

Welcome

Many of you know that I had knee surgery a couple of months ago - I tore my ACL and had to get a replacement. Leading up to the procedure, I was super nervous. It wasn't my surgeon - he's one of the best in the Metroplex, by all accounts. And it wasn't the fact that it was my very first surgical procedure ever. I wasn't freaked out about going under anesthesia or anything like that.

What made me nervous was the recovery. They told me I was going to be non-weight-bearing for 6 weeks (it only ended up being 2, but I didn't know that until I woke up). I had an idea of what non-weight bearing was going to mean - every single thing in my life, from showering and using the restroom to preparing food to doing work to sleeping - all of it was going to be harder than it used to be. (And I didn't have a clue how hard it was actually going to be, which is probably for the best.)

I'm a really self-sufficient person. I don't like to ask for help. (Can anyone here relate?)

And I knew that over the next couple of months, I was going to have to ask for help, to rely on other people for pretty much everything. And that level of debilitation was pretty scary for me.

Which, when I say it that way, sounds pretty stupid, doesn't it? I was afraid to ask for help. Afraid to need other people.

I had seen over the last couple of years that this self-sufficiency was a problem in my life, a spiritual red flag God wanted me to address. So in my anxiety approaching my surgery, I made a decision to welcome my helplessness as a spiritual practice.

I need to learn to be less self-sufficient. To admit my need for other people. This is a spiritual practice, as we'll see today.

In fact, though self-sufficiency is a deeply held American virtue, we'll see today that it is poison for our spiritual lives. God didn't create us to be self-sufficient. God designed us to need and to be needed, to love and to be loved.

This is hard. Really hard. So hard that it might take a debilitating surgery to teach some of us that lesson. But friends, when we begin to learn it, we find a new beauty and freedom we never imagined possible.

Message

We are currently in the season of Lent. This is a time the Church sets aside to prepare to celebrate Easter. It's 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 morning, we're continuing our exploration of the book of Revelation. We're calling this series, "Under Pressure" In this series, we're 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 are 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.

We began with the Church in Ephesus. To the Ephesians, Jesus called himself the one who walked among the lampstands. As a church that had forsaken love for legalism, they needed to return to the one who is the heartbeat of the Church.

Then we went to Smyrna, where Jesus was the one who was dead and now alive. The Smyrnan church was staying faithful to Jesus and suffering for it - they needed the Jesus who had conquered death.

Next was Pergamum, where Jesus was the one with the sharp, two-edged sword in his mouth. The Christians in Pergamum struggled to discern true teaching from false, and needed the Jesus whose very word is the truth.

Then we went to Thyatira, where the Church

After Tyatira was Sardis

And last week, we visited Philadelphia, the church who was most faithful, even though it didn't spare them from hardships. Jesus reminded them he is the one who opens doors, who holds the keys of Death.

[Scripture Slide] Today, we visit the final church in the city of Laodicea. Laodicea was regionally famous for a few key things: first, weird as it sounds, they were known for their water. The nearby city of Hieropolis had a famous hot spring, but the water had a high enough mineral content that it was essentially undrinkable. Visitors to Laodicea, by contrast, had been known to praise the city's water.

They were also regionally famous for an eye salve said to cure blindness and a purple fabric prized by the region's nobility.

But what *really* set Laodicea apart was their self-sufficiency. Laodicea was destroyed by the same earthquakes that hit Philadelphia and Smyrna. But unlike those cities, Laodicea didn't take Roman money and resources to rebuild. This was a point of pride for them - their eye salve and textiles had brought so much wealth into the city they didn't need help.

The Church in Laodicea was infected by this same self-sufficiency. Jesus' letter to them has two big allusions to ancient hospitality practices. When a relative or friend of high status came to town, it was expected that their people would meet them in the city center (sort of like picking them up from the airport). We'd go get our friend and escort them back to our house, and immediately offer refreshment - washing their feet from their long travel and offering them a drink. Something either cold or hot was the standard. Lukewarm drink was an insult - it sent the message that you just didn't care that much about your visiting friend. If you did, you'd prepare.

So with that in mind, listen to what Jesus has to say to this self-sufficient church:

“Write this letter to the angel of the church in Laodicea. This is the message from the one who is the Amen—the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s new creation:

Jesus does some interesting word play here: the word "beginning" there is the Greek word *arche* - where we get our word archaic. The word can mean both 'source' and 'ruler'. It carries the idea that the king or ruler is the source of peace and stability - really of life itself. Jesus is reminding the Laodicean Christians that he is the source of their life and health, the source of everything they prize. He goes on:

“I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth!

This is one of the most famous images in the seven letters, and it's one we grossly misinterpret. You've likely heard this verse cited to say that Jesus hates lukewarm Christians. I was taught growing up that

Jesus would rather you be not a Christian at all *or* totally on fire for him - hot or cold - than just sort of phoning it in.

Which is ridiculous. Remember the letter to Sardis, the dead church? They were a cold church and Jesus was *not* happy with them at all. No, Jesus doesn't abide Christians who are checked out any more than he wants people with one foot in and one out. For Jesus, it's all kingdom or none.

This passage is a hospitality passage: Jesus is imagining himself as a guest in the Laodicean church, and they've served him a lukewarm drink. They weren't prepared for him to show up, and they've put basically no effort into hosting him. Jesus is rightly disgusted.

And it turns out the source of their blasé attitude is their self-sufficiency. Listen as Jesus takes digs at their culture of self-reliance:

You say, 'I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!' And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. So I advise you to buy gold from me—gold that has been purified by fire. Then you will be rich. Also buy white garments from me so you will not be shamed by your nakedness, and ointment for your eyes so you will be able to see. I correct and discipline everyone I love. So be diligent and turn from your indifference.

The Laodiceans trust their wealth; Jesus counters that their self-reliance has made them spiritually poor. They put stock in their textile industry - those purple garments; Jesus says their self-reliance has left them naked. They boast about their famous eye salve, but Jesus says their self-reliance has rendered them blind.

And of course it has - if Jesus is the *arche*, the source of life, then trying to live without relying on him would be like trying to get light from a lamp that's not plugged in. The lamp could be perfectly functional, but if it's not connected to a power source, it's not going to light up.

So too with us. If we're trying to go through our lives without being connected to our source, we're like a lightbulb without a socket.

An honest question for us: how much of our day includes Jesus? Are we meeting him regularly in prayer? In Scripture? Are our weeks ordered by the rhythms of worship together and Sabbath? Do we make space for Jesus in our lives? Do we welcome him? Do we *depend* on him?

Or are we self-sufficient? Have we cut ourselves off from our source?

Jesus isn't finished with the Laodiceans. He offers a final image, one that, if like me you grew up in church, you've heard misused a lot:

“Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends. -- Revelation 3:14-20

This verse is used in Evangelism. We tell non-Christians that Jesus is "standing at the door of their hearts" and knocking. The plea is to let Jesus in, to accept him (if you ever wondered where the language of 'asking Jesus into our hearts' came from, this is it.)

Do you see the problem with that interpretation, though? This letter isn't to a bunch of non-Christians. It's to a church!

The people who have left Jesus standing out in the cold aren't the pagans of Laodicea but the *Church* of Laodicea. The body of Christ has no time for Christ himself. The people of Jesus have forgotten their *arche*, their source and ruler.

And Jesus, rather than take offense, has gone the extra mile to show up at their house (remember, they met in homes just like we are right now). He's humiliated himself by showing up and essentially begging to be let in.

Please. Just open your doors so we can eat together.

If you're feeling uncomfortable right now, imagine how the Laodiceans felt. Can you imagine them looking to their front doors, imagining their king, their leader, their God, standing on their front stoop, knocking. Begging.

Talk about a God who isn't concerned with image.

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. It marks the day Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. The day with the waving palm branches and songs of praise. We most often imagine Jesus being welcomed by the whole city of Jerusalem, but that's not what was actually happening there. Take a look at what Matthew tells us about Jesus' arrival:

The entire city of Jerusalem was in an uproar as he entered. “Who is this?” they asked. And the crowds replied, “It’s Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” -- Matthew 20:10-11

The people of Jerusalem were confused. They were 'in an uproar'. Matthew helps us see there were actually two groups of people on Palm Sunday: the crowds and the people of Jerusalem. The crowds were pilgrims, people who had come down from the Galilee for Passover. Galilee was where Jesus did all his ministry and miracles. That was his hometown, his stomping grounds. And he was with a whole huge caravan of pilgrims making the journey down to Jerusalem.

As they got closer and closer, the crowds got more and more excited. *They* were the ones who celebrated his entry into Jerusalem. He was the promised Messiah, come to establish God's kingdom.

The people of Jerusalem weren't so excited. Like the Laodiceans, they had figured out ways to accommodate themselves to Roman rule. They might give lip service to the idea of freedom, but when push came to shove, they were happy to crucify Jesus in the name of law & order.

Palm Sunday is a day that begs the question: are we the crowd or the city?

Do you *need* Jesus, or do you treat him as an accessory?

Is he knocking at the door, asking to be let in, or is he already at the head of your table?

As we move into this Holy Week, how are you inviting Jesus in? How are you making space for him at your table?

A life of faith requires us to be connected to the source of life. We cannot do this on our own - and the good news is that we were never designed to.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus makes space for us at his table.

1. Asdf
2. Asdf
3. Asdf
4. Asd

Assignment + Blessing

"Those who are victorious will sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat with my Father on his throne. Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches." -- Revelation 3:21-22