

INTRO:

Hello friends, family. Thanks for joining us online this morning. My name is Tim Basselin and I'm on the preaching team here at Catalyst and this is my first time preaching online. So I want to start by saying hello to my mom, who lives in Alabama. Hi mom!

Mom mom has been called a saint before, more than once. She doesn't have any official credentials from the church confirming miracles she's done, but still she has lived a rather saintly life. She's never touched alcohol, never touched tobacco. She's lived a life of sacrifice for others. In fact, she doesn't know what to do with herself if she's not helping out someone. Of course, she'd be quick to tell you she has faults. But even that confession might just be further proof of a holy humility. We think of saints as being holy people, and that's because the word saint comes from the Latin word sanctus, which means holy. Sometimes we think of that holiness as a kind of purity or innocence. Saints seem incapable of sinning.

We also think of holiness as being separated out, called to something particular, set apart for a specific purpose. The items used in the temple in the Old Testament were holy items, not to be used for anything else except worship. My mom has been told many times that she has been chosen, separated out. When she was around 40 years old, my dad suffered a severe brain injury. Well-meaning friends that were attempting to comfort her would say things like, "God doesn't give us more than we can handle, so this means he knew how strong you truly are." It seemed my mom had been chosen, set apart for this purpose, selected because of her great faith. As though Satan was itching to test someone, like at the beginning of Job, and just to show off God said, "Have you considered my servant Mary Elizabeth?"

I remember some 9 months after my dad's accident, he was still in the hospital, and I heard my mom crying in her room, which wasn't unusual. She prayed a lot that year, and she cries when she prays, and these cries had the cadence of prayer. But this time her tone was different. It was a deeper, more guttural calling out than normal. I stepped around the squeaky parts of the floor to get closer and hear, to make sure she was ok. And I heard her pleading, "Why me, God? Why me? I've been your servant! I've done everything right my whole life! Why God? Why have you taken him from me?" I opened her bedroom door and tried to act like the Holy Spirit. I went over and knelt down next to her and put my face into the carpet like hers, and I said nothing.

I was 12 when we learned you could do everything right your whole life and it wouldn't protect you from anything. All that American Dream talk, all that just work hard enough, you can do anything you want talk—I was 12 when we found out all of that was shifting sand, and you couldn't trust a house that was built on it. I was 12 when we learned that it could be true what scripture says about never seeing the righteous forsaken or their children begging for bread, but that it was also not the whole truth.

Today we're going to talk about what it looks like when righteousness is not rewarded. What do you do when you've been obedient, and yet... tragedy, and yet you're stuck in your job, and yet you find yourself depressed? And yet, a virus affects your family, your retirement, your livelihood.

As has been the answer throughout this series, we turn to Christ, we look to a vision of our savior. Let us do that now in worship.

Message

This is the season of Lent, which is the 6 weeks before Easter when we take a long hard look at the meaning of the cross in order to prepare for Easter celebration. During Lent we imitate Christ by practicing dying to ourselves. A lot of people fast during Lent, and the purpose is to intentionally die to our desires in some small area in order to be reminded that our true life does not come from our own efforts and abilities or from the things of life we desire. True life comes from resurrection, from the Holy Spirit's power in our lives. But before there can be resurrection, there must be death. And so we practice small acts of self-denial so that when we encounter large things, like pandemic, our automatic reflex isn't to just protect ourselves by stockpiling supplies or to just try harder to overcome the problem by our own efforts of helping ourselves or even our own efforts of helping others. Instead, we've trained ourselves to be comfortable with denying what seems to satiate us and to instead look to God for true life.

This year, our Lent series is called Under Pressure. And we've come to be under a great deal more pressure than any of us imagined when planning the series. For the past month we've been visiting the seven cities of the book of Revelation and listening to what Jesus had to say to those churches as they were under pressure.

Those seven cities were all in the Roman province of Asia, modern day Turkey. The book of Revelation was written at the end of the first century, when 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?

Revelation's answer to all of these churches, no matter how they were struggling, was to offer them a fresh picture of Jesus. That's what we see at the end of Chapter 1, just before John writes individual letters to each church:

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. -- Revelation 1:12-16

This is a mystic's vision, a seeing into other realms, an attempt to put into words what words cannot contain. To truly see this vision, we have to slow down. We have to accept it as mystery. This is a Christ transfigured. A Christ more than simply victorious. There's something else going on here, something more than we can comprehend. This is a vision that requires meditation, holding space for the mystery of Jesus as a man and as God.

In the next couple chapters, John writes a short letter to each of the seven churches, and connects each church to a specific part of this vision of Christ.

For Ephesus, he held the seven stars and walked among the seven lampstands.

For Smyrna, he was the alpha and omega, the dead one come to life.

For Pergamum, he held the sharp two-edged sword out of his mouth.

For Thyatira, his eyes were fire and his feet bronze.

For Sardis, he had the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

[Scripture Slide 1] And in the vision for the church in Philadelphia today, starting in chapter 3 vs 7, we see a Christ who holds the keys to death and the grave. Philadelphia was a city on the Eastern edge of the Roman empire. It was built specifically as a base from which Roman culture and Roman rule could influence the provinces beyond Rome's reach. And it did so quite successfully. You can imagine the church in Philadelphia likely had a similar desire--set in this particular place, with the infrastructure to reach out beyond the Roman empire. It should be a missionary city, sending people out to tell others the gospel. But as we will see, this church is not thriving. It is weak.

“Write this letter to the angel of the church in Philadelphia.

This is the message from the one who is holy and true,

the one who has the key of David.

What he opens, no one can close;

and what he closes, no one can open

Philadelphia's picture of Christ includes keys, like the ones from chapter one that unlock death and the grave. Keys symbolize having authority over something, and the key in Philadelphia's vision is called the Key of David. These lyrical phrases connect all of the Old Testament prophecies given to Israel about a descendant of David ruling on the throne forever and ever to this transfigured Christ who has conquered death and the grave and who has all authority to rule, to open or shut whatever doors he pleases.

So what does this Jesus who holds the Key of David say to the Church of Philadelphia?

“I know all the things you do, and I have opened a door for you that no one can close. You have little strength, yet you obeyed my word and did not deny me. Look, I will force those who belong to Satan's synagogue—those liars who say they are Jews but are not—to come and bow down at your feet. They will acknowledge that you are the ones I love.

“Because you have obeyed my command to persevere, I will protect you from the great time of testing that will come upon the whole world to test those who belong to this world. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take away your crown.

These letters all have a pattern. Jesus starts by saying, I know your works, I see what you're doing, and I have this against you. Or... even more strongly like last week to Sardis, “I know your works. You have a name of being alive, but you are dead!” And then Jesus gives them encouragement and makes promises

to them. The letter to Philadelphia, though, breaks the pattern. The holy one, the true one says I know your works. I know you have little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

To Philadelphia, Jesus speaks no words of condemnation or judgement. From what we can tell, they are a holy church. And yet, Philadelphia seems to be the weakest of the 7 churches, Jesus notes their lack of power. But also the fact that they have been obedient and persevered. This church was small, it was struggling, but not, it seems, because it was unfaithful.

We have this thing we as humans do. It comes in multiple forms. Here's the religious form: if you are faithful to God, God will bless you, and you won't be sick or poor, or at least not as sick or poor. The extreme version of this, we call a prosperity gospel. If you have faith, God will heal you and prosper you. Here's the secular form of the same thing: if you work hard enough you can be anything you want to be. We call this, simply, the American Dream. It's woven into the fabric of our society, from our economics to our politics to our education.

These statements have a lot of truth in them, but they're not the full truth.

Here's one of the problems when we act as though they are the full truth. Humans are judgemental. It's what we do. And so the other side of the coin of these half truths is that when we see a person who is poor, we work that formula backwards, and we assume they must not be faithful, or they must not have worked very hard. We judge the homeless person. We judge the people in low-income housing. We have questions, unspoken, about sickness and birth defects and people who are divorced and ... the list goes on and on.

We also do this to ourselves. When tragedy strikes us, we turn this formula, this judgement on ourselves and we pray, "Why me, God? I've been faithful! I've worked really hard." This isn't fair.

These are ok questions to ask. I think they are proper questions. When we think of Job, we remember Job asking these questions of God. And though God did not exactly answer Job's questions, God also did not punish Job for asking. In fact, he punished Job's friends who thought they knew the answers, his friends who judged Job and assumed Job had sinned. The Psalms, as well, are full of questions about God's justice. The Psalmist cries out again and again different forms of "Why me??"

Of course Christ's holiness, his set apartness and purity, Christ whom we are called to be like...was led to the cross, where He cried out the Psalmist's words from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The church in Philadelphia stands as another biblical example that faithfulness does not necessarily breed success. Faithfulness includes the willingness to take up our crosses, to encounter the ultimate failure of death, and yet to believe. To believe this vision given to the church in Philadelphia, that Christ

ultimately holds the key of David. He is the fulfillment of all the prophecies about peace, when God reigns over the earth. He, ultimately, holds the keys of death and the grave.

Faith as willingness to take up our cross is what we practice during Lent. When we fast, we practice denying ourselves, putting our usual desires to death, so that our desire can learn to instead rest in Christ, who holds the keys. We practice it on a small scale in our bodies and in our hearts, so that when tragedy strikes, so that when pandemic arrives, we know who truly opens and shuts the doors. We know who truly holds the keys of life and death. We know how to not trust in the comforts of this world.

Philadelphia was built specifically as a base from which Roman culture and Roman rule could influence the provinces beyond Rome's reach. And here is this church in a position, with the infrastructure, to be a great missionary church, sending people out to tell others the gospel. Yet, it is weak.

This feels familiar, doesn't it? I often feel weak in places where it seems more fair that God should bless me, in places where I've done my part, I've kept my side of the bargain, I've put in the work. Sometimes we try and we try and we try, and we want to spread God's good news, we want to be an example to others of what God can do.

*And it seems to us that the way to be an example is to be successful.
Why would anyone else want the good news if it didn't lead to success?*

Friends, the church in Philadelphia reminds me of our church. Catalyst has been given a vision for a changing population here in Rowlett. There is enormous growth in the city. There are large apartment buildings and condos going up all around our church. And we have been given a vision to reach those communities. And yet, and yet, you know the pains of the last five years. We are a church that is not thriving and successful. We are weak.

Is that hard to hear someone say? It's a difficult thing to admit. I've wrestled with it a great deal. I'm going to be honest. My family has wrestled with whether or not to stay here.

If it's hard for us to admit we are weak, why is that so?

How deeply ingrained in us is our desire to prosper, to thrive?
And by whose standards do we measure success?

Is it embarrassing to be part of a church that is not growing, prospering, rich? Catalyst can't afford a youth minister, or a full-time worship leader. And we don't pay JR very well at all. We're not drawing in the crowds. We have few resources, little time, little money, for transforming our community. We are a weak church.

Catalyst, these words are for us today:

“These are the words of the holy one, the true one,
who has the key of David,
who opens and no one will shut,
who shuts and no one opens:

“I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ...

Christ holds the keys. Jesus opens and closes the doors. Can we trust in that, Catalyst?

I believe my mom does have a saintly quality, but her holiness is not what people often attribute to her. It's not a form of being set apart by doing this or not doing that. And it's not that she was so holy that God knew she could handle something awful. It's actually the other way around. The awful things, the struggle of suddenly losing a spouse and raising two teenage boys on her own, and dealing with hospitals and work and finances and a thousand other things no one will know about. It's being in the midst of that, and being on her knees, crying out to the only one who holds the keys of death and the grave -- that's what has made her saintly.

By few standards of this world could you say she's been a success. She never made much money. She never had any fame. But no one in this world holds the keys.

The author of Hebrews says that even Jesus learned obedience through suffering. That's a great mystery for us--that the one we're supposed to be like learned obedience through suffering.

Again, this is what we practice during lent. We practice tiny sufferings, little denials that form our hearts toward obedience. We practice that inner turn of the soul from wanting to be satisfied by food or entertainment or whatever else, to recognizing that our true satisfaction can only come from the one who holds the keys. And then when tragedy strikes, we will find ourselves on our knees, not getting answers to our questions, but knowing whom to ask, and trusting that Jesus is ultimately opening and closing the doors. This is how we learn to accept what God wills. This is how we learn obedience.

For some of us, the pandemic has been a restful respite. If your circumstances have allowed that, wonderful. For some of us, though, jobs are in danger, and it doesn't take much looking down the road to see housing and other basic necessities being in danger. For some of us, our lives or the lives of those dear to us are in danger, and we're afraid, full of anxiety, because everything we touch, every person we see, seems dangerous, even life-threatening.

However you are experiencing this pandemic, from minor inconveniences to anxiety about health, I pray you are able to meditate on this vision of Christ, to know Christ as the one who ultimately holds the keys to death and the grave. If you can, practice those inconveniences, those weaknesses, as forms of fasting. Allow the absence of the thing you desire to turn your desire toward Christ.

The city of Philadelphia had multiple names throughout the years. Their name changed as new emperors took over, or became the city's benefactor after a severe earthquake, allowing them to rebuild the city. The city's names were meant to show the power and success of Roman rulers.

This church's success, though, was not the success of Rome. Nor is your success the success of America. Here is the success Jesus envisioned for the church in Philadelphia. Here is the end of the letter to the church.

If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Communion:

[Communion Slide] I hope you have some elements prepared to take communion in your home today. Because taking communion is the greatest picture and practice we have of denying this world's success and following Christ. Here, we participate in Christ's broken body. We participate in Christ's spilled blood. We enter into death, death to ourselves, because we have the hope of resurrection. Do you have the hope of resurrection today? Do you know that the resurrection work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is not the same as what we think of as success? Do you have faith? Do you believe that Christ alone holds the keys to death and the grave?

Before we receive communion together, we're going to pray together. I'm going to ask you some questions and give you some space to consider them in prayer with God. Then I'll pray for all of us and we can receive communion.

1. How do I tend to measure success when it comes to my faith?
2. How is God calling me to understand spiritual strength?
3. What does it look like for me to trust in God in the week ahead?

On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this in remembrance of me as often as you drink it." For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes again.

Benediction:

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 1:17-18

