

***The Letter to Philadelphia: Neglect – Locked Out in Death's Night*¹**

Fifth Sunday in Lent (YrB)

[Psalm 132:11, 13–18, Isaiah 60:3–11; Revelation 3:7–13; Matthew 28:16–20]

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Points to Ponder

1. How does the proper distinction of Law and Gospel help us wield the ‘key of the Gospel’?
 2. How can we share the Gospel with others as we physically serve them?
 3. What fears or hesitations do you have when given the opportunity to share the Gospel?
 4. Word and Sacrament is a gift from God – how does it help you get a glimpse of heaven?
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Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and our Lord and King, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Let us Pray: Gracious God, thank You for Jesus, the key to life, who has unlocked the door to heaven for us. Give us such love for others that we may freely share the key with them and so do our part, in Your strength, to carry out the Great Commission. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

It might seem like I am here to preach to the choir – and maybe I am. After all, there is little to fault you for as a congregation. Perhaps first I should introduce myself. I am the angel Kleis [Klay-iss], and my name means “key.” Jesus, whom I serve, holds the key to the New Jerusalem, a key He has entrusted to the congregation here at Philadelphia and to every Christian church. It’s the key of the Gospel, a key that exists nowhere else but in the church.

Jesus’ desire is that the Gospel key opens the way to heaven. He sends you pastors to proclaim the Good News, even as Christ commissioned the eleven remaining apostles after He rose. He poured His Spirit out on them, they preached, and thousands entered into God’s kingdom. The apostles baptized, and souls were washed clean, declared righteous before God. The apostles blessed bread and wine, and the body and blood of Christ forgave, quickened, and strengthened the souls of the faithful.

So it is among you. As you hear and receive the Good News, Jesus fills you to overflowing, hearts are opened among your neighbors, whom you love, and they are moved to believe in Christ Jesus.

That brings me to the purpose of my visit. I am not here to tear you down. You already have had enough of that, suffering as you have through the frequent earthquakes that occur in your part of the world. If anything, you who are living in such a dangerous city need

¹ Worship & Sermon resources for this series: *Revelation for Lent*, Donald H. Neidigk, (Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, 2004)

reassurance of God's continued love. And He does love you. Your faithfulness in the face of trial, temptation, and persecution is duly noted in heaven.

Your Christian brothers and sisters in neighboring towns would do well to follow your example. You face challenges like theirs, but when they have failed, you have stood firm. You have continued to trust God's Word and to believe in Jesus when it would be so much easier to return to paganism or Judaism.

This is a major wine-producing region. It would be tempting to join in the festivals for Dionysus, the wine god, known to the Romans as Bacchus. His cult is a powerful influence in Philadelphia. But the Jews, not the pagans, offer the most opposition to your faith – Jews who claim to be the rightful heirs of Abraham and David. They never cease trying to have you arrested on trumped up charges of disloyalty to Rome or practicing an illegal religion.

Yet Christ came to the Jews first. He proclaimed the Good News of the kingdom to them. He did many miracles to prove His divinity, but the Jews spurned Him. They called for Jesus' death. Even after He rose from the dead, they refused to believe in Jesus.

Here is the extent of their neglect: The Jews despised their birthright. They abandoned faith for dead works. So bitter and hateful has the antagonism from the Jews become that theirs is no longer a synagogue of God's people but a synagogue of Satan. They claim to be the true Israel, but the Lord Jesus calls them liars and children of the devil.

That describes anyone in any religion who would turn away – **or turn you away** – from Jesus to false teachings. Woe to those who neglect the truth for error!

But, beloved, do not hate the Jews. They are a synagogue of Satan only because the devil has blinded them to the truth. Pray that they will repent of their evil and learn that Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah for whom they yearn. Deal kindly with them so on the day of Christ's return they may willingly, along with you, acknowledge Jesus as Savior rather than unwillingly bow to Him as judge.

Unlike the synagogue of Satan, your doctrine is pure. Your faith is strong. Your love for God's Word is unquestioned. Your morality is above reproach. Oh, that the other congregations were as you are!

Once you were slaves of sin, living in guilt, having no hope because you were excluded from God's people and His promises of grace. You worshiped idols and chased after the vain and temporary things of this world.

You once were as guilty of neglect as the unbelieving Jews. But when the key of Jesus' Gospel unlocked the gates of the kingdom of God for you, when you learned that He died and rose again for you, when you were baptized into Jesus, everything changed. **“Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”**²

² 1 Peter 2:10

You formerly blind pagans and rejected Gentiles are now **“all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”**³ You who had no status – women, slaves, non-Jews – all of you are now **“Abraham’s seed, and heirs.”**⁴ You are heirs of all the precious promises God made to Abraham and his descendants.

All of this became your possession when you heard of Jesus, believed, and were baptized. All these treasures are opened through the key Christ has given to you.

Everyone – Jew and pagan – needs to hear of Jesus. The beloved apostle Paul has written: **“For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on Him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?”**⁵

The Lord Jesus says to you, **“Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.”**⁶ “What open door?” you ask. Open doors come in all shapes, sizes, and places. One open door is assisting missionaries with your offerings. **“How can they preach unless they are sent?”**⁷ And how can they be sent unless you give to support them? And there are other ways.

You go to the market every day and meet neighbors and shopkeepers. In almost every conversation, someone will mention a need. That need – a frustration, a family problem, a regret, a worry – is the door through which Christ can enter when you speak a gentle word of faith.

Needs exist all around you. People are sick, lonesome, hungry, poor, illiterate, confused, abandoned, dying. Every problem is an open door for Christ, whose love you can share with others by caring enough to help.

I am certain that you will use the key. To keep the word of Jesus and to confess Him is to proclaim Him. That is who you are, people who stand up for Jesus no matter how terrifying the adversary. You can do that, even in the face of persecution. The Lord Jesus encourages you, **“Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.”**⁸

Let no one take your crown. God will help you. How do I know? Well, after all, I am an angel, and sometimes we angels are privy to information you do not ordinarily have. I happen

³ Galatians 3:26-27

⁴ Galatians 3:29

⁵ Romans 10:12-15

⁶ Revelation 3:8

⁷ Romans 10:15

⁸ Revelation 3:11

to know that while great tribulation and suffering are about to come on you, you will bear up and continue to be faithful. There will be persecution from Rome that you cannot conceive of now, persecution far more horrible than the struggles you have with unbelieving Jews in Satan's synagogue.

After Rome fades into history, you Christians in Philadelphia will withstand the onslaught of the Turks and Islam. Indeed, you will remain a free Christian city until well into the fourteenth century. Then, finally, the Turks will overwhelm you, but your faith and church will continue. Two thousand years from today, your descendants in Philadelphia will still honor the name of Jesus.

Jesus has the highest expectations of you, expectations that will be fulfilled not because of your strength but because of His. He will keep you strong in faith and love. In Baptism you were named God's child. Your name is written in the Book of Life. The promise of Jesus for you, and all who overcome, is that your names will be engraved on the pillars of the temple in heaven. Indeed, you will be the temple and Jesus Himself will live among you. It will be a temple unlike those here on earth, which are destroyed every few centuries by earthquakes. It will be a temple that lasts forever, safe from every enemy. This is Jesus' promise to you.

Christian friends, your city of Philadelphia is known as the "gate to Asia," situated as it is on a major highway. But your church, caretaker as it is of the Key of David, rests on the highway to the New Jerusalem. Use the key. Keep the gate open for every lost traveler who is seeking to find his or her way.

I Kleis [Klay-iss], the key, am leaving your sight now, but not you, so do not be afraid. Although I cannot really open doors for you, Christ can and does as you use the Gospel key of Word and Sacrament placed in your pastor's stewardship by Jesus so you might get a glimpse of heaven. 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."⁹

⁹ Romans 15:13