

Ben Libby  
 Sermon  
 March 15th, Lent 3

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever, Amen.

The Word of the LORD which forms a portion for our sermon text this morning comes to us from John's Revelation, chapter 2, the first 7 verses:

**To the messenger of the church in Ephesus write:**

**The one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven gold lampstands, says this:**

**2 I know your works, your labor, and your patient endurance, and that you are not able to tolerate evil people. You have tested those who say they are apostles, but are not, and have found them to be liars. 3 Indeed, you do have patient endurance. You have endured hardships on account of my name and have not become weary.**

**4 But I have this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 5 Remember, therefore, the state from which you have fallen! Repent and do the works you did at first. Otherwise I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, if you do not repent.**

**6 But you do have this: You hate the actions of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.**

**7 Whoever has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious I will give the privilege to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.**

This is the Word of The LORD!!! The congregation may be seated...

Mercy, Grace, and Peace ARE YOURS from your God and Father and from your Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. Dear fellow Redeemed

I don't know if you have heard, but there is a virus going around. Of course, you have heard! It seems like this topic is omnipresent. Everywhere you go and everything you hear seems like it all about the coronavirus. The economy has been affected by it, sporting events have been canceled because of it, even schools and universities have been temporarily shut down. It is all because of the presence of this coronavirus!

This virus is just one in the latest line of maladies that have plagued mankind. The reason that everyone is losing their collective minds over it is because of how contagious it seems to be. It doesn't seem to be that destructive in comparison to some of the other illnesses we have seen, but it is easily spread.

Well, what if I were to tell you that I had contracted coronavirus? [ long pause ] I, in fact, don't have it, but how did that prospect make you feel? Well, perhaps you would initially feel sorry for me. But soon after that sympathy wore off, you would probably grow concerned about yourself. You might feel sorry, but you also wouldn't be giving me a house call any time soon. Just my presence would be a threat to you. You would probably keep yourself a safe distance away from me, and I wouldn't blame you. After all, we live in uncertain times. Uncertain times produce fear, panic, isolation, and doubt.

Someone who was well acquainted with these feelings was the Apostle John. He had been a young man when Jesus walked on the earth. But a lot had

happened from that time to when he wrote these words. He, along with the other disciples of Christ, had gone out into the world and preached Christ Crucified. This was a rewarding yet hard existence. John would have seen firsthand the loss of life, heartache, and persecution. John himself lived in some uncertain times.

Yet, John's message is not one of doom and gloom. He writes some encouraging words, words that were very badly needed. These words were originally written about the church in Ephesus, but they very much apply to us today and what we are going through. They are words of encouragement, concern, and above all else love. Jesus had a message to give to these Christians through John, and this message applies to us today in America just as much as it did to the Ephesians during the first century. He says, **Whoever has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.** What is the message that we should be hearing? Christ's love conquers! It conquers our fears, and it conquers death itself! We pray that the LORD would bless our study here this morning.

Do you feel isolated? One of the answers we have been given for stopping the spread of coronavirus is to limit ourselves from gathering together in large crowds. The virus is pretty contagious, so if we limit ourselves from being in crowds, the logic goes, we stop the opportunity for the virus spreading.

But of course, the side effect of this is that we are now removing ourselves from society. People are "self quarantining" themselves. There is nothing wrong with this. It seems pretty prudent given the state of the world. But, this can make for some lonely times.

John knew a thing or two about being isolated. When John wrote this letter, he was exiled on the island of Patmos. Of course, there is a difference between being forced into exile and forced into our own homes. What is the difference? They both result in isolation, but the difference is the reason for the isolation.

John tells us why he was where he was when he introduces himself in this book: **I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and**

**kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Rev 1:9 NKJ)**

John was preaching and teaching about Jesus, and as a result, he was banished to this remote island. Yet, his banishment was for our benefit. He goes on to say that he was **in the Spirit on the Lord's Day (Rev 1:10 NKJ)** that is, he was worshipping on a Sunday. All of a sudden, he saw the glorified Son of God, Jesus Christ. The result of that encounter is this book of Revelation.

John originally wrote this book to **the seven churches which are in Asia (Rev 1:4 NKJ)**, that is, the 7 churches in Asia minor. Chapters 2-3 are all specific to each of those 7 churches. First, John starts with the church in Ephesus, which would have been the closest church from Patmos.

Each letter follows a certain order to it. Each letter starts with Jesus addressing the congregation. Our text starts with, **To the messenger of the church in Ephesus write:** Then Jesus would go on to introduce Himself with some interesting titles. In our text, He calls Himself, **The one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven gold lampstands** Jesus goes on to address what is good in the congregation, and also points out what isn't. He then calls them to repentance, promises blessings to the one that conquers or overcomes, and ends by giving an exhortation to "hear what the Spirit says".

So, what was going on with the Ephesians? We know a lot about them from the book of Acts and from the Apostle Paul and his letter to this congregation. But much time had passed between the writing of those books and this one. It seems like this congregation, as well as the other 7 to which John is writing, had one overriding problem in particular: persecution. Where they were living was not exactly ground zero for Christianity. At the time, as was much of the world, these cities were under Roman rule. Ephesus was known for its pagan worship. This would have been a hostile place for the Word to grow. So,

naturally, you could see why they would need encouragement.

Jesus through John lists the works of this church. **3 Indeed, you do have patient endurance. You have endured hardships on account of my name and have not become weary.**

Whenever we are suffering, it is always important to keep in perspective that someone has it worse than you do. This is certainly the case today. There are people and places in this world which are going through a much harder time than we are. Yes, things seem pretty bleak for the most part right now. But are they really?

What these Christians were going through was worse than our coronavirus situation. What is the worse thing about living under the cloud in which we find ourselves today? We have to spend more time at home...

These Christians were being actively persecuted for their faith. They were under attack from physical threats and spiritual. Jesus applauded them for withstanding teachers who were false apostles. He also praises them for hating the **"the actions of the Nicolaitans"**. This was the practice of so-called Christians practicing things they were not supposed to under the guise of Christian liberty. These Ephesians had **"patiently endured"** something that is very praiseworthy indeed.

But, they had a fatal flaw. **4 But I have this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 5 Remember, therefore, the state from which you have fallen! Repent and do the works you did at first.**

What happened to them is something that is tempting for us as well. It can be easy to focus on doing things that we forget the reason we are able to accomplish anything in the first place: the love of Christ! Their brotherly Christian love had grown cold throughout their time of hardship. This was indeed a flaw that needed to be addressed. John wrote in another one of his letters: **We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love**

**his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 1 John 4:19-20**

What they were going through might have been worse than what we are going through, but both situations have the same root problem: FEAR! For them, it was fear of persecution and false doctrine. For us today, it is the fear of the unknown.

We don't really know the full extent of what this virus means. Right now it has shut down society. But could it get worse? Recently, my family and I have gone grocery shopping, only to find basic goods completely sold out. People seem to be hoarding things, either out of fear or out of the prospect of making a quick dollar. People seem to be dominated by fear today!

Fear is good when it is used for what it is meant for. After all, we are told to "fear the LORD", that is, to love and respect Him. It is good to have a healthy sense of fear. But having too much of it can be crippling...

When it comes to fear, it is like pain. It definitely serves a purpose. If we place our hand on a hot stove, the pain that our brains receive tells us quite quickly, "OUCH, take your hand off of that!!!" Yet, choosing pain is not ideal. It serves a purpose, but no one chooses to live in pain.

It is the same with fear. Fear tells us that we are in danger and need to remove ourselves quickly. But, to let that fear dictate how we live is no way to live! Yes, we should be apprehensive about certain things now that we know what we know. But to live in constant fear is an overreaction.

Our problem is one of fear, just like the Ephesians. What is the solution to this fear? The love of Christ!

When John first had this vision and encounter with the glorified Jesus, he too had a fear problem. This wasn't unique to John alone. All throughout the Bible, when people come face to face with a heavenly being react with fear. But this wasn't someone who John had never seen before. This was his Lord who he had learned from. Yet, Jesus looked much different than what he was used to. John was even at the transfiguration, but still, that was just for a brief moment. This was something else entirely! John tells us: **And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me,**

**"Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. 18 "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. (Rev 1:17-18 NKJ)**

Jesus comforted John in his moment of panic and fear. He does so with His blessed reassurance. He touched him, and told him essentially, "John, don't be afraid, I am in control! I died, yet I live. I have conquered death, and so too shall you!"

Death is really the driving force behind fear, isn't it? People fear the worst because as they see it, the worst is death. Death is the worst thing that can happen to us. But this is not comprehended the way it should be by all. Unless Jesus returns, we all have to experience death in some shape or form. We have to experience the death of our loved ones, and ultimately we have to go through death ourselves. But this death is not what we need to be afraid of. This is just temporal death. Everyone will have the resurrection from this death. The real death to be afraid of is spiritual death!

This is what Jesus was warning the Ephesians about! **Repent and do the works you did at first. Otherwise I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, if you do not repent.**

Yes, death is something we all have to go through. But this is not something new. No one can escape this fate, although some try. But sin breaks us all down. Our bodies do not last in this vale of tears. But the love of Christ has conquered death! Yes, we will most likely still have to experience temporal death. But eternal death? We have been saved from that horrible fate. Jesus died on the cross and suffered the pain of hell so that we would never have to! Listen to what He promised the Ephesians here and what He, in turn, has promised you as well! **To the one who is victorious I will give the privilege to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.**

Here, in the last book of the Bible, we are taking back to the first book. In Genesis, when God created the garden of Eden, He placed in it two special trees. **Gen 2:9b the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.**

These two trees each served a special function. We know intimately the function of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because we are living with the consequence of it still today. That was the tree of which God commanded not to eat, **for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. (Gen 2:17 NKJ)** Yet, the tree of life's full function is yet unknown fully to us. We do have the LORD's commentary of it after the fall out of sin: **Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever " (Gen 3:22 NKJ)**

Yet, that very tree is what is promised to us here in Revelation. It is the answer that man has been searching for since the dawn of time. It is the cheat code to death, the so-called fountain of youth. Yet, eternal life in these bodies of sin is not what we desire. That's why God exiled Adam and Eve from the garden in the first place. We seek perfect eternal life, and those who follow Jesus will have it! **"I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world." (Joh 6:51 NKJ)**

Yes, dear Christians, this tree of life is your blessed promise! It has been given to us as a result of the tree of death, the cross of Christ! Because Jesus died on the cross, there is now nothing to fear. He died so that we might live. Not just here on earth, but forever with Him in paradise!

At the end of this revelation, Jesus showed John a vision of that beautiful promise. It also featured this tree of life: **And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. (Rev 22:1-3 NKJ)**

Yes, it seems as if we are living in uncertain times. It seems as if there is nothing we have lived through that can compare even to what we are currently living through now. But that's not really the case. It's always been the same. We have always been afraid of what we don't understand. Afraid when we don't know what to expect. We fear death, and it drives people to do crazy things.

But then, once we go back to the Word, we understand by faith that we don't need to be afraid. Yes, with this virus, things could get worse before they get better. But yet, no matter how bad it gets, we all have been delivered from every evil! We have the Love of Christ, and it truly conquers all fear. It conquers and overcomes fear because it conquers and overcomes death! We have the tree of life because Jesus suffered on the tree of death! All praise and thanks be to Jesus, the Son of Man, our key to eternal life! AMEN!!!