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Sermon Series: *Lenten Letters*, No. 5

Sardis: False Reputations

March 29, 2020 (video)

Our text this morning comes from the book of Revelation.

I wondered a little about this idea of studying the churches of Revelation throughout Lent. I really did believe that's what God was leading me to do, but it still seemed a little strange, I think, because of the apocalyptic nature of Revelation.

I mean, who would have thought, just three weeks ago, that the days would seem as apocalyptic as they do – you know? It's eerie. Empty cities, empty parking lots. Empty roads. Empty store shelves...

In this past Thursday's midweek update, I wrote about how Curt Caldwell came into the office this week and mentioned how much these days remind him of the days during World War II – a very similar mood, a mood of caution and tension and conservation and maybe a little fear of what would come next – fear of the unknown.

Well, another fellow of his generation, Bernie Cobb, wrote back and said, generally, that he'd been having the same sort of thoughts as Curt, except that back then he remembers people standing in lines for gasoline and food and things like that, but he cannot remember ever seeing people stand in line for toilet paper – as people are doing today.

I guess with different eras – different generations come different priorities!

Revelation, Chapter 3 – Jesus' word, this time, to the church at Sardis:

To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

⁴ Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.

⁶ Whosoever will, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

As you know, all this video stuff is new to us. I think we're getting better.

The first Sunday – two weeks ago – the camera was jumpy because I was sitting on a bed, so every time I moved, you know, the camera would bounce a little.

Last week, the camera was still, but the lighting was bad – even with the shade pulled, it was too bright.

Now, let me say, I didn't mind hearing about those sorts of things from some of you – that's good, and we're fixing that.

But, I did NOT need to hear the comment about, "Boy, I guess it's really true that a video camera will add ten pounds to the person being filmed. How many cameras is he using anyway?"

That's a little harder thing to hear.

Just the same, though, that's still a far easier thing to hear than what the church at Sardis had to hear from Jesus.

The church at Ephesus was strong in doctrine, but weak in world engagement – in mission – in outreach.

The church at Thyatira was engaged with their world, but had become weak in doctrine – in conviction of truth.

Here – the church at Sardis – Jesus says, was weak in both.

It didn't used to be that way. At one time the church was strong in both doctrine and mission. But things had changed.

Similar to the city itself.

It was built on a great cliff, and so the people there thought it impenetrable. Then in about the seventh century BC, gold was discovered in its hills, so the city was proud and known world-wide for its security and wealth. Everyone knew where Sardis was and what it was.

And then, in the year 17, it was destroyed by an earthquake.

It was rebuilt, by special order of the emperor, but Sardis was never the same.

And yet the people there either could not, or would not, see the change that had taken place. They lived on as though nothing had changed – they lived on as though they were still as wealthy and prominent and important and respected as ever.

They were living in the past – their own past, and they refused to see the present for what it really was.

And Jesus says here the same was true about the church there.

The church was once a spiritual powerhouse. Doctrinally pure. Engaged with their surroundings. A transformational force for good and right and godliness in their city.

But that was no longer the case.

Yes, there were a very few who were faithful, and who would be rewarded for their faithfulness – Jesus spells all that out.

But Jesus' main address is to the unfaithful there – who were the majority. It seems, in fact, that they were the vast majority.

He says to them, "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up!"

It's been suggested that "Watch out!" or, "Be alert!" are better translations of this, but all the elements are included. "You who have been asleep at the wheel – snap out of it and realize your true situation."

You who think all is well, but is not.

You who have deceived yourselves about your own spiritual condition –

You who are riding on the spiritual coattails of generations past, and are not even aware of it –

You who have inherited a fortune, but have chosen to use it only for your own personal luxury, rather than investing it in your community or future –

You who are merely putting on a show that is really helping no one –

Wake up and see the reality of your situation – before it's too late for you!

That was Jesus' message to them.

One commentator writes, "This is the most complete denunciation of any of the churches – not for wickedness, but for laxity and carelessness."

This is not something you want to hear from Jesus.

How did the church get to this point?

We're not told explicitly, but it's easy to imagine how it could have happened.

We take things for granted so easily – that what has been will always be.

That's been driven home these past few weeks, hasn't it? We have no guarantee at all that what has been will always be. In fact, you can pretty much guarantee that what has been won't always be – at least in this temporal world.

We're wise to grasp that – and live that reality.

We also too easily take things at face value – we're impressed, and we come to conclusions based, so often, on the wrong things.

I remember a few years ago some fellow – I think he was a pastor somewhere who was visiting the seminary – he drove in to the church parking lot. I happened to be out at my car, so he stopped and chatted for maybe 60 seconds – and he ended his "visit" by looking around at the buildings and saying, "Well, you have a tremendous ministry here – a tremendous ministry!"

Now I'm sure he was just trying to be kind or encouraging or whatever, but the truth is, first, it's not my ministry – it's not my ministry to have.

But beyond that, there's no way he could really know what was happening in this church by a 60-second look at the campus. This could be the unhealthiest church in the state – going through all manner of turmoil and junk – but you couldn't know any of that from the way the buildings look.

Whitewashed tombs, you know?

It's like the disciples when they were so taken with the buildings of Jerusalem – and Jesus said, "All these are going to fall down one day."

It's so easy to take things at face value, to assume that just because something looks good – or something was good at one time – it is, or still is good.

We can't do that. We have to live with our finger on the pulse of reality – to see things, with Jesus' help, as they really are, not as they were or as we wish they were or as they seem to be.

Because if we don't, Jesus says here, "I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you."

The glories of the past will neither please Jesus – nor keep us in right relationship with Him.

And the fact that we don't know what tomorrow holds means that this was an urgent matter for the church at Sardis – just as it's an urgent matter for us.

This all brings to mind the time in Matthew 21 when Jesus saw the fig tree by the road that had leaves but no figs, and he struck it down – because it was unproductive. It looked healthy enough, but it wasn't producing what it was intended to produce.

That was sort of his real-life illustration of what He'd said back in Matthew 3 that, "Every tree that fails to bring fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

Maybe we're learning this lesson as a nation in these days.

We have this image of ourselves being so strong and capable and independent.

And yet this microscopic bug comes along and – look what's happened to us!

Maybe what we've understood as success – as a nation – isn't really so successful in Jesus eyes.

Maybe this is revealing how far from real success we've strayed –

how far from God –

from holiness of heart and life –

from realizing that we are not independent, but that we are, in fact utterly dependent on God for anything and everything that's good –

and that we're dependent on each other in more ways than we know.

In what ways are we riding on the coattails of a past that is no more?

And how do we set out to recover that past as a people who love and serve God – who are not ashamed of Him, but willingly and passionately call on Him – not just in times of tragedy but in times of prosperity?

As God called on Sardis to repent of this sort of presumption and laxity, so does He call on us, as a nation today.

And, I think through this word to Sardis, Jesus calls us, as individuals and as a church, to do the same – to really ask the question, "What have we determined to be our parameters for success? And are they real – and are they important, truly – to Jesus?"

We might think the buildings, the finances, friendliness, excitement, the number of events or programs make a

difference. And it's not that those things are bad. But that's not what ultimately matters to Jesus.

Bob Mulholland, in his commentary on this passage asks these questions:

In our church—in our own spiritual lives—there may be excitement, but is there awe and humility?

There may be entertainment, but is there transformation?

There may be social awareness, but is God's divine, liberating power present?

Are we alive to God's Kingdom's perspectives and values and behaviors?

Or are we just living an image—an image of past vitality?

You see we all have an image we like to portray to other people. We want people to think that we're smart, we're happy, we're good looking, we're cool, we have it all together.

But sometimes the image we project and the reality of our lives is very, very different.

Just as He called the church at Sardis, Jesus calls us—He calls our church—He calls our community—and I think He's calling our nation—past the place of mere image.

The fact is, the very best image or reputation is worthless if it isn't true or real.

What other people think of us really doesn't matter in the end.

But what Jesus knows of us does matter—forever.

And so, He's calling us past mere image and on to truth. And in doing so, He's graciously letting us know that how we answer His call—that's what makes an eternal difference.

How hard it would have been for those at Sardis to hear Jesus say, "You have a reputation of being alive, but actually you are dead!"

Yet His words are words of grace, because repentance is still possible. And, it's repentance that leads to life.

I wonder if God is asking you, in these strange days, to stop investing so much effort in reputation—to stop living in realities past—and instead begin realizing and then investing in what's actually real in your life?

To repent—to turn from past to present—from reputation to reality.

By His Spirit, God is ready to help us do this. He's looking for willing hearts—people willing to listen and turn and walk in His ways.

Holy Spirit, I invite you—we invite you—to say whatever you need to say to us about the way we see reputation and reality, about whether we're living in past or present. Don't let us go the way of Sardis—keep us from kidding ourselves about who we really are, who we've become. Thank you for loving us so much that you call us to yourself through repentance—this grace of warning and the ability to turn and walk in a different direction—toward you instead of away from you.

Jesus open our eyes where they need to be opened and turn our feet as people—as families, as a church, and as a nation—toward You.

May you sense the Lord's presence in your life this week.

May we see His grace in everything He allows into our lives.

May we respond to Him—to His voice and guidance—quickly and in faith.

And may we take every opportunity to love, to encourage, to help, and to be His body—His presence—in our world.

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