

Preaching Copy: When Fear Replaces Faith-Revelation 2:10

Mid-Week Lenten Service #2

Wednesday, March 11th. 2020

Text: Revelation 2:10

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Stop fearing! (Stop being afraid of) the suffering that is about to happen. Behold (listen up-pay attention), the devil is about to throw some of you into prison (imprisonment), in order that you might endure testing (tempting); and you shall have the kind of persecution that seems hopeless and never ending that will last for ten days. You are to be faithful unto death, and I will give to you the crown of life

Exegetical Statement

Christ calls out to His church in Smyrna as they undergo persecution from Rome to worship the Emperor and the Roman gods. They are also undergoing persecution from the Jews who are working with the Romans to bring about their demise because they believe that worshipping Jesus is worshipping a false god. Because this Church has lost their first love, they are lacking that perfect love that drives out fear. They are not willing to give up all they have rather than fall away. They fear of loss of temporal things and their temporal life which has become more important than their fear of and love for the God, who can destroy them physically and spiritually forever in hell. He reminds them that the suffering that they are facing, although real and painful, will only last for a short period of time, not for the eternity that the devil tries to make them believe. While they may have lost all their temporal wealth, through faith in Christ they are rich in the true wealth that they have now and will have overabundantly in eternal life. He who suffered their death and rose again as proof of their salvation gives to them through faith the power to withstand the testing. Through the ongoing work of their baptism He replaces in their hearts the sacrificial love that they had lost. No matter what happens in this life they will be given the victory that Christ won, which no one can take away. And through His victory will be more than conquers in eternal life.

Focus Statement:

Jesus comes to us in Word and Sacrament with healing and strengthening needed to face persecution. His suffering and death assure us that whatever we face is not punishment as He took that for us. His love renewed in our hearts is far more valuable than anything the enemy could ever take from us. In Him we have life now, His real presence carrying us through the times of trial in this world making them instead of means of separation, means that draw us closer to Him. And if we are called to give our life as a witness of faith, then we have lost nothing but gained eternity.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

The Church throughout the ages has been no stranger to persecution. The Church in the world today suffers extreme persecution. As we have been lulled into loss of our first love we are unprepared for the persecution that is to come before the Last Day

What the hearer should do as a result:

Through participation in Word and Sacrament keep that first love alive so that Christ's perfect love can expel the fear that seeks to rule our hearts and minds. See times of trial and testing as Christ drawing us closer to Him. Pray for our brothers and sisters suffering persecution now.

Subject Sentence: Christ's love held in faith drives away fear

Introduction: Smyrna-our 2nd Stop

Tonight we visit stop #2 on our tour of the 7 Churches of Revelation. And the letter that is our topic of study tonight was originally written to the Church in the city of Smyrna. This city was located about 40 miles north of Ephesus, which we looked at last week. In the days of the Apostle John, Smyrna was a beautiful place, and an important city in the region of Asia Minor which is now modern-day Turkey. Historians believe its population would have been around 100,000. It was known for having streets that met at right angles in a day and age when many other cities had streets that radiated out from the center of the city like spokes on a wheel. It was famous for its advances in the areas of science, medicine, and its magnificent buildings. Among those were a large public library, and a museum dedicated to the ancient Greek author Homer, whom they claimed used to live where their city now stood. The city also contained a beautiful stadium where the Greek Olympic Games were held.

It was a city fiercely loyal to Rome. They supported worship of the emperor as well as worship of the Roman gods. The one exception was the Jewish Synagogue which was Rome allowed to exist as a legal religion in the Empire. Otherwise it was mandated that those who lived there worship the Roman gods and worship the Emperor. These were things that Christians, who worshiped only the Triune God, could not do. And so they were targeted for persecution, even by the Jewish Synagogue. This is why Jesus refers to them as the Synagogue of Satan, because they took an active role in targeting Christians for persecution. They considered Jesus to be a man and not a God, and worship of Him the same as worshipping Satan.

It was in this city that a disciple of the Apostle John named Polycarp was martyred. He had been accused of refusing to worship the Emperor and was brought to the town square. As the charges were read the members of the Synagogue of Satan ran to collect firewood. Polycarp was tied to a pole and told to deny Christ and confess Caesar and Lord or die. He responded **"You threaten me with a fire that burns for an hour and then is extinguished. But you are ignorant of the fire of coming judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly."** And so the fire was lit, and Polycarp was martyred by being burned at the stake.

It is to the Church in this city that Jesus has John write, (**Revelation 2:8**) **"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.'**" To a Church facing persecution Christ reminds them that He is the God of the Old Testament: the "First and Last", which was a title used in the book of Isaiah. He is the God who took on human form so He could experience death: your death and my death, and who came back to life to give to His Church life now, and eternal life to come.

He tells them **Revelation 2:9** **"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan"** He tells them that He is the God who is present with them in their trials and tribulation. He knows what they are suffering. He knows that they struggle to make ends meet as they are punished by the unbelievers for their loyalty to Him, and even by those Jews who claim to worship God, but instead serve the devil.

He tells them **Revelation 2:10a** **"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation."** Actually a better translation would be **"Stop being afraid!"** In their trials and persecutions the devil had been whispering to them that their suffering would last forever in order to take away their hope and replace it with fear. Jesus promised that it will last for "ten days". In Revelation numbers always have symbolic meaning. In this case Jesus is not referring to a literal 10 days, but a short yet defined period of time of which the starting and ending have been decided by Christ Himself, not the Romans, and not even Satan. Still, the possibility of facing persecution and tribulation for any amount of time is enough to cause fear in their hearts as well as the hearts of us gathered here today too.

Persecution of the Church is nothing new. Dr. Louis Brighton, the Seminary Professor who wrote the Concordia Commentary on the Book of Revelation shared with his Seminary Class a story he heard while serving as a pastor in England. His organist was a quiet and withdrawn man who had grown up in the country that is now Croatia. He lived there at the end of World War II, when the Allies gave control of that area to the Soviet Union. Communism had no place for Christianity, and they began a campaign to wipe it out. When the soldiers heard that this man was the organist at the local Lutheran Church, they brought him and his family to the town square and called all the townsfolk to gather as witnesses. A soldier pulled his gun and put it to the organist's forehead and ordered him three times to "Deny Christ or die!" The organist refused to do so each time. So the soldier took his gun from the organist's forehead and put it to the forehead of his wife while he and his children looked on. "Now", said the soldier, "Deny Christ!" The man's lip trembled, and tears fell down his face. His wife spoke up telling him, "Don't do it! Never deny Christ. No matter what happens we will have eternity together in heaven." The organist responded to the soldier "I will not deny my Lord and Savior." With that the soldier pulled the trigger three times and killed the man's wife and two children. And then they let him go; to live with that horrible image the rest of his life."

There have been many other similar stories throughout the centuries. But as Americans where this kind of persecution is for the most part foreign to us, we forget that it still goes on to this day. In the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt Islamic Militant soldiers regularly kidnap and torture Coptic Christians. An organization called the Voice of the Martyrs tells of a 35-year-old Christian shopkeeper who was confronted one day in his shop by several masked men armed with automatic rifles. They made him hand over his money and the most valuable merchandise in his shop. Then they trained their rifles on him and told him to choose between converting to Islam or death. When he refused, they shot him dead with multiple rounds while his customers and other townsfolk looked on. And lest you think this is an

isolated problem in one country, the Voice of the Martyrs has similar accounts that happen regularly in such countries as Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, and other places.

Here in America, for the most part, we have been spared such brutal persecution. But the devil has other ways to persecute the Church in America. It comes as a consequence of our committing the first sin that only Christians can commit. It comes when we lose our first love, when we replace Jesus on the throne of our heart with something else. When we instead make our wealth, our health, and our lives as important or more important than Him. When we allow ourselves to be caught up in the fear-filled panic spreading this country over the Coronavirus. When we are unwilling to speak the truth in love concerning God's design for marriage being one man and one woman. When we are unwilling to speak out for the lives of the unborn because we don't want to face the anger of the Women's Rights Groups, or even our neighbors, who might accuse us of suppressing the right of women to have adequate health care. We are even fearful to proclaim openly Jesus testimony from **John 14:6 "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"** because it might offend Muslims, or even cause them to retaliate against us. In these ways we allow fear to replace our faith, just as if we had been given the ultimatum to "Deny Christ or die".

Jesus speaks to us in this letter to "**Stop being afraid**". He warned His Church in **Matthew 10:18, 21-22** "**¹⁸and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles....²¹Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, ²²and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved**" We hear His promise in this letter that the one who endures will be saved. We hear his promise in **Revelation 2:10-11** "**¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.**" We hear the promise of the crown of life and that the one who conquers will not be hurt by the "second death" which is the eternal death all unbelievers will suffer in hell. But we don't have it within ourselves to conquer this fear that replaces our faith. We don't, but Christ does!

He comes to you in His Word and Sacrament to renew in your hearts that first love that you have lost. He replaces it with His love that flows to you from the cross. It is the love that moved Him to take on your flesh, and your sin, and suffer and die for them. It's the love that made Him remain on the cross until He could say with His dying breath "**It is finished: your sins have been paid in full.**" He died to forgive even your sin of giving up your first love. The faith that unties you to His suffering and death for all men, that makes it "for you", is the power that moves you to repent of your sins, and to remove whatever it is that you have placed on the throne of your heart. And then the indwelling Holy Spirit given in your baptism sets the King of Kings and Lord of Lords on that throne where He belongs.

The Apostle John writes about this in **1 John 4:13-18a** ¹³ **By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.** ¹⁴ **And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.** ¹⁵ **Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.** ¹⁶ **So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.** ¹⁷ **By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.** ^{18a} **There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”** That perfect love that we receive through faith in Christ is the power to cast out the fear from our heart. And it happens every time we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us through the Word and the Sacrament.

The Holy Spirit points us to hold fast by faith to Jesus promise in **Matthew 10:29-31** ²⁹ **Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.** ³⁰ **But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.** ³¹ **Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”** Christ shows us how much more valuable we are when He came and died for us. With Christ ruling in our hearts we can accept the truth of **James 1:2-4** ² **Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,** ³ **for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.** ⁴ **And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.** We understand that the devil’s persecution becomes, in the hands of our ruling Savior, the means to protect and build up our faith, so that his attempts to rule us by fear only serve to draw us closer to Christ and His perfect love. The Spirit renews and strengthens our faith so that we (Revelation 2:10) **Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”**

Persecution of the Church has happened in the past, continues on today, and will be happening somewhere in the world until the day Christ returns. Persecution is already at our doorstep and more than likely will increase in intensity and force as we approach the Last Day. The temptation will remain to let our fear replace our faith. But the Spirit promises to work through the means of grace to replace the first love of Christ in our heart. To make Jesus once again our King and our Savior. And His perfect love present in us by faith, will always defeat our fear. May His work be ongoing in your life and mine until the day He returns. Amen.