

The Letter to Smyrna: Fear unto Death vs. Courage unto Life

First Sunday in Lent (YrB)

[Psalm 16:1-6; Isaiah 14:12-17; Revelation 2:8-11; Matthew 24:5-15]

February 21, 2021

Rev. Frank C. Ruffatto

Redeemer Lutheran Church – Charleston, WV

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Some have viewed the book of Revelation as one of woe. What does this letter to the Church in Smyrna convey?
 2. What does the Church today face in terms of false teaching? What is our response?
 3. What kind of persecution does the Church face in various parts of the world?
 4. What, in this letter to the Church in Smyrna, brings you comfort?
-

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and our Lord and King, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Let us Pray: Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are, yet without sin: give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit; and, as you know our weakness and our fear, so may we know your power to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, Amen.

I realize this is somewhat awkward, to have someone you have never met bring you a special message from God. But before you blame your pastor, it is not his fault. Pastor Polycarp was reluctant to give his pulpit to someone he had never met, especially someone who literally appeared out of nowhere.

Pastor Polycarp was preparing his sermon when, in the blink of an eye, I was there. Now I had always been there, but your pastor did not know it. Seeing me, he thought I was a stranger who needed his advice or a gift of love from the church.

But it was only me, the angel of the parish. Pastor Polycarp was slow to accept the idea that I was an angel, but the building was securely locked and still I was standing there. He concluded that I must be who I said I was, and I am an angel.

But I am not just any angel. I am your angel, the angel assigned to the church at Smyrna. I have been sent to you from the Lord Jesus Christ by way of your beloved apostle John, friend and teacher of your pastor, Polycarp. John wants me to tell you that he prays for you every day.

Indeed, he is far more concerned for your well-being than he is for his own, though he is a prisoner on Patmos, and you are free, at least for a while. You see, what has happened to John and to the other apostles – namely, martyrdom and prison – lies ahead for many of you.

You may call me Stephanos, “the crowned one.” There are good reasons for me to take that name. Your great city of Smyrna is known as a crown. Rome calls you “the lovely, the crown of Ionia, the ornament of Asia.” Yet those attributes that inspire this name are of little value. The reference recalls the religious character of the people here, people of devotion, but not to the God who made heaven and earth.

No, the people are devoted to the state, which to the residents of Smyrna has become its god. Smyrna was the first city in the Roman Empire to build a temple to the goddess Rome. Along with her temple are ones dedicated to Tiberius, son of Augustus, and to Livia. There is even a temple to the Roman Senate. It is as if your neighbors will do anything to curry favor with the current masters of the world. In exchange for this shame and debasement, your fair city receives a library, a theater, a stadium. These edifices are beautiful now, but in a few years, they will be piles of broken stone, just as Rome will be.

But you and your neighbors have little in common. Your faith has kept you from running with the idolaters. You have stood fast and refused to worship those pitiful idols Rome calls its gods. Because of this, you already are suffering: an occasional arrest, a key leader flogged and imprisoned. Soon you will suffer more.

Some of the Jews who claim to be God’s children have allied themselves with the pagans who oppose you. These enemies claim that you are traitors to Rome. Although pagan and Jew are hostile to each other, they hate Christ even more. Therefore, they hate you, Christ’s followers.

Besides all this, you live amid poverty, barely able to feed, clothe, and house your families. Your neighbors do not want to hire atheists and cannibals, which is what they consider you to be.

This, because you have cast aside the gods of Greece and Rome, gods that can be seen, your neighbors believe you have no god at all. You are atheists. Surely a people who practice human sacrifice, eating and drinking the blood of the victim, are the most unsavory sort. Which is what they think about our Holy Eucharist. It is all untrue, of course. It is all a misunderstanding of your faith, but that is why your enemies hate you and want to be rid of you. No wonder you are frightened.

But do not be afraid! I bring you Jesus’ own words written in John’s hand. These are words of encouragement. I bring you a message from **“the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”**¹ Because He who was crucified now lives, every problem you face is temporary, a moment not worth comparing to the glory prepared for you by Him.

Rome, your pagan enemies, the lying fanatics, they all will be gone in no time. But not Jesus. Jesus is the one who existed before all else, who died, and who now lives to defend you. Soon you will enjoy the fullness of His victory. No matter how terrible the events ahead,

¹ Revelation 2:8

you are on the winning side, Jesus' side. Nothing can harm you because nothing can harm your resurrected Savior.

Perhaps you wonder if Jesus even notices what you endure each day in your service to Him. He most certainly does. He says to you, reassuringly, **“I know your tribulation and your poverty, (but you are rich!)”**² And you are!

Does pagan Smyrna have what you have? You possess the treasures of God's Law and Gospel, His grace, the forgiveness of sins, citizenship in God's eternal kingdom, membership in the family of believers in Christ, a family that cares deeply for you. Smyrna thinks of itself as a glorious crown, but it is all tin and rhinestones compared to what God has given you in Christ.

What of those accusations from unbelieving Jews who have allied themselves with the idol worshipers against you? Do you not think Jesus is aware of that too? He says, **“I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.”**³ These Jews say you are traitors to Rome. But how could that be when you pray daily for your emperor and governor?

Your only crime, if it is a crime, is that you do not worship your rulers. Those who claim Moses as their lawgiver should remember his command not to bear false witness. May they, who first had the Law, repent of their slander before it is too late. It is not you but these false Jews who have reason to be afraid.

So, friends of Christ at Smyrna and Pastor Polycarp, do not be afraid. Yes, you will suffer – some of you a great deal, especially you, Polycarp. You, dear pastor, will continue to serve in this place for many years, defending the faith not only against pagans and unbelieving Jews but also against Christian heretics and Gnostics. There are troubles ahead that you cannot even imagine.

False teachers, dangerous wolves as yet unseen in Smyrna, will undermine the apostolic faith. Marcion will deny that the God who created the world is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. He will claim there is nothing to God but love, that an evil, false god was responsible for the suffering and death of Jesus.

Then Valentinus will convince many that everything physical is evil, that the spiritual world alone is good, that heaven is made up of pairs of “aeons” – angel-like, almost divine beings, one of which fell into sin and then created the world. To Valentinus, even Christ is an aeon that adopted a human body.

Many will consider this nonsense to be wisdom, but Polycarp will know better. He will defend the truth of the Trinity, the truth of the divine and human natures of Christ, the truth of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection for sinners.

² Revelation 2:9

³ Revelation 2:9

Polycarp will be a giant of faith and orthodoxy, doing battle with every enemy of Jesus. He will be arrested at a public festival and given the opportunity to renounce his faith. He will refuse, proclaiming that he has served Christ for 86 years and is not about to deny him now. Then Pastor Polycarp will be burned to death, as may some of you.

‘But do not be afraid,’ Jesus says. It is a trial you must go through, but His grace is sufficient for what lies ahead. Persecution will last only ten days. Does that mean it will last literally ten, twenty-four-hour days? No, that is not what John, and the Spirit of Jesus are telling you. Ten days means there is a limit.

When the testing is complete, the suffering will end. For some of you, that will be the day you die in faith, as it will be for Polycarp. For others, it will be when persecution ends, and you can live out your years peacefully. But the persecution will end. That is a promise from Jesus. Therefore, Jesus exhorts you to **“be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”**⁴

Many of you seem so troubled by death, so anxious that you will do anything to forestall it. Why? For an unbeliever, death is understandably a terrible thing. It is blackness. It is a nightmare of the unknown. It is a den of horrors.

But not for you. For you, death is a door to something far better – a place of light and peace in the presence of Jesus, whom you will at last see face-to-face.

Have you not repeatedly recited the words of the precious psalm: **“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me”**?⁵ How can you fear the valley if your Savior has trod its path ahead of you and returns to carry you safely through it? Fear is what happens when your gaze dwells on your circumstances rather than on Jesus’ face.

Beloved, lift up your heads from all these things that frighten you and rest your gaze on the King of glory! As you do, you will find your heart encouraged to keep going, to stay in the race and finish it. Then you will receive the promised crown of life. This is not a crown worn by kings, one heavy with gold and jewels. It is not a crown that someone wears whether or not he deserves it. That is not the crown to which you look forward.

Yours is a crown of living laurel, woven into a ring, a crown like that worn by the athlete who labored for it, who sweated and struggled and agonized, every muscle straining to finish the race.

And, beloved, you will finish because Jesus has run the race for you and won. He is there at the end of the course, calling you. The Holy Spirit dwells within you, making you a holy temple for Christ. God’s angels like me are caring for you, lifting you up when you stumble.

⁴ Revelation 2:10

⁵ Psalm 23:4

Thus, the crown, a crown of life eternal, is yours as you receive it by means of faith, as Word and Sacrament keep it before your eyes. If this is the prize of your heart, the prize for which you yearn, every resource of God's grace will empower you to receive it.

Do you hear me, Smyrna? Do you hear me, all who will read this letter in the years to come? Suffering lies ahead. You may not suffer like Polycarp, burned to death as the mob laughed and cheered, but you will suffer.

Perhaps your suffering will be from the pain of faithless friends. Maybe your suffering will result from the rejection of those who spurn your faith. Maybe you will feel alone in your service of God because your loved ones feel no need for Jesus.

Your Savior understands your suffering. One day you will see for yourself that it was not in vain. Keep the eyes of your faith on the crown Jesus promises, knowing that **“He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”**⁶

Remember, you are never alone. Your angel may be sitting right beside you now. I have stood beside Pastor Polycarp many times as he wrote his sermons, though he never knew it until today. From the way he is looking at me, I can tell that he would like his pulpit back. So, with your permission, I will return to my guard post on your behalf. Even so, hold on to the words of the Psalmist: **“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”**⁷ Amen.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.⁸

⁶ Revelation 2:11

⁷ Psalm 27:1

⁸ Romans 15:13