

“Listen to the What the Spirit Is Saying in Sardis”

Scripture: Revelation 3:1-6

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Today we complete our series on the seven messages to seven congregations in Revelation 2 and 3. This message is addressed to the congregation in a city called Sardis. However, as is clear from all seven of the messages, we are to listen in because there is a message to the “churches” in the message to each individual congregation.

The message for today is addressed to the congregation in Sardis, an old city...already 600 years old at the time of the writing of the book of Revelation. One of the great virtues of its location was that it was easily defensible. The city was on a plateau surrounded on three sides by steep cliffs, a natural fortification. The only one way to enter the city was through a narrow pass. Guard that narrow pass and the city was basically safe from any attack. Yet twice in her history, the leaders of Sardis took for granted their invulnerability and the city was conquered. They simply did not guard the un-climbable cliffs that surrounded the city. And guess what? Twice, opposing armies scaled those cliffs by night and conquered the city.

With this civic history of growing lax in their wakefulness, listen now to the message to the church in Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6):

3 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. ³ Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. ⁴ Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶ Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

One of the goals for the past seven weeks in worship has been to listen to a part of Scripture that many Presbyterians have given up to what I would characterize “fringe interpretations.” Clearly, the book of Revelation is a difficult text but we have let the agenda for understanding this book be set by those who want to talk about: “the signs of the end times in the conflict between Hamas and the state of Israel;” the “Rapture” where in one swish God grabs all the good people and the not-so-good get “left behind;” and the “mark of the beast” that is hidden in our credit card numbers. We rightly can ignore such interpretations but what we miss is a rich text addressed to congregations wondering about their future...congregations in jeopardy...congregations in crisis.

Do you sense a crisis in the church? All the mainline churches are in crisis today (Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and so forth). Indeed, even these names no longer mean as much to people. People say, “We are looking for church that that is good for us”—not a particular denomination. I grew

in a time that we stressed being “ecumenical”—the important thing was being a Christian, not a Presbyterian. Well, we have succeeded; fewer and fewer people today are concerned about denominations. Contrast that to what my father says to me. He says, “I have never had a choice about what church I would belong to...I have always been a member of First Presbyterian Church.” That would be First Presbyterian Church of Tarboro, NC...First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte, NC...First Presbyterian Church of Austell, GA...and now First Presbyterian Church of Marietta, GA. The thought of being anything but Presbyterian is foreign to him.

The crisis is not just about the name “Presbyterian.” Our particular denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), as a whole is in a crisis. Our membership has dwindled by almost a million and half members since the 1960’s. The great loss has not been to other congregations or to death. No the great loss has been to inactivity...the great loss has been to no church at all. The way we gained members has changed. Did you know the Presbyterian Church grew? Our greatest gain of members was biological: we birthed Presbyterians. No one should be surprised to know that the birthrate among Presbyterians has decreased. So we can say, “We just don’t make ’em like we use to!”

It is not just a denominational crisis. Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church has its own crises: strong passions revolve around our budget, our worship practices, our lack of focus on a unified mission, church staffing priorities, and then the sense of neglect: people feel neglected, benevolent causes feel neglected, property maintenance feels neglected, staff salaries feel neglected. All of this in the midst of doing a lot of good things: several weeks ago, a baptism of a child as a fifth generation member...focused Bible studies like our Disciple Bible Studies, which dramatically shape our Christian character and practices...a new group in Stephen Ministers training beyond expectations—nine members in the new class...putting up extra chairs at the each of the past Second Sunday services because of the large attendance...incredible music by our Agape Choir, Chancel Choir, Covenant Choir, and Joyful Voices Choir...dedicated Sunday School teachers continue to live out their faith...STAR tutors keep working with elementary children...and better than anything on ESPN, the best sports entertainment takes place in our Activities Center on Friday nights and Saturdays and soon we will have the largest gathering of Oakland Avenue folks outside of a worship service: the basketball banquet. Last year we had largest income for the operating budget in our history. So is the glass half-empty or half-full?

Here is the crisis at Sardis: they have a name for being alive but they are sleeping, nodding off. Jesus says, I am coming...not gentle and gracious coming to knock at your door like he will to the church in Laodicea...but rather “like a thief.” That is not a gentle or gracious coming. Anyone who has ever been robbed knows the disturbance it creates in your life. Now everywhere else in the New Testament, the image of Jesus coming “like a thief in the night” is a reference to the second coming of Jesus...what we say in the Apostles Creed—“from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” However, here this is not warning about the second coming. Jesus is coming and will create a crisis in this congregation...like the crisis of a thief coming at night...like the crisis that came from not guarding the cliffs around the city. A crisis like his final coming will be experienced

Here is one of the interesting twists of the book of Revelation: language and imagery that was meant for the end of all things is applied in nitty-gritty of the “here and now.” What is happening is that language and imagery that was meant for one period of time is applied to another. Let me give you an analogy. I remembered a pastor who always had the congregation sing “Joy to the World” in July. People would

say, “But that’s a Christmas song.” He would respond, “And when is it not appropriate to sing, ‘Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king’? When is it not appropriate to sing, ‘He comes to make his blessing flow far as the curse is found?’” Language and imagery associated with Christmas works all year round. So, yes, to describe Jesus as coming as a “thief in the night” usually meant the Second Coming. But that’s not the meaning here. I am going to come to you, says Jesus, and I am going to create a crisis like what you expect the end to be like...if you don’t wake up.

So, if this Sardis congregation were a car, we would say the engine is running, the wheels are turning, the vehicle is moving, but the driver and all the occupants are not paying attention at best or talking on their cell phones or dozing off or just plain asleep at the wheel. We know what happens when someone is asleep at the wheel.

When I was in college, I piled into a car with seven fraternity brothers and took a winter road trip to Mount Holy Oak College in Massachusetts, an all-women’s college. It was about a two and a half hour car trip south from my college in New Hampshire. We had a great time...oddly enough we did not over indulge and the driver particularly was diligent. But about one o’clock in the morning, we all piled back into the car for the trip back. Eight of us in the car...winter time...the outside temperature was about 20 degrees...and we were running the heater full blast. About three o’clock that morning on Interstate 89 going about 70 miles per hour, all eight of us were asleep. No one had stayed up to talk to the driver...we each left that to someone else. All along Interstate 89 there are steep drop offs and abrupt mountain cliffs. We all woke up as we hurtled off the interstate, hit a snow bank and bounced down hill and came to stop. We had gone off the road near an exit where the ground was basically clear and the snow brought us to a reasonably gentle stop. This, of course, was before the days of cell phones. Fortunately, another car in our road trip caravan saw what had happened, came and checked on us, and went and got a tow truck. The tow truck pulled us out and we headed back to school. No was sleepy anymore!

Few of us do not have one of these “there but for the grace of God go I” stories. They wake us up. The Sardis congregation, like that car filled with eight fraternity brothers had the appearance of moving forward, making progress, of following the road, until the crisis became evident to all. Now here is where the example from my college days breaks down. It is not enough that we talk to each other...that we do need to listen to each other...that is vital. We can keep ourselves awake...by supportive and engaged conversation and also by shrill shouts. No, where this breaks down is whether we are on the roadway God is providing for us...or whether we are we trying to bump through walls, snow banks, and canyons with no exit.

Here is where the conversation needs to continue: Is our conversation about what God is seeking and setting out for us? Or are we asleep at the wheel? That is a question for a congregation and for us as individual followers of Christ. Now, I tempted to ask you reach over and pinch the person beside you to make sure they are awake...but that’s the easiest thing to do, make sure someone else is awake. But how awake is the person you see in the mirror each morning? How awake are our church programs? How are awake are we?

A church leader named Lovett Weems has given me a new exercise...to ask an awakening question: To finish what we do with a “so that.” You see, the problem in Sardis was not they were not working—they were. The issue says Jesus, is that your works are not perfect...literally, “complete.” Your works

are not focused toward an end, toward a Godly design. How do we complete our works? One way is to name the “so that.” We have Friendship Fellowship so that... We have church basketball so that... We have Sunday School so that... We have worship so that... We expect someone to notice when we are not in worship so that... We have youth programs so that... We say the Lord’s Prayer so that... Some our “so that’s” may not stand the scrutiny of the light: so that we can have fun, so that I can control what happens, so that I get the attention I deserve, so that I will like it. Our ministry is not complete without the “so that” which finishes with the old Presbyterian standard: so that God is glorified and we enjoy God’s presence in our life.

As a matter of curiosity, I checked with the pastor of the Sardis Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, a congregation established in 1790. I wanted to know what was going with the Scots and Scots-Irish settlers who named their church. Sardis, a sleepy, dozing church. Tom Kort sent me this reply:

Let me quote from our history book about Sardis, written by Jennings Reid....he writes: “In the book of Revelation Sardis has the name of being alive and you are dead. Why would anyone want to select the name of Sardis? It is a good question, but let the inquirer read on. Sardis was not really dead, but asleep. If she but awakened and repented, she was possessed of a glorious hope....awake and strengthen what remains...remember then what you received and heard; keep that and repent.”

...In some ways, it is a constant reminder that faithfulness is more important than appearing to be faithful...a church can always fall asleep...so you have to stay alert...repent...and claim the hope of being faithful. I hope this helps...in some ways it keeps you from getting too big for your britches.

Each week we have had a question to chew on and to digest...a question arising out of these seven texts.

“Have you lost your first love and will you seek it again?” was the question to the church in Ephesus. “Are you more drawn to the voice of our culture than the voice of God?” was one of the other questions. Laura asked us last Sunday, “Are you listening?” The question today is best expressed in that little song that I think everyone knows... a song we learned as children:

Are you sleeping? Are you sleeping, sister church...sister church?
Morning bells are ringing. Morning bells are ringing...

[Chimes/handbells provide the final: “Ding dong ding”]

Are you sleeping? Morning bells are ringing. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.