

Laodicea Sermon: Benign Whateverisms
Revelation 3: 14-22

One December morning 7 decades ago, my great-grandmother, mother of 9, walked into the kitchen early in the morning and declared: “Jack is in trouble. We have to pray right now. He is swimming in fire.”

Her son, my great uncle Jack was serving the United States Navy, stationed at a remote place, far from Louisiana, called Pearl Harbor. He had been blown off the deck of ship he served by the concussion of an explosion and he was swimming to safety, through the waters of the harbor. The waters were strewn with bodies of the fallen, debris from the sinking ship, and yes, great grandmother got it right: he had to swim through fire as the oil floating on top of the water ignited and burned.

Remember, in 1941 there is no CNN or live TV feed. It was only many hours later when her fears were confirmed as they heard reports on the radio of the attack that began WWII. But great-grandmother Simmons was right about Jack: she had had a vision. She had seen it and it came to be.

Visions. Dreams. Intuitions. Our scientific, rationalistic, and realistic minds have a hard time with them. I have gradually decided that our dislike of visions is rooted in the fact that we have so little experience with them. The people I know who claim to have them usually don’t talk about them out of fear of seeming “crazy.” So visions go unshared. And one wonders what we are missing.

There is no world so strange for us in our Bibles as that world we find in Revelation. This is the case, of course, because Revelation presents the visions of John of Patmos, a prisoner not likely to return home again. And John’s visions paint a God who runs counter to what we have been taught in Sunday school. God is love, right? We are one in the Spirit – Amen!?! Revelation pushes and pulls against our lovely images of God. For example: Revelation 6:3-4: “When the Lamb opened the second seal...out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.” The preacher who tries this outfit on has taken a tough task indeed. I do not envy the preacher who takes on Revelation willingly – wait, that’s me!

Kidding aside -- the fact is that we cannot and we should not avoid Revelation. It is part of the cannon. It is in the book. Our forefathers and mothers preserved it for us. I also can report that I am asked about Revelation more often than I am asked about anything else in the Bible. I even remember when one of our Youth and me read Revelation out loud together riding in the truck on the way back from a mission trip – she was so interested in Revelation that she was willing to read aloud for three hours, stopping her reading to ask me questions, and for us to discuss the theology in the text.

What I want us to explore this morning is that before it is a book of visions and of fantastical creatures, Revelation is a book written to 7 specific congregations, all in Asia Minor. It was a vision originally for them. And so I want to ask, what did John of Patmos say to the churches – what did Jesus want these churches to hear through this vision, its warnings, and his correction? Better still – what might his word to those churches being saying the CHURCH today?

The first word to this ancient church at Laodicea is a tough word. Jesus and John of Patmos come out swinging. “You are lukewarm. You are like tepid water suitable for

neither drinking nor bathing. I wish you were either hot or cold. Hot things and cold things are preferable to what you are – hot and cold can change environments and atmospheres, but you are neither. You are self-satisfied and believe that you need nothing. You think you are rich – but you are poor, blind, and naked. I want to spit you out of my mouth like lukewarm water. Spit you out!”¹ Tough words from Jesus -- especially tough when you learn something about Laodicea. It must have hit them hard – right between the eyes.

Laodicea was in the heart of Asia Minor – halfway between Colossae and Ephesus – two of the cities whose names are carried forth in our Bibles as the letters to Colossians and Ephesians. Central to trade routes and it was famous for several things: first, it was a wealthy place. Second, it was city of medicine – particularly noted for producing a salve that helped with eye infections. Third it was famous for its wool and its clothing. And last, it was noted for having nearly undrinkable water – so high in mineral content and tannic agents that people often would spit it out or it caused people to vomit.²

All this means that when John of Patmos sends a letter to these folks and tells them that even though they are known for wealth, Jesus thinks they are poor. And even though they are known for eye medicine, Jesus thinks they are blind. And even though they are famous for their wool, Jesus sees them as naked. And yes, just like the water they drink every day, Jesus is ready to spit them out. Be done with them. Why? They are lukewarm.

You can drink tea either hot in a tea cup or cold and iced and sweet and wonderful in a tumbler. But does anybody really want to drink it a room temperature?

The cold of February and the heat of August get our attention, don't they? But wouldn't life here lose some of its flavor if we had every day be a tepid day – 55 degrees and hazy? 365 days of tepid – I would take even the snow over the lukewarm any day.

That is the trouble in Laodicea and it is the trouble, I think, in much of the church today. I do not want to speculate beyond the parallel I have already drawn as to what Jesus would say to the PC(USA), our denomination, in 2010. But I doubt it would be an overwhelmingly positive review. To be sure there are growing churches, there are active and lively churches – we work hard and pray hard here at HMPC that we will be counted in this number of the growing.

But in 2008 our denomination lost 69,381 members. The largest year for membership loss on record. Ever. Why? Well this is the scary part that I think Jesus would want to spit out of his mouth: the losses are three fold:

Deaths.

Transfers to other churches.

And people who simply were dismissed from the rolls. They stopped coming. They don't go to church anywhere else. They don't go anywhere. They just quit. Hazard a guess at which group is the largest? The ones who just walk away.³

They just walk away. It's too tepid. It's too lukewarm.

There is a book written five years ago called *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. In it the authors analyze data from the National

¹ This is a homiletical paraphrase of the text itself.

² Brian Blount's commentary on Revelation, published 2009.

³ This data is mined from several sources – most notably a PNS story from June 22, 2009.

Study on Youth and Religion conducted in 2002 and 2003. The authors have just written a follow-up book (*Souls in Transition*), where they resurvey the same 3,300 young people. What this means is that these two books give us a snapshot of what our young people are getting from their church and their culture about the Christian faith from High School, into college, and just beyond. Our Young people, our Youth, are a barometer of where we are going and who we are as a church. The results are, in my opinion as your pastor, startling. Speaking only for myself, I can only tell you that I can hardly put the books down.

What the books suggest is that the Young Adults have gotten from the church not an apologetic, lively, living, life directing Christian faith. But instead, they have received a world view that roughly equates to what they call “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” – moralistic: church has something to do with right and wrong; therapeutic: related to “therapy” – church is to make me feel better about myself; Deism: related to the world deity – meaning that church has something to do with God. Others have desecrated modern Protestantism as a series of “benign whateverisms.” Listen to that: benign whateverisms. In other words: “whatever I believe is just fine, so too is whatever I become, as long as what I believe and what I am is benign and doesn’t hurt anybody else.” Or, think of it this way: political correctness in faith and in lifestyle run amok.⁴

John of Patmos, the writer of Revelation might say that when we talk about our faith, we are neither hot nor cold. We are lukewarm. Too few of us pray regularly at home. Too few of us engage in Bible study with our children. Too few of us participate in family service projects. Too few of us talk about faith openly. Too few.

It has become akin to what H. Richard Niebuhr, the great theologian, wrote about what people believed in 1937 – the church professed “a God without wrath who brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”⁵ It took WWII to wake the church from its slumber and one hopes it will not take something similarly horrific this time.

To be sure we are good people; or at least we want to be good people. Revelation is not saying to us that we are bad people of bad intentions and it is not what I am saying to you. What I do think is that too often our faith is neither put on the stove nor placed in the deep freeze – meaning we just let it sit there, on the countertops of our lives, letting it take the temperature of whatever comes. And to this approach – John of Patmos and the Book of Revelation are saying – no more! Be hot, be cold – be anything but tepid!

For John of Patmos the lukewarm approach of Laodicea was not acceptable because the Dragon of Rome was real, the anti-Christ had dawned, and the red-horseman was coming. Terrible things were happening all around him and a tepid response was not enough. You cannot hope a Dragon away. You might sweat him out or freeze him out but lazing on the deck like a bucket of rain water – that’s not going to do much.

⁴ Sermons are so hard in this sense: it is so difficult to condense 6 different scholars into a few sentences. The work this relies upon is by Christian Smith, Patricia Snell, Melinda Denton, and Kendra Dean. Smith, Snell, and Denton use the phrases, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Dean uses “benign whateverisms.” I think the latter is easier for sermon than the former, and there are intellectual nuances that differentiate the two. I am grossly oversimplifying for the sake of brevity, but I do find it all a helpful and fascinating critique of the church we are a part of.

⁵ This appears on page 288 of *Souls in Transition* and it also appears in an article by Kendra Dean in *The Christian Century*, February 9, 2010 page 35. The article is a book review of *Souls in Transition*.

It's like the friend who falls into the ditch – and she asks you – “why didn't you say something? You saw the ditch? Why did I have to fall in before you would help me? Why did you wait to pick me up?”

I think if we are honest we will quickly find that our personal lives are filled with these moments – where we think we are strong and that we see clearly, but a Dragon of a sort arrives, and we don't want to be rude and we don't want to be wrong and so we stay lukewarm – saying little and doing next to nothing.

I also think that if we are to be honest, and I am included in this, we Presbyterians as a church are often very much the same. We see a problem in our church or in our town or in our world and we keep the peace and we do little. Not because we are unconcerned, but because we just don't want to seem rude and we hope so badly that the problem will go away. In this we settle for the countertop tea instead of boiling it on the stove or adding scoops full of shaved ice.

Revelation is a call to repent of this. And though Laodicea is a world away, the problem persists. By settling for whatever temperature fate brings us, we have created a church that too often stands for “whatever” instead of for the Gospel that Jesus has called and empowered us to proclaim.

I hope this Lent we will pray about being either hot or cold – anything but lukewarm. I hope this Lent our church might find a way to speak of its faith and its life in Christ with passion and empathy. I hope that this Lent we would pray to be no longer passively benign. That we would no longer settle for whatever. I hope we pray to be passionate and filled and engaged.

When asked about the historic membership loss of the PC(USA), Gradye Parsons, the Stated Clerk of our Denomination, the highest ranking permanent staff member of our national church, said, “You know, Presbyterians can be evangelists, but we often stumble over the words. [Ask yourselves and tell others] -- Why do I believe in God? Why do I go to church?”⁶

So I ask us all – when was the last time we invited someone to church? Read the Bible at home with family? Prayed over something with a friend that wasn't a meal? Talked about war or immigration or terrorism or torture or health care or the national debt with someone while we were concerned with what we ought to say or think as Christian disciples of Jesus Christ? When did we last answer the question: what does it mean to be a Presbyterian?

This Lent affords us an opportunity to explore these very things. It strikes me that Jesus Christ is calling us to be hot or cold, anything but the lukewarm disciples that he found in Laodicea.

We dare not sit idly and tempt Jesus to spit us out.

Amen.

⁶ PNS article, June 22, 2009.