the church in Pergamum the Holy Spirit recalled Balak; to the church in Thyatira, Jezebel. There

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is quite a difference between Balak and Jezebel in the Old Testament. That should not be lost in the comparison of these two letters. Thyatira was in sad shape. Some commentators think that Jezebel is only symbolic and others think this was real woman, perhaps the wife of the senior pastor who never converted to Christianity. Right at the leadership of the church was compromise.

It is important to see that God sees the sins as the same: Sexual immorality and food sacrificed to idols. All sins are sin. In pagan culture and also in the USA our sin before God has a certain sickening sameness to it.

“V. 21.” This is the most sad verse in the letter. God had given them a time for repentance, and the people are unwilling. That is the United States in 2009. We flaunt God. We should have been wiped away years ago. How long will God wait? We know the day of His judgment is coming—or is it beginning right now?

“V. 22.” The Greek words and sentence structure are powerful. In the Greek it is very plain. It says, “You want to hop in bed with Jezebel. Go right ahead. It will not be a bed of prostitution, but a sick bed and then a death bed.” In that time disease was always associated with sin. Long life meant God was pleased. So as the Ten Commandments speak God’s actions across the generations, so here “V. 23.”

“V. 24.” They are called to a special sort of martyrdom, the same kind to which Sully is called. To be a faithful Christian means hardship and suffering. It is not glorious and headline making. They went without jobs because they refused to burn a little incense, eat a little meat offered first to a pagan god, or engage in a little harmless sex between consulting adults. There is no opportunity for a moral crusade because people think you are a little weird. That is how sincere Christians are treated in America; not in open persecution that can invite martyrdom, but a marginalization that just keeps Christianity out of the mainstream. Jesus gives them one challenge. “V. 24.” That is the challenge Jesus has for you and me. Here at Sully we are committed to insuring that we hold on to God’s truth until Jesus comes. That is why our strong commitment to Christ-centered education. It was part of our vow today. Let’s keep it always strong at Sully!

“V. 25.” This is an echo of Acts 15:28,29, the advice of the Jerusalem Council to the Gentile believers, “Acts 15:28,29.”

“V. 26.” Jesus repeatedly spoke about the first being last and the last being first. Revelation shows us just how that happens. Here is little Thyatira almost unable to keep its head above water in the sea of secular surroundings and yet they are going to have great authority in eternity. How great?

“V. 27.” This is a quote from Psalm 2:9, the Psalm the teenagers remember is about God establishing His kingdom. God says, “Psalm 2:4-6.” This is a Psalm about God’s great power. Notice the last phrase of the verse, “Just as I have received authority from my Father.” The struggling Christians of Thyatira who overcome may be the last people on earth to have power, but are the tables ever turned in eternity when Jesus gives them His authority just as the Father had given Him authority. What a change!

Are you noticing how closely Revelation is tied to the rest of the Bible? Those who say we have a whole different book here, miss the whole point of Revelation being a picture of God’s final triumph and His people being triumphant with Him.

“V. 28.” We learn in the last chapter that this a reference to Jesus, “Revelation 22:16.” We are given Christ.

“V. 29.” This is the familiar conclusion to which we have become accustomed. Again it is a reflection of Jesus words to His disciples, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Now on to the last three churches. We kind of know the cadence, so we just have to catch the flow. Now we are in orbit and will be able to see what our great and gracious God does as we see this world from His perspective of love. Hang on, and enjoy the view!