

“Reading Other People’s Mail: Sardis”

11th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. 3:1-6 08/01/21

This morning, as we continue with the fifth of the seven churches Jesus writes to in Revelation, we travel from Thyatira about 30 miles southeast to Sardis, its acropolis planted atop a steep hill roughly 1,500 feet above the Great King’s Highway. The commercial sites, entertainment, religious centers, as well as political centers were in the lower valley, but citizens and military could retreat in times of danger to the top of the mountain where they had a seemingly impenetrable fortress.

This was the place with the wealthiest monarch in the world once ruled, King Croesus, on whom the legend of King Midas was based with his “touch of gold” due to the nearby mountain river that literally produced tons of gold AND silver. Not coincidentally, Sardis was the first to produce pure gold coins for trading currency. It also industrialized the process of dyed wool garments of nearly every color. Unfortunately, it also became the regional center of worship for the pagan nature goddess Cybele, later blended with worship for Artemis. There was a massive outdoor temple area there in her honor that also included temples for other gods, but get this: The Christian church was also located in this complex, basically next door to the pagan fertility rites that regularly were going on in clear view and that, over time, bore a remarkable resemblance and caused probable confusion in the minds of some of the Christians in Sardis.

Let me explain the problem. Cybele is the mother of Attis who dies (albeit, at his own hand) and is resurrected. Mary is the mother of Jesus Who willingly allows Himself to be killed but Who is resurrected from the dead. In the pagan rituals mother goddess Cybele is worshiped, so why shouldn’t Mary be also? Ritual meals are participated in honoring Attis, so also the early Christians celebrated the Lord’s Supper. Attis’ resurrection was celebrated in the Spring, so also the resurrection of Christ. Ah yes, just goes to show you that all roads lead to heaven. Ho-hum. Even the Jewish Synagogue in Sardis (then the largest in the ancient world)—and contrary to Ex. 20:4—allowed inside their place of worship figures of lions (representing Cybele) and the Eagle (the symbol of the Roman Empire). No wonder the Christians also grew complacent and syncretistic! Over the centuries the whole city devolved into pretty much a melded mess of ideas.

The natural rock walls on the north, east and west slopes of their acropolis were nearly vertical, accessible only from a narrow path on the south slope, making Sardis impossible to conquer—so you can imagine the shock when King Cyrus of Persia did the impossible. 546 years before Jesus was born, the king of Lydia instigated an attack against the Persian Empire. It didn’t go well, so he retreated to safe and

secure Sardis. Sitting comfortably within their fortress, the citizens of Sardis became overconfident and complacent. Then one night, Cyrus sent men around to the north side of the acropolis, who carefully scaled the rock wall that had been left completely unguarded. One by one they entered the city and slaughtered its citizens in their sleep—a disaster that could have been easily avoided had they just stayed alert! And in 214 B.C., Antiochus the Great conquered Sardis using the exact same tactic!

By the time Jesus wrote his letter to the church in Sardis, the once proud, impregnable city had even become a Greek metaphor for arrogance and overconfidence. It still thought of itself as well-off and prestigious, but its glory days had long passed. The political power had moved to Smyrna, and the main trade route had moved south. On the surface the Lydian capitol still thought of itself as alive and well, but internally it was slowly dying. Church-wise, history was about to repeat itself yet again, because in many ways, the congregation in Sardis was plagued with the same arrogant and lethargic problems as the city itself. So then, look at what Jesus had to say to them in Rev. 3:1-6...

“Write this letter to the angel of the church in Sardis. This is the message from the One Who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars: I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of My God. Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again. If you don’t wake up, I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief. Yet there are some in the church in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes with evil. They will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. All who are victorious will be clothed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life, but I will announce before My Father and His angels that they are Mine. Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what He is saying to the churches.”

As always, before critiquing the church, Jesus begins by presenting His credentials. Jesus says in v. 1, *“This is the message from the One Who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars.”* This sevenfold Spirit of God is, of course, God the Holy Spirit. The “sevenfold Spirit” refers to the fullness of the Holy Spirit’s power and presence, because the number seven is used throughout Revelation to symbolize completeness and perfection. Also, these letters were, of course, sent out to seven churches, so the Holy Spirit is depicted as being present in each one of them. But because the church in Sardis was teetering on the verge of spiritual death, Jesus wanted to remind them that it is Jesus Himself Who sends the Holy Spirit. And it’s the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, Who breathes spiritual life into His children and His church, not only **giving** the gift of faith but also **preserving** it in those who don’t foolishly choose to reject it.

To a dying congregation, nothing could be more important than the Holy Spirit. Jesus said it Himself in John 6:63, *“It is the Spirit Who gives life.”* Remember Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well in John 4:13-14? *“Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life.”* What is this water that Jesus was talking about? It was the Holy Spirit. This becomes much more obvious in John 7:37-39, *“On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, “Anyone who is thirsty may come to Me! Anyone who believes in Me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from His heart.’” When He said “living water,” He was speaking of the Spirit, Who would be given to everyone believing in Him.”*

Perhaps the Spirit is compared to water because the Holy Spirit does for souls what water does for bodies. Dr. Don Colbert, in his book, The Seven Pillars of Health, devotes seven whole chapters to the benefits of water. He writes, *“Water is the single most important nutrient of our bodies.”* He goes on to explain some of the advantages of keeping our bodies properly hydrated, including greater energy, a heightened immune system, better nutrient absorption, prolonged life, weight loss, greater metabolic efficiency, reduced risk of heart attack, improved attention span, better memory, and the list goes on and on. It’s amazing what just a little water can do! So, if water is so important to our bodies, how much more important do you think spiritual living water is for our souls?

The Holy Spirit—the living water that Jesus offers—does for our souls what H₂O does for our bodies. Like the morning dew on dry grass, the gift of God’s Spirit refreshes and revitalizes dry and spiritually parched souls! In his book, Come Thirsty, Max Lucado puts it this way: *“You’re acquainted with physical thirst. Stop drinking and see what happens. Coherent thoughts vanish, skin grows clammy, and vital organs shut down. Deprive your body of necessary fluid, and it will tell you. Deprive your soul of spiritual water, and it also will tell you. Dehydrated hearts send desperate messages, snarling tempers, waves of worry, growing guilt and fear, hopelessness, resentment, loneliness, insecurity.”*

Every genuine believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit from the moment of baptism, but we all have to return to His well of living water to be empowered over and over again. Any professing Christian or congregation that doesn’t do that might **look** alive, but they’re really just the walking undead, spiritual zombies going through the motions but whose souls are dry right down to the bone marrow...which brings us to the next part of Jesus letter—the **criticism**.

The Lord Jesus skips His usually compliment for the meantime and dives right into the problem of the church in Sardis in vss. 1-2. He says, *“You have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead...I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of My God.”*

These Christians weren't under any kind of persecution that we know of. Rather, like the soldiers who should have been standing guard when King Cyrus captured the city, the church had become complacent, living on their past reputation, perhaps over confident or maybe they just stopped caring.

Let me use an analogy: Let's say, five years ago a star went super-nova and exploded some 30 light-years away. We wouldn't know about it for another 25 years—because that's how long it would take for the light to reach us. So even though the star is dead and gone, for the next 25 years it would seem as if that star was right where it's always been—twinkling across the galaxy. Well, that's what happened to the church in Sardis. There was a time when this church was alive and active, when this church was a shining influence in the community, a time when their passion for Jesus burned as brightly as any star. They still had their reputation, but that's about all they had. Some time ago, without anyone even noticing it, their passion died—their star burned out. And all that was left was a husk of a once proud congregation—a fancy, stained-glass tomb that served as nothing more than a monument to past glory.

There's no indication it was because of violent persecution or heretical teaching. It was because people just stopped caring. They were content with all the good they had done in the past. One by one, they stopped ministering to one another. They stopped fellowshiping. They stopped giving. Maybe they decided that they didn't need to go to church, except for a few holidays or special family events. They quit inviting their friends and neighbors. They rarely volunteered for service projects anymore. Maybe they still enjoyed coming and listening to a sermon—if it wasn't too long—but rarely if ever did it have any impact on how they lived their lives. Like the fig tree from Jesus' parable, they bore leaves but no fruit. They were alive on the outside—dead on the inside. It kind of reminds me of Jesus' harsh accusation to the most outwardly religious people of His time, the Pharisees, in Matt. 23:27, *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, that look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.”*

So then, what do you do when you find yourself living among a dead in dying church, and you barely have a pulse of your own? Jesus gives a command to the Christians in Sardis that answers that very question.

Jesus' command to Sardis is broken into several parts, but it begins with two little words in v. 2: ***“Wake up!”*** If only someone had shouted these words to the people of Sardis when King Cyrus snuck into their city like a thief in the night. And by the way, when Jesus returns, it will be with that same suddenness, so it's time to wake up and smell the coffee! But how?

The first step in **revival** (which is what this church desperately needed) is to recognize their situation. As they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, the first step is admitting you have a problem. These people needed to wake up to the reality around them. Evidently, most of the church members there were just **playing** church...spiritually dead or dying while the church body, as a whole, already had one foot in the grave. And the situation wasn't going to get better on its own. So, Jesus also tells them in v. 2, *“Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead.”* In other words, before it's too late, you've got to start building one another up again with the spark of spiritual life you still have left! As the author of Hebrews puts it in 10:24-25: *“Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of Christ's return is drawing near.”*

Finally, Jesus commands them in v. 3, saying, *“Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly and turn to Me again.”* These believers needed to get back to basics—to return to the foundational teachings of the apostles about the Savior that had changed their lives in the beginning and that could make those things the central focus of their spiritual lives once again. They needed to ask the Holy Spirit to help them fan the smoldering embers of their love for Jesus into flame once again. They needed to remember the hopelessness of life without Jesus and the sense of relief and awe they felt when they were first brought in God's kingdom, experiencing His grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love. They needed to return to the central theme of the gospel—the sinfulness of man, the unconditional love of God, the sacrifice of Jesus, and life that He offers. It might take a while for the rekindled light of Jesus to reach the darkest places of their hearts, but if they would just let Him in, they would rediscover the fullness of the Spirit, and streams of living water would once again flow through their hearts. And the same is true for each one of us and for our congregations today.

And what was Jesus' promise to the righteous remnant in Sardis who **hadn't** soiled their lifestyles with apathy, arrogance, and compromise? It's twofold. First, He says in vss. 4 & 5 that to those who've been listening to Him and who hadn't yet fallen asleep but who'd overcome the temptation of spiritual lethargy, that they would walk with Jesus in a white robe of righteousness, accounted worthy by Christ Himself.

Since Sardis was known for its fine woolens and its proficiency at dyeing wool, Jesus gives them the promise of a pure white garment – the most difficult of all to make. There was no dye back then to make a garment white – dyes only make them darker—so a white garment (the color connected with righteousness) was the garment most unusual and precious for the Bride of Christ, His Church.

Jesus' other promise in v. 5 to the individual who overcomes his spiritual apathy is to never blot out that person's name from the Book of Life, but rather acknowledge His Name before His Father and His angels!

Cities like Sardis were all constructed with beautiful white marble. The kings who built them would then carve their names and make inscriptions glorifying themselves on columns and stones. However, when they'd die, the following ruler would simply scratch the previous name out of the marble and write in new ones. Jesus promised to all those who overcome their apathy that their names could never be erased, that their place in heaven was absolutely secure for all those who place their trust in Christ alone. You see, this is no book of **Works**. This is the Book of **LIFE**, an eternal life already won for us by **Christ's** work, rather than of our own.

But before that final, thief-in-the-night arrival occurs, it's time for each of us to **wake up** and, in the words of Heb. 6:12, "*...not become spiritually dull and indifferent but **instead** follow the example of those who are going to inherit God's promises because of their faith and endurance.*"

And so, may God also renew **us** each day with His Spirit to stay alive and alert to His promises that will never fail us in our Savior's Name, Amen!