

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California
The Third Sunday in Advent
December 12, 2004

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

SECOND LESSON: Revelation 3:1-6

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”
NIV

As we begin this morning, let's have a short quiz. I will begin a familiar expression, and you finish it. The first one is easy, especially if you've already been skiing this year. "As white as _____." *Snow*, right? Okay, number two: "I'm so tired; I'm going to sleep like a _____." It's *log*, isn't it. I don't think logs actually sleep, but they do just lie there without moving. Expression number three: "As dead as a _____." It's *doornail*. This one I've always wondered about: How dead is a doornail? What is a doornail? I looked it up. It used to be that nails were all made by hand and therefore valuable. When a house was demolished, they always tried to save and reuse the nails. All except the doornails, that is; they were always bent, and so they were unusable—dead.

I bring these three expressions up because they all relate to next in the series of letters Jesus wrote to early Christian churches. The letter we're looking at today is the one written to the congregation in Sardis, a city in Asia Minor (now Turkey). All these expressions are connected to deadly attitudes that were present in the people of this church—attitudes that Jesus had to correct. More than that, though, these attitudes are still found in Christian churches today, and we still need Jesus to change them. Let's find out more about this.

The Living Lord Corrects Deadly Attitudes:

Thinking you're alive when really you're dead

One more quiz question for you. This one's a little harder. Complete the expression: "As rich as _____." Anybody know? The answer is *Croesus*. Have you heard that expression before? Ever wonder who this guy Croesus was? Let me tell you. He was king

of a wealthy and influential city in ancient times, a city by the name of Sardis. That's right, the same Sardis mentioned here in the Bible, the same Sardis that was home to a Christian congregation in the late First Century. Sardis had been an extremely wealthy and influential city. And Croesus, king of Sardis, had been one of the wealthiest men in the world during the city's heyday. At one point in its history, the city motto was this: "Sardis: of Lydia (the region), of Asia (the province), of the Greek empire, the number one metropolis." Immodest, but it had been true.

But that was then. By the time Jesus sent this letter to the Christian church in Sardis, the city was but a shadow of its former self. No longer was it the powerful and influential city it had been. It had become pretty insignificant. But still, the people of Sardis were proud of their history. They thought more highly of themselves than was warranted.

It seems that this was true for the people of the Christian church there as well. Jesus says to them, I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Evidently, this particular church was well regarded. It had a good reputation, a reputation for being "alive". Maybe it was a busy church. Maybe the people there did a lot and carried out a host of activities. But something was missing. The people thought they were alive, but really they were dead.

The people of the church were busy, but something was missing. Says Jesus, Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Something made what they were doing incomplete. What was it? Jesus doesn't say in precise terms, but he does give us a hint: Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. "Remember what you have received and heard." When Jesus tells someone to remember, it's likely because they have forgotten something. What had the Christians of Sardis forgotten? "What they had received and heard." These people had received a gift: eternal life through Jesus Christ. These people had heard good news: Jesus Christ has brought you out of death into life. All that God had promised for centuries has now been fulfilled. Jesus Christ gives you real life, here and hereafter.

Jesus' command to these forgetful people: "Repent!" This letter told the Christians of Sardis: Realize that you've been forgetting the gifts God has given you. Seek his forgiveness for your forgetfulness. Believe that you have it in Jesus. Then show your gratitude by remembering the priceless gifts he's given to you. Hold on to his words; keep them always. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. (John 6:63)

So the problem at Sardis was Christians thinking they were alive when really they were dead. Christian people who were very busy, but something was missing. Hmm. Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Are you thinking that these words of Jesus are especially appropriate for us in the days before Christmas?

Some of you, when you start a workweek, can probably sense right away what kind of week it's going to be. There might be little indicators. I have a little indicator. It's the "This Week at St. Peter" section of the service folder. About this time of year that section gets pretty long. A lot of church activities going on. And that's not the half of it. You know what I mean. There's shopping and decorating and cleaning and relatives coming over or traveling to prepare for; it's insane. But could it be that we're extremely busy for Christmas, but something is missing?

Busyness—even church-related busyness—is empty without Jesus at the center of it. It could lead to the Sardis condition: thinking you're alive (after all, look how busy we are!) when really you're dead.

I think what we all could use is a dose of what Jesus is giving: a strong wake-up call and an firm encouragement: Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. Remember what most of us learned as little kids: Christmas is about Jesus. Not me—Jesus. Remember the gifts we have already received from him: pardon by God, peace with him, life and light. Keep that good news in your heart and at the heart of your Christmas.

Thinking you're awake when really you're asleep

I said that Croesus was the famous king of Sardis. He lived in a fortress on a high plateau, surrounded by cliffs on three sides. Do you know the story of how his reign ended?

Croesus went into battle against Cyrus, the great Persian king. Croesus lost. But he retreated to his home city of Sardis and to his impregnable fortress on the cliff-encircled plateau. The army of Cyrus advanced, but Croesus was not afraid. How could he be attacked? He went to bed one night confident, even though his enemy was close by. The next morning, his fortress had been conquered. How had it happened? Evidently there was a small crack in the rock on the side of the plateau where his fortress stood. The crack was diagonal, running from the ground to the top. The enemy army had climbed, one soldier at a time, to the top, and then had overrun the city from a side no one expected.

This attack could have been stopped. If someone had been there to, say, drop stones on the enemy soldiers who were scaling the walls, they never could have seized the city. But the citizens of Sardis had been asleep.

Listen again to Jesus speaking to the Christians of Sardis: Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. “People of Sardis, don't get caught sleeping again!”

Could it happen that we'd get caught sleeping when Jesus returns in glory? For forgetful sinners like us, it's a possibility. We heard Jesus say last week, Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. (Luke 21:34) Sometimes we may purposefully ignore or at least marginalize Jesus and his Word. Other times, though, it's not that we purposefully ignore him, but that we get overwhelmed by all there is to do and worry about. And when there's a little break from worrying about life, we like to take that time for ourselves and tune everything else out—God included. I find myself doing this. You too?

In the hectic haze of this Christmas season, let's challenge ourselves to hear the call of John the Baptist: “God's reign is here!” Let's not, in all our busyness, think that we're awake and ready and find ourselves asleep when it comes to Jesus and his nearness. Let's wake up and smell the sweetness of his peace. Let's challenge ourselves to take Jesus' words to heart: Wake up! ...Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.

Thinking you're clean when really you're dirty

I think if you had asked many of these Christians at Sardis how they looked in God's eyes, they would have told you, "Pretty good." Other people seemed to think they looked good, after all. But God's view was different. To him, many of them had stained their robes—God's way of saying that they had not been leading lives to match the new status he had given them in Jesus. Jesus does not point out any specific, grave sin they were committing, only that they were forgetting and losing touch with the message they had been taught.

There were some in Sardis, however, who were, by God's power, doing what God wanted. Jesus closes his letter to this church with an encouragement, or rather a couple encouragements, to them. The first: Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white.

God uses this picture numerous times in the Bible, and it communicates, doesn't it? He pictures us as people dirty and stinky, filthy and stained with imperfection and sin. Even the apparent good things we do are "filthy rags" to God, he says, if those things are done disconnected from faith in him. We're dirty. But that's only the first half of the picture. God describes his work as taking our filthy clothes off of us and replacing them with spotless garments. And that's a good way to picture what Christianity is all about. Jesus took our guiltiness in the sight of God off of us, our filthy clothes, and put them on himself. Then he suffered and died for our sins. And in exchange for our dirty lives, Jesus gave us his life. In other words, we can now stand in the presence of God covered with Jesus' perfect record of obedience. It's an exchange of clothes—Jesus takes the dirty and gives us his cleanness as a gift.

Now Jesus says, "Be the new, clean person I have made you. Live a life that matches the white robes I've put on you. When you sin, come back to me. I'll forgive you and make you clean."

We don't like admitting we're wrong. We don't like saying to God, "I'm filthy, and it's my own fault." But Jesus urges us to admit that, because that's the truth. Even more than that, Jesus wants us to admit that we're dirty so that he can take that dirt off of us and replace it with his clean clothes. He wants us to stand before God impeccably dressed, and the only way to do that is to be clothed in Jesus. "Keep these clean clothes on," he says. "Stick with me."

Jesus also says, I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. The Bible sometimes uses the image of a big book as a way of picturing the list of all who have eternal life. I take comfort in how Jesus says what he does here: I will never blot out his name from the book of life... You see, our names are already in there. Jesus, purely as a gift, has written them there. Jesus has brought us to faith in him; we're in the book of life. His encouragement to us now is simply to keep relying on him and following him. "Stick with me," Jesus says, "and you can be sure that your name will never leave that book."

After writing down the theme and sections of this sermon ("The Living Lord Corrects Deadly Attitudes: Thinking you're alive when really you're dead..." etc.), I thought to myself, "That's fairly depressing." But I certainly don't want you to go away with

thinking that. So take a look back to the first verse of our section today: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. Jesus is the one speaking. “The seven spirits of God” or “the sevenfold Spirit of God,” we gather, is a name for the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, who is true God with the Father and the Son, to dwell in his followers, to give them faith in God, to lead them, to help them pray, to energize and direct them. Jesus is repeating that promise here in Revelation to these struggling Christians. Jesus calls himself the one who holds “the seven stars.” We learned earlier in Revelation that the seven stars represent the pastors of the seven churches to whom Jesus is speaking. Jesus is working through these pastors to proclaim bad news and good news to people, warning and comfort.

Here’s the point: to Christians like you and me, who sometimes think that we’re in better spiritual shape than we really are, Jesus comes. He comes to us and does more than tell us, “Hey! You’re dead, you’re asleep and you’re dirty.” He comes to us and works on us through the Holy Spirit. He comes to us and works on us through pastors and other Christians who share his message with us. Jesus comes to us, dead as doornails in our sins, and makes us alive. Jesus comes to us, sleeping like logs and unaware of his presence, and wakes us up to the reality of him and his work. Jesus comes to us, dirty in sin, and makes us as white as snow with his blood and righteousness.

Let’s all—all of us struggling sinners—take that home with us. Through Jesus, we are alive, awake and impeccably dressed. Amen.