

Welcome

For pretty much as long as God has been interacting with humanity, religious people have been weird. You can go all the way back to Noah, whom God told to build a boat... in the middle of dry ground... when it had never rained. That's weird, right?

Or Abram, when God told him to pick up and move, with no clear direction. Gideon raised an army then sent 90% of them home. The prophet Isaiah once walked around naked for three years because God told him to. Ezekiel cooked food over cowpies (after negotiating with God down from human waste).

Jesus himself travelled with an entourage of men and women - something not done in his days, that raised more than a few eyebrows. He was unapologetically nomadic, rather than maintaining a base like most rabbis in his day did. He hung out not with respectable people, but the scum and riff-raff of his society.

Paul got kicked out of most of the cities where he tried to plant churches.

There was a woman in the early church named Thecla who baptized herself (because no one else would) and who followed Paul around preaching, instead of getting married and settling down like everyone wanted her to.

It didn't stop after the New Testament either. There was St. Francis of Assisi who famously stopped in his travels to preach to animals. And in more modern times, our own denomination made a name for itself by, among other things, refusing to go to the circus or watch movies (thank God that's not still a thing!).

Sometimes, Christians are countercultural in amazing ways - like the Christians who sat at lunch counters to protest against racial injustice or those at our Southern border today working with families separated from each other.

Other times, Christians are just weird - like the guys who handle snakes. Which begs the question: if following Jesus makes us different, how exactly are we supposed to be different?

Today is all about what God requires of us, how God invites us to live lives that mark us out as different - and maybe even a little weird.

Message

This is the season of Lent, which is a season the Church sets aside to prepare to celebrate Easter. Lent is a season where we take time to interrogate our hearts for sin, so that when we find ways that we have turned from God, we can confess that sin, repent and turn to God.

This year, our Lent series is called Under Pressure. We're going to visit the seven cities of the book of Revelation, to listen in to what Jesus had to say to those churches.

Those seven cities were all in the Roman province of Asia, what we call today Turkey. The Revelation was written at the end of the first century, when a Caesar named Diocletian was on the throne. Unlike Nero a generation earlier, Diocletian didn't really care about Christians. There was no officially sanctioned wide-spread persecution.

But the churches in those seven cities all faced one important question: in a world that wants you to worship Caesar as Lord, who will you serve?

Jesus? Or Caesar?

There're probably a million different ways to answer that question, and we're looking at seven of them over the season of Lent. These seven churches had seven different responses to "How do we stay faithful to Jesus in an unfaithful world?"

And not all their responses were good. But for John, no matter where the churches were, no matter how they were struggling, they needed the same thing: a fresh revelation of Jesus. That's what we see at the end of Chapter 1, just before John writes the letters:

When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave. -- Revelation 1:12-18

Believe it or not, this intense, bizarre, cosmic vision of Jesus is what all seven of these churches need to be faithful to Jesus.

And he's who we need too. Just watch and learn.

On Ash Wednesday, we began with the Church in Ephesus. We saw that, though held on to the teaching of Jesus with a death-drip, they'd held on so hard their claws had come out, claws they used to destroy people who didn't see the world the way they did. We saw on Ash Wednesday that John called them to remember their first love - Jesus himself.

Today, we're travelling to the next city, Smyrna. The Smyrnese were a people who felt caught between opposing claims on their loyalty. I think we can feel that today pretty well. In our desire to be GOOD, we aren't sure where our allegiance and loyalty should go. Being a good employee these days often means

working a lot more hours than you really have in you, and at the cost of time for yourself, or with your family and friends. Being a good parent means being torn between obligations, running from one event to the next. Being a good spouse, partner, friend... we could go on and on. We're all tired all the time - in fact, we've turned it into a virtue. Somehow, the more tired you are, the more impressive that makes you.

Jesus has a powerful word for those of us who find ourselves caught between opposing obligations and desires: following him is going to make us weird. It's going to mean we disappoint some people, fail to meet some of those expectations. Not be the person every single person wants us to be. We should expect not to fit in, and be faithful to him anyway.

[Smyrna] The Smyrnans were in a worse place than us, if you can believe it. But first, some background on Smyrna. Smyrna was a wealthy port city that had been destroyed almost 700 years before the Revelation, then rebuilt about 300 years later (think about that: the city was gone for longer than the US has been a country). The city had a reputation as the city that was once dead but now alive.

The city was prosperous enough that it grew up the side of the nearby mountains, leading to a spectacular skyline some ancient travelers called the "crown of Smyrna".

Smyrna had a special relationship with Rome. Over 200 years before the Revelation was written, when Rome was battling Carthage over control of this region, Smyrna had backed Rome. In appreciation for their loyalty, Rome rewarded Carthage with an Imperial Temple, a marker of loyalty to Rome and favor or Rome.

Here's where it gets really interesting: as a marker of loyalty, Smyrnan citizens were expected to offer a pinch of incense on the altar at the Imperial altar once a year as an offering to Caesar and Rome. Doing so granted them a certificate they could show or display, proving their loyalty to the empire (and the city!).

The Christians in the Smyrnan church refused to worship Caesar. Their lord was Jesus, not Diocletian. So of course, they didn't get their loyalty certificates.

[Scripture Slide] Now, I want you to do a thought experiment with me: imagine you're at a Rangers game, and it's time to stand for the national anthem, and you see someone a few rows in front of you stay seated. Not only that, they turn away from the flag and hum a different song to themselves.

How would that person be treated by the people around him?

And that's in the US, where we have freedom of religion and freedom of expression. You can imagine how much worse it would be if shop owners proudly displayed their loyalty certificates and the Christian shop owner didn't have one.

The Christians suffered social ostracization, economic hardships and more. They were really and truly suffering for their faithfulness to Jesus.

Which is why Jesus sends them this powerful word:

“Write this letter to the angel of the church in Smyrna. This is the message from the one who is the First and the Last, who was dead but is now alive:

“I know about your suffering and your poverty—but you are rich! I know the blasphemy of those opposing you. They say they are Jews, but they are not, because their synagogue belongs to Satan. Don’t be afraid of what you are about to suffer. The devil will throw some of you into prison to test you. You will suffer for ten days. -- Revelation 2:8-10a

Did you catch the references Jesus makes to Smyrna? He calls himself the one who was dead but is now alive - a spin on the city's nickname. And at the end, he promises them a crown of life, in contrast to the city's skyline. He also insists that he knows their suffering, and he calls them rich, even though they're poor.

That's a major bit of encouragement for Smyrnans, who have been suffering in real, tangible and economic ways because they have remained faithful to Jesus. The city around them is rich and prosperous, enjoying the fruits of a port city with Rome's favor. Can you imagine how hard it was for them to know that the only thing keeping them from enjoying the same prosperity was a pinch of incense tossed on an altar *once a year*? It seems like such a little gesture to ensure your family eats, your friends don't ostracize you or hurl insults at you.

And yet here Jesus says, I see you. I see the truth no one else (not even you!) can see: you're rich. Rich in Spirit. Rich in what matters.

But what about that bit in the middle, about the synagogue of Satan? Who are these Jews John speaks so negatively about?

We have to be really careful here, because Christians for centuries have used verses like this to stoke the fires of anti-Semitism - and you can see why. Calling Jews a synagogue of Satan sounds pretty harsh.

What we have to remember here is that John, the author of Revelation, and many of those early Christians were Jewish. Before they believed the good news that Jesus is God's Messiah, they gathered in synagogues to worship God and many of them were looking forward to the coming of God's Messiah.

That's especially important outside of Israel. In Roman cities like Smyrna, Jews had a protected status, an exemption from the expectation to worship caesar. Smyrnan citizens treated Jews living among them like foreigners (even if they were born and raised in Smyrna). They didn't have the same expectation of patriotism they did for their fellow Gentile Smyrnans.

But many Jews didn't believe Jesus was God's Messiah. They didn't want to follow Jesus, and they rejected the Jews who did.

So the Church in Smyrna was comprised of Jews and Gentiles who were following Jesus, and had been rejected by pretty much everyone - both Gentiles *and* Jews in Smyrna. People who had once been friends and family turned their backs on them.

So John, a Jew, calls his fellow Jews a "synagogue of Satan", meaning he thinks they're deceived and being used to test the faithful Jesus-followers of Smyrna.

Christians today - especially us Gentile Christians have to be very careful with this passage because, as non-Jews, we're not part of this conversation. It's a lot like the n-word. That word belongs today to the Black community. And there's a lot of debate within the Black community about how that word works, whether it's empowering or derogatory, and more. But I'm White. That word doesn't belong to me. So I don't use it. Even when it's just me and my White friends. Even with my close Black friends. Even when I'm singing along to a rap song. Because it's not my word.

Same goes for this passage here. Given the violence the Church has visited upon Jewish people throughout the centuries, we have to handle this verse with care. And what matters for us today is that truth that the Christians in Smyrna had no safe haven. No matter where they turned - to the Jews or to the Gentiles, their choice to be faithful to Jesus cost them relationships.

So what do those Christians in Smyrna have to teach us today? A lot, I think.

If we are following Jesus in our culture, it likely means we're going to make both sides of a lot of stuff uncomfortable. We'll be pro-life in a way that makes conservatives uncomfortable, because we won't just care about the unborn. We'll also advocate for policies that care for kids after they're born, fighting xenophobia and poverty. We'll be against the death penalty and see war at most as a last resort rather than a preemptive weapon. On the other hand, we'll pursue racial justice in a way that makes progressives uncomfortable. We'll demand systems that are truly just and representative, not merely tokenistic (like the primary system that's delivered 6 White frontrunners for the presidential race). We'll seek to establish systems and policies that work to repair past injustices while simultaneously working to make our present more equitable.

You can feel that tension, can't you?

A church that takes seriously Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves is going to be pretty weird.

It's enough to freeze us in place, if we're not careful. That's why we need to hear Jesus' words to the Church in Smyrna: I see you. When others reject you, harass you, question you, ostracize you, I see you, I know you.

Hang in there.

And here's one practical way to be weird: remember earlier how I pointed out that we're always tired, that as a culture, we've glorified burnout? Well it doesn't take a rocket scientist to identify that as bad, does it? The practice of Sabbath is an ancient one God gave us specifically to combat the way Empire wants to work us to the bone. A Sabbath day - a day where we don't produce. A divine waste of time.

1 day of the week is 1/7, just over 14%. How many of us can say we have 14% margin in our schedules? 14% of our week that isn't booked up with work, sleep or errands?

I honestly think a church that committed itself to Sabbathing seriously would be a gamechanger in our city. We'd be seriously weird, no doubt about it. And we'd suffer some ridicule, some judgment, especially if it meant our kids missed games or practices. If we had to say No to our bosses when they ask for more than they're entitled to of our time. When we don't respond to those emails, texts or messages for a few hours (instead of right away).

The Smyrnans faced that - Jesus told them they'd be "in prison for 10 days", which was a poetic way of saying, Yes, things are going to be bad for a while, but not forever. A limited time of persecution. Because when you don't just do what everyone else does, people don't understand. Our lives stand as a prophetic witness to those who live with Rome's voice in their ear. Our lives become a good news invitation. And Jesus sees us.

That's the call today: to be weird, not for the sake of standing out, but for the sake of faithfulness to our lord and rescuer, Jesus.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus sees us and invites us to his table.

1. Where does my faith in Jesus put me at odds with the culture around me?
2. Where do I ignore Jesus in favor of the values and voices in the culture around me?
3. What does it look like for me to be faithful to Jesus this week?

Assignment + Blessing

How are you choosing to be weird this week?

But if you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life.

“Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches. Whoever is victorious will not be harmed by the second death.” -- Revelation 2:10-11