

Welcome

Welcome to Ash Wednesday at Catalyst. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of 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, the sins we're going to explore during Lent are the places where we compromise our faith. Rather than remaining faithful to Jesus, we allow all sorts of pressures to add something to the mix. Jesus and...

Jesus and politics (it's an election year).

Jesus and family.

Jesus and job.

Jesus and the things I want.

Jesus and...

The reality is that a lot of us add things to our faith. We divide our allegiance between Jesus and any number of other things - good things and not so good things. And this is poison for a strong faith. A strong faith is a pure faith.

So the question we're asking this year is: Is my faith pure? Is our faith pure?

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?

To a much higher degree than us, those seven churches faced pressures to conform, to reject Jesus in favor of Caesar, or at least to worship both. To divide their allegiance and loyalty.

Those churches came up with seven different ways to navigate those tensions. Seven different responses to "How do we stay faithful to Jesus in an unfaithful world?"

[Scripture Slide 1] Not all their responses were good. So you'd expect John to write seven separate letters, addressing each church and their problems, giving them wise spiritual counsel. But that's not what John does. He writes one letter, the book we now call Revelation. And while he addresses each church individually, he also addresses them together. Because, 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. No matter what our struggles are, no matter what pressures we face in the world around us, no matter how our allegiance to Jesus is tested, the answer is to look to our lord and rescuer, Jesus himself.

John says, I don't care how many problems you have. The answer is to know Jesus better.

And I know that sounds like the sort of answer you expect to hear at Church, but I promise it's a whole lot more interesting than that.

Before we go on, though, it's important for us to take John at his word. We need to see Jesus, to worship him. So we're going to spend some minutes worshipping Jesus together.

[Music Set]

Reflection

Tonight, we begin with the first letter, to the church in Ephesus. Ephesus was a coastal city. Its port created a metropolitan environment, with people from a bunch of different cultures - think New York,

San Francisco or New Orleans. Ephesus was famous for housing one of the seven wonders of the Ancient World, a temple to Artemis, the Greek goddess of the hunt, chastity and childbirth.

Something that will become clear as we work through these letters is that a group of teachers has come to the province, and is making a circuit through these churches. They're called by several different names, and at least one of their leaders seems to have been named Nicholas. We'll explore the specifics of what they were teaching over the next few weeks, but for tonight, all you need to know is that what they were teaching was dangerous and damaging for these churches. Neither John nor Jesus was a fan.

As we'll see in a moment, the Ephesians were having none of what these false teachers were selling. They didn't accommodate the teachers, didn't host them in their church, didn't tolerate their teachings. But in the process of rejecting the false teaching, something had happened to the Ephesian Christians. They had become cold and judgmental. And, for Jesus, that's a significant problem.

What is the answer? Let's listen in as Jesus addresses the Church:

“Write this letter to the angel of the church in Ephesus. This is the message from the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the seven gold lampstands:

Jesus identifies himself as "the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the lampstands." Jesus actually interpreted this imagery for us at the end of his description of himself: in 1:20, he said, **"This is the meaning of the mystery of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and the seven gold lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."** -- Revelation 1:20 So Jesus wants the Ephesians to know him as the one who has authority over the Church, and who is in the midst of the churches. Why? Let's keep reading:

"I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting.

"But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches. But this is in your favor: You hate the evil deeds of the Nicolaitans, just as I do. -- Revelation 2:1-6

The Ephesians don't tolerate false teachings. They have no time for the Nicolaitans or their ideas. Good job, says Jesus. So what's the problem? Jesus says they "don't love him or each other" as they did at first. The original Greek there says they've "forgotten their first love."

And the punishment, Jesus says, is that he will remove their lampstand. If the lampstands are the churches, then what Jesus says is that they'll cease to be a church. What does that mean, really?

We've talked a lot here at Catalyst about what it means to say God is most essentially self-giving love. It's this love that is the essence of God that is the ground and foundation of our faith. Receiving and participating in God's self-giving love is what makes us a Church.

The Ephesians were (rightly) worried that these false teachers would destroy their church. They were concerned that, if these false teachings took hold, they would lead the Ephesian Christians so far away from authentic faith in Jesus that they would cease to be a church in any meaningful sense. Jesus might say, They'd lose their lampstands, the light that showed them the way of faith.

But in their quest to remain true to God, something equally bad has happened, something we see a lot in religious folks: they became judgmental, harsh and cruel. Rather than being motivated and energized by God's self-giving love, they became morality police. They became legalistic, concerned not with whether they were loving reflections of Jesus, but whether everyone else was doing the right things.

And Jesus comes to them in this letter and says: You're in real danger. If you forget the love that is the beginning and foundation of your faith, if your faith is animated by a quest to be right rather than a quest to love more perfectly, then you're actually not a church anymore.

You were so busy fighting to keep the false teachers from destroying your church that in the process, you yourselves became the architects of your own destruction.

Which is a pretty terrifying idea, isn't it? That in fighting to defend what is so dear, we end up becoming the destroyer? And yet we see it again and again in our life of faith. Leading with love is much harder than leaning on law. Love requires us to live in the grey, where law reduces everything to black and white. Love requires us to welcome strangers and outsiders, to be kind even to our enemies. Law allows us to exclude those who don't measure up.

Love is difficult, especially in the midst of conflict. Law is much easier, especially in the midst of conflict.

But Jesus says if we want to be his people, we must be a people of love, even in the midst of conflict. Maybe *especially* in the midst of conflict.

That's really hard. It goes against our nature, and it goes against the divisive, siloed nature of our culture. Jesus knows that, which is why he reminds us he is the one who walks among the lampstands. Returning to our first love is returning to Jesus himself. It's a call to take our eyes off our laws and put them back on Jesus himself.

The Ephesians lived in a culture that insisted they follow Rome, not Jesus. Their culture glorified violence, called war 'peace' and used money to control the populace. In those regards, we're not terribly different from them. As this election year heats up, we're encouraged more and more to be a people of

judgment and condemnation, to allow political allegiance to determine our relationships. We're formed to place our trust in the future in the lap of the person in the Oval Office.

And, as Jesus did to the Ephesians, he says to us, "You've forgotten your first love. Repent! Turn to me!

So we now turn to Jesus with an attitude of repentance.

Communion + Ashes

Blessing + Assignment

“Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches. To everyone who is victorious I will give fruit from the tree of life in the paradise of God. -- Revelation 2:7