

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Sunday After Ascension, May 16, 2021

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)
Hymns: 380 (23:4) 417, 407:1-4, 407:5
Lessons: Isaiah 40:26-31; 1 John 4:9-14; John 12:20-26
Sermon Text: Revelation 3:1-6
Sermon by Pastor M. H. Eibs

In the name of Jesus our ascended Redeemer, dear friends,

If the Lord were to address a letter to the congregations in our fellowship, what would he have to say? Since the Lord does not reveal his Word to us outside of the Bible, we do not have a direct answer to that question. But that does not leave us in the dark as to what the Lord has to say to Christian congregations in general. For we have the letters which the Lord addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor in the book of Revelation. Jesus, the Lord, the Head, of the Holy Christian Church, said to John the Apostle, ***“I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty,”*** Revelation 1:8. Then he instructed John, ***“Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea,”*** Revelation 1:11. These cities were all in Asia Minor where St. Paul had brought the Gospel of Christ. Ephesus is the main city of the seven cities named, and the rest of the cities were all in the vicinity of Ephesus.

All of these cities had a Christian congregation to which the Lord Jesus spoke a certain message according to the spiritual condition of each congregation. So also we may learn what the Lord might say to our congregations from what he said to the seven congregations in Asia. Let us meditate on this theme:

THE LORD OF THE CHURCH SPEAKS TO A CONGREGATION.

He gives:

- 1. A severe reprimand because of spiritual decay;**
- 2. An admonition to repent before it is too late;**
- 3. A promise of future glory to those who remain faithful.**

“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.” John the Apostle was commanded to write a letter to the congregation at Sardis through the pastor of that congregation. The pastor is here called ***“the angel of the church in Sardis.”*** He was the messenger of the Lord who proclaimed the Lord’s Word to that congregation. The Lord Jesus is described as the one who has ***“the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars.”*** Jesus as the Head of the Holy Christian Church is the one who sends the Holy Spirit with all his gifts to us, and he communicates these gifts of the Spirit through his Holy Word which is proclaimed by the ministers of the Word. This is what the Lord wished to communicate to the congregation at Sardis: ***“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”*** Jesus says: ***“I know your deeds.”*** The omniscient Lord Jesus knows all things. He knows what is going on in every congregation. Jesus began his message to each of the seven congregations in Asia with the same words, ***“I know your deeds.”*** The Bible says, ***“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account,”*** Hebrews 4:13. So the Lord Jesus is concerned also with the spiritual condition of every congregation.

He told the congregation at Sardis, ***“You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”*** This congregation was spiritually dead, or in a state of spiritual decay. It was alive in name only. In actual fact its Christian life was dying inwardly. This is not said about every member of the congregation, but about the majority of the members. They were called Christians, and members of a Christian congregation, but they were devoted to material things of this world. To gain and possess the material things of this life was their principal concern.

Such a worldly attitude we can expect of people in general, also in our land which at one time was called a Christian nation. We see this worldly attitude in the newscasts we hear, in the movies that are popular, in the TV shows, and in the manner of living of the majority of people. They are not concerned about a moral decay. In fact, there are some who do not even want the name of God mentioned. They would like to see the religion taught in the Bible obliterated. People in general are not concerned about spiritual matters.

What about us? Surely we don't want it said of us that we are spiritually dead or in a state of moral and spiritual decay? The Lord wants us to ponder his letter to the Sardis congregation and apply it to ourselves. We would certainly hope that the members of our congregations are not spiritually dead. If this is true, then how should spiritual life among us be demonstrated? We ought to be concerned, first of all, that our congregations have the Word of God taught in its truth and purity. It ought to be a matter of grave concern that no false teaching be allowed or tolerated, for that would mislead us and finally rob us of the precious Gospel of salvation. If we do not want to be charged with spiritual decay, then in our homes the Word of God ought to be used. We ought to read it and study it and teach our children to know God's Word. We must also guard against being worldly-minded. Our first concern every day should be our soul's welfare and not our physical or economic welfare. The Bible says, ***“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things,”*** Colossians 3:2. How many material possessions we can acquire while living on earth should not be our principal endeavor. Rather, we should always be occupied with how we can reach our heavenly home above. We must guard against fleshly lusts and the sinful pleasures of this world. Paul says, ***“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator,”*** Colossians 3:5-10.

Only if we follow God's Word and obey what the Apostle Paul writes, can we by the working of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel avoid that spiritual decay of which the Lord warns so severely in our text. With this warning or reprimand goes **an admonition to repent before it is too late.**

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. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.” The pastor of a Christian congregation is here exhorted to preach repentance to his members. He is given the duty to arouse those who are spiritually asleep and in danger of spiritual death. Those who are earthly-minded and indifferent or careless about using God's Word and Sacraments must be admonished before it is too late.

All of us are to be reminded of what we have once heard and learned when we were first taught the truths of God's Word. We are not to be satisfied that we were once instructed and confirmed and then carelessly go on our way through life. If spiritual decay is not to set in, we must continually go back to the Bible and learn and study the teachings we find there. ***“Study diligently the Scriptures,”*** John 5:39. Jesus promises, ***“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,”*** John 8:31-32. If we do not do this, it will happen in our midst just as it is happening in so many churches today, that the Gospel of Christ is lost, and the teachings of Christ are compromised with error.

But what is far worse, Jesus says, ***“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.”*** The warning is that the Last Day will come unexpectedly, as a thief comes, and our returning Lord will find us spiritually asleep, and not prepared by faith to greet him when he comes again. We surely do not want this to happen to us!

The message of the Lord of the Church to the congregation at Sardis is concluded with **a promise of future glory to those who remain faithful.**

3.

“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.” Here Jesus speaks of the few in the congregation who are not spiritually dead. They have ***“not soiled their clothes.”*** There is no one upon this earth who is sinless. No one is perfect. No believer perfectly serves his Lord. But there were a few at Sardis also who had not contaminated themselves with worldliness, materialism and the other sinful ways of this world. They had by faith received Jesus as their Savior and with his perfect righteousness were clothed in white and so were worthy in God’s sight. They too in eternity will enjoy the bliss of heaven.

To us also the Lord gives this precious promise of future glory as those who trust in him for salvation. ***“He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never erase his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”*** All those who by God’s free grace through the Gospel conquer the sins and temptations of this life and remain faithful to Christ, will enjoy the blessedness of eternal life in heaven.

What a wonderful thing it is to be able to look forward to seeing with our own eyes what John saw in the vision Jesus gave him of heaven! ***“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’”*** Revelation 7:9-10. Who are these? John was told, ***“These are they who have come out of great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,”*** Revelation 7:14. Jesus by his blood-atonement for our sins won for us this perfect righteousness which avails before the throne of God. ***“The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin,”*** 1 John 1:7. ***“Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,”*** John 3:16.

With that promise of future glory before us, let us heed the message of the Lord of the Church and take it to heart. ***“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*** Then our names will not be blotted out of God’s book of life, and we can look forward to Jesus confessing us before his Father and the holy angels as his believing followers. May the Holy Spirit keep us in this true faith so that we ever confess,

***“Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness,
My beauty are, my glorious dress,
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.”*** Amen.
(The Lutheran Hymnal 371:1)

(From a Ministry By Mail sermon for May 7, 2006)