**Revelation 3:1-6** September 1, 2019

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Pentecost 12

Dear Friends in Christ,

Have you ever seen—probably not in real life—but maybe in a sit-com or somewhere, one of those bobbing barrels? Hands behind your back, you dunk your head into the water and you come up with… who knows what!

Today we bob our heads down into the barrel of that most mysterious book of the Bible, Revelation, and we wonder what we have caught between our teeth, or perhaps more accurately, in our ears. Mysterious language. An inside conversation, almost like we weren’t supposed to hear it. Not sure who’s talking and who is listening. What’s going on?

Briefly—In the second and third chapters of Revelation, Christ Jesus speaks through the Apostle John to seven different congregations. He has a specific message to each church, to its own challenges and flaws, to its strengths and blessings. Just as if you have more than one child or grandchild, you speak to each according to his personality. Each of the seven messages, even the ones that talk turkey, has the same goal: to get people to heaven.

In our reading we hear one of those letters to a Christian congregation in a town called Sardis. What we hear was specific to them. Yet we know that anything God tells to one group has something that all can learn from. Today we hear a message

**On Fooling Ourselves and Overcoming**

*[Read Revelation 3:1-6]*

*Revelation 3:1“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:*

*These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 3Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*

*4Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. 6He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*

**A. Fooling Ourselves**

After introducing himself, Jesus’ first words are these, ***“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”*** Jesus knows what you do in church, and when you leave the church. He knows what you were doing on your lunch break on Wednesday, and what your Friday nights look like. More than that, he knows why you do what you do. He knows the waitress who grumbles under her breath even while wearing a smile for the customers to get a good tip. He knows the boy who is well-behaved on a given day because he is hoping to get away with something a little later. He knows when our actions are a true picture of what is going on in the heart, and he knows when it is nothing but smoke and mirrors.

And he looked into the church at the town called Sardis and he knew it was all a lie. Oh, they had a good reputation. They were active. Others looked up to them, were impressed, and wanted to be like them. Their community respected them. But Jesus knew the truth.

At this point it is tempting to imagine what might have been wrong in Sardis, to fill in the blanks with our own favorite villains. Maybe they had cliques in their church! Surely they were unconcerned about the poor! Maybe they had great programs addressing all kinds of social concerns, but nothing about sin and a Savior? We don’t know.

It is always tempting, where the Bible doesn’t identify the problem, to form Jesus’ words to our pet peeve. We are not told. And that is ok, because whatever the problem was, what Jesus wants us to take away is that they had fooled themselves. Whether they thought Bingo night was a substitute for evangelism, or they ignored the needy around them, or their worship was meaningless repetition or self-serving entertainment, the real problem was that they had fooled themselves. They thought they were alive, but Jesus decrees that they are dead.

Have we fooled ourselves?

Now I am not saying that Faith Ev. Lutheran Church is a mirror image of the self-deceived Sardis congregation. We can look at things happening here that are good and godly. I see people this morning who do truly treasure Jesus as their Savior. You treasure and eagerly anticipate the blessing of the Lord’s Supper. Our congregation is meeting its budget for the first time in years. We have fellowship events, a provisioned food pantry, teachers for our Sunday School, keyboardists who generously volunteer, a huge lawn that gets mown, and I could go on. All of these things done for and in thankfulness to our Savior. However the world judges them, they are signs of spiritual life. No. I do not think Jesus would look at our group of Christians and say, ***“but you are dead.”***

Yet we must ask if we have fooled ourselves. Does talking about evangelism equal actual evangelism? Does walking out the door taking no part in the life of the church reflect what the family of believers should look like? Have we fooled ourselves? No, that is not the right question. *Where* have we fooled ourselves? *How* have we fooled ourselves? It is so easy to do so. And when we have really fooled ourselves, we don’t even realize it.

**B. Seeing the Truth**

If you know your Bible history well, you have probably heard of the disease of leprosy. One form of this disease of leprosy, Hansen’s disease, still exists in tropical parts of the world. Leprosy is often thought of as a skin disease because one of the symptoms is bits of flesh rotting away. Actually this disease does not attack the skin, it attacks nerves. People with leprosy often appear very strong. They can hold burning hot pots, and walk barefoot on rocks and thorns that other people find painful. But their strength is their weakness. While it looks like strength, what is really happening is that nerves have been deadened so they don’t feel the pain. Because they don’t feel the pain, they don’t realize the damage they do to their bodies. Because they don’t feel the pain, they get infections, and those infections worsen leading to loss of fingers, toes and the like. They have fooled themselves into thinking they are strong, when in truth death is at work. The way lepers deal with this disease is by always wearing shoes, and gloves when working. And most importantly of all—and here is the important part—to do a daily self-assessment, every morning and evening visually examining especially their hands and feet for any potential damage, for death at work.

To the self-deceived in Sardis Jesus tells them to do the self-assessment. ***“Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die… Remember what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.”*** “Remember what you heard!” Jesus tells them and us. Think about your catechism class, your membership classes. By God’s gracious blessing I don’t believe Jesus would look at this group of Christians and say, “You are dead!” But a true self-assessment will show a places where we have fooled ourselves, both as individual Christians and, yes, as a congregation.

We know how easy it is to fool ourselves. To offer the least possible bit to God and convince ourselves that we really couldn’t have done more. To look at the world condoning more and more sin, even criminalizing those who would speak God’s word against sin[[1]](#footnote-1) and we think, “At least I don’t do that.” We think that we are practicing Christians, and deceive ourselves about how often we really do pray, and how often we really do help others, and how often we actually open our Bibles.

That process of self-assessment, of figuring out where we have fooled ourselves is the good old-fashioned discipline we call repentance. It is what God means when he tells us in 1 Corinthians 11:28, *“A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup,”* that is, before receiving the Lord’s Supper.

Which is how Jesus tells the Sardians to get un-fooled. ***“Remember what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.”*** Go to the Word. Jesus doesn’t tell us to judge by our own consciences. We humans can justify our motives to the hilt. People can riot and excuse it because of perceived grievances. People can be profanely insulting because, well, “He insulted me first!” But God hates that stuff. It is sin. Return to the word of the Lord which stands forever, unchanging, condemning sin for what it is. Before that Word the mists of self-deception burn away, and we realize that we *must* daily repent and run back to our Savior, so thankful that he has come for… for sinners, because that’s what we are! That process of identifying our own sin, sorrowing over it, and trusting Jesus to save us from it, that is repentance. That’s what gets us un-fooled.

**C. Overcoming, and What It Looks Like**

When you realize that you have done something bad to someone, and you apologize, and that person accepts your apology—you know how you feel kind of awkward the next time you see that person? Well, after repenting, the believer does not look at Jesus and wonder how our last sin has changed our relationship with him.

Jesus spoke straight truth to self-deceived people, he also speaks heart-stirring affirmation to all who see the light. He speaks a trinity of blessings in our reading: ***“He who overcomes will be dressed in white [and walk with me. cf.v4] I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”***

Our name will not be blotted out of the book of life. This “book of life” is God’s register of those who will one day be in heaven. Notice that Jesus did not say he will write our name in the book. It is already written there. In fact, we are told that our names were written in that book at the beginning of creation (Rev. 17:8). But he says the penitent’s name will not be blotted out. *Every* sin is forgiven in Jesus.

Again Jesus tells us that he will acknowledge us, that he will own us at the Final Judgment. He will not be ashamed of us and all that we have done. Even the Zacchaeus’ and the repentant thieves on crosses, and tax collectors, and prostitutes, and murderers, and even pedophiles, and druggies and hypocrites who in their latter days or even last moments humbly turned to him for forgiveness, Jesus will claim all of them and confess them as his own before all humanity, before the angels, before God the Father.

Most beautifully, from verse 4, he says about his people, ***“They will walk with me, dressed in white.”*** Before the sermon we sang one of my favorite hymns, “Let Us Ever Walk with Jesus.” It speaks mostly about acting like a Christian, walking the Christian walk. But it also speaks to this verse, that we will one day literally walk with Jesus in a place called heaven, a place variously pictured in the Bible as a mansion, and a beautiful park, and a serene city. Whatever it will look like there, maybe all of the above, Jesus urges us to envision walking those halls, those paths, those streets with him, dressed in clothing of leisure and luxury and purity. And we will no longer be able to fool ourselves because the weakness and selfishness of this worldly flesh will have passed away, and we will know what God created us to be.

In the meantime, we ask our Lord Jesus, “Help us to see rightly where we are fooling ourselves. Help us to overcome and be victors in you.” Amen.

1. e.g. Regarding current trans-gender issues: “Therapies designed to reconcile a child with his or her sex are now illegal in more than 15 U.S. states.” https://www.national review.com/magazine/2019/04/22/the-trans-child-as-experimental-guinea-pig/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)