

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California
The Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 19, 2004

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

SECOND LESSON: Revelation 3:14-22

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. ¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. ²⁰ Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

²¹ To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (NIV)

Picture This: Three Advent Images

What images pop into your head in these days before Christmas? When you think of this period of time we're in between Thanksgiving and Christmas, what do you think of? A Christmas tree? Your family's nativity scene? Maybe something more mundane: driving around in a full parking lot, hoping to get a space? If you're like me and you grew up with TV, you probably have images of the Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer special that marked its 40th anniversary this year (who can forget the Abominable Snowman with the pointy teeth?). I can picture in my mind Linus reciting Luke 2 in "A Charlie Brown Christmas": "And there were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night..." (That one's fresh in my mind since I just watched it last week.) What about you? What images come into your mind during this Advent season?

Whatever they are, I would be willing to bet that they aren't the three images that Jesus lays on us today. As we listen to the last of the seven letters Jesus sent to early Christian congregations in the book of Revelation, we are confronted with three unusual, if not downright disturbing, images. Though it may be uncomfortable for us, let's picture in our minds the images that Jesus paints with his words to the church in the city of Laodicea.

1. The Spitting Savior

Has this happened to you? You're sipping a cup of hot coffee. Something calls you away from it for a while. You come back to your cup and, without thinking about it, take a big gulp. A split second later you realize that your once hot coffee is now lukewarm and disgusting. Ever happened? I'll drink an iced coffee drink from Starbucks. And I'll drink a cup of hot coffee. But lukewarm and tepid? No thanks.

Jesus says, These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the

other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

What's Jesus driving at here? We get the picture, don't we? The Christians of Laodicea were not on fire for Jesus, not very excited or enthusiastic about him, his message or his work. Jesus calls them on it. They had evidently been much more invigorated when it came to listening to the gospel, to really treasuring Jesus' forgiveness, to serving Jesus and the people around them. But they had been cooling off. They were fading. They were caring less and less about Jesus, becoming more and more apathetic. Indifference is the problem at this church in Laodicea. Apathy. Not caring.

Do we put up with people who don't care about us? Not if we can help it. Someone who doesn't care what we think, who doesn't listen to what we say, who hardly cares if we exist or not—we don't have a lot of patience for them.

What about Jesus? How long will he put up with lukewarm Christians? He says to the Laodiceans: So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. There's a strong warning. "You don't care about me, fine. I cut you loose." Jesus was going to spit them out like a mouthful of lukewarm coffee, reject them.

In several of the other letters to the seven churches, Jesus addresses specific things these groups of Christians were doing wrong, like falling into sexual sins and idol worship. But here, Jesus is not going after Christians for any specific sin, only that they are shrugging their shoulders and not taking him seriously. Do you see what this means? It means that it's not only our obvious and shameful sins that disgust Jesus, it's our lukewarm, uncaring attitudes.

The Spitting Savior—there's a Christmas card you won't see. It's an image we'd just as soon not have lingering in our minds. So why does Jesus put it there?

Here's why: because Jesus is more patient with apathy and indifference than we are. Notice that Jesus could have said nothing at all to these lukewarm Christians. He could have ignored them the way they were ignoring him. But that's not what Jesus does. He comes to them and gives them a strong warning: Repent of your apathy, or you will lose your connection to me, and with it you will lose heaven itself.

What is the antidote to apathy? It's Jesus' commitment to us, which doesn't run hot and cold. Are you lukewarm toward him much of the time? I am too. Let's listen to him as he calls us on it. Let's take to heart the fact that we have disgusted our Lord. And then let's ask for his forgiveness and receive it. Let's together be amazed at how patient he is with us and how he cares about us even at those times when we don't care much about him.

2. Shopping from Jesus

What caused people not to care about Jesus? Were things so bad in their lives that they forgot about him? No. Things were so *good* that they forgot about him. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' What we know about this ancient city corroborates this. Laodicea was a banking center of its area. In the city was a mint for manufacturing coins. It was a wealthy city. Adding to its wealth was a wool clothing industry. The city was known for dyed wool cloth that it produced. And there was the eye salve; a well-known and often prescribed medicine for the eye was produced in Laodicea.

See why people felt pretty comfortable? "We're wealthy, we're well dressed, and our vision is terrific."

Jesus says to them, however, But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. "You think that you're so wealthy you don't need anything anymore. But you are bankrupt when it comes to your soul. You're pitiful and broke. You think your fine cloth dresses you well. But in the sight of God, you look terrible, covered with the guilt of your apathy. You think that you see everything so well; your eye salve can cure any vision problems. But you are blind to the fact that you have offended me and that my righteous anger is around the corner."

The Laodiceans thought they had everything they needed. In reality, they had nothing they needed—nothing they needed to stand face to face with God and be saved from his wrath.

I've had the opportunity in the last few years to speak to several missionaries. Some have worked overseas, others right here in our country. Some have worked to spread God's Word in destitute and impoverished places. Others have started churches in affluent exurbs. Which do you think—I'm speaking in general terms here—found the work easier? What kind of people seemed to be more open to hearing the gospel, rich or poor? Generally speaking, those who are poor. They realize that there's a lot that they lack, and they often quickly see that one of those things is fellowship and closeness to God. That realization opens the door to the good news that Jesus gives us just that closeness.

Not all of us here are wealthy. Some struggle to make ends meet. But in a country like ours that is, by history's standards, rich, these words to the Laodiceans are a warning for us, too. As much stuff as we might have, as much stuff as we'll get for Christmas, we all by nature are poor, naked and blind. Sinners like us are missing what is needed to stand face to face with God and live.

So Jesus says, I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Now, when Jesus counsels us to "buy" things from him, he's not saying that we earn or buy our way into heaven. That's clear from the rest of Scripture, and even from other places in Revelation. What Jesus is telling the Laodiceans and us is to realize that we are missing crucial things and that these things can be found only in him.

Where are you doing your shopping this season? It depends, right? It depends on 1) what you need and 2) where you can get it. Jesus says, I counsel you to buy from me... Let's do it this week. Let's see that we truly need can be found in only one place. We need to be able to stand in front of God now and on the day we die and be acceptable in his sight. Let's realize that the only way that will happen is if Jesus covers our shameful sins with his blood and righteousness. Let's put his salve on our eyes so that we can see the truth: the truth of our desperate condition and what he has done to lift us up and give us life and hope.

Let's see our needs and see them all met in Jesus Christ.

3. Jesus at the door

This letter is unusual, isn't it? What I mean is that the Laodiceans' problem was that they were caring less and less about Jesus. Which makes me wonder: Would they even care that Jesus was now speaking to them?

I don't know how this letter affected their concern about Jesus. I can't tell. What I can tell, however, is the level of concern Jesus had for them and for all Christians who are losing their fire. Jesus could say to all of us, "You don't care much about me? Fine. I can take a hint. I'll leave you alone. You can drift off, away from me, and I'll let you go. See ya. Wander all the way to hell for all I care." But Jesus says nothing of the sort. Instead, he says, Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Why does he say that instead of "See ya"? Because he loves people, even lukewarm ones. "You have a serious problem. It's going to kill you. Listen to me and live."

And Jesus is persistent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. What does Jesus do? He stands at the door. He knocks. And he speaks. His voice tells us over and over again about our poverty, our nakedness, our blindness. But then that very same voice says, "I love you. I forgive you. And I freely give you what you need. Is your soul hungry? I will feed it. Are you dying? I will revive you. Are you missing fellowship with God? I will give it to you."

He's here today, you know. He stands again at the door and knocks. His voice resounds. "Still he comes within us. Still his voice would win us from the sins that hurt us, would to truth convert us." Open the door. Listen. Repent. Believe. Eat. Drink. And live.

I hope that in the last few weeks, as we have listened to Jesus speaking to us through these seven letters in Revelation, some images have been added to pre-Christmas file folder in your mind. I pray that what we all envision this time of year—well, every time of year—is Jesus, who comes to us and finds us wherever we are in life. He comes to us who are following him but struggling. He comes to us who are stumbling and about to fall. He tracks us down who are running away from him. He loves us enough to come and find us.

Picture this: picture Jesus, wherever you are, finding you. Picture Jesus saying what needs to be said. Picture Jesus embracing you. Amen.