

SMYRNA-THE CROWNED CHURCH

If you have ever read about the 7 churches in the Book of Revelation have you thought what kind a church are we? Have you thought which congregation God might consider us? So who are we as a church and as the people of God? That's a good question. What kind of story do we have to tell the world...as a church...as individuals? Are we afraid to tell people about Jesus? If you wear a cross around your neck, or a shirt that has some religious saying on it do you have a story to tell them of why you wear them? One time in Alabama I saw a teenager in McDonalds with a Christian T shirt so I asked if he was a Christian. He said no, he just bought the shirt at a yard sale. It had no meaning for him. Can you give an account of what you believe? My "Jesus is My Boss" hat has brought me many opportunities to witness to my faith. At stores sometimes as we're checking out someone will tell me they like my hat. When I'm walking around the store someone else will say, "Nice hat" or "He's my boss too." Just before Christmas I was at Wal-Mart and some guy saw my Jesus hat and told me he liked it. He asked if I was a Christian and I told him yes. He said he was also. I told him I was a retired pastor serving at the Williamsville UMC and that I had a late call to ministry and all that. He was overwhelmed with my short version of my story and we shook hands and blessed one another as we continued our Christmas shopping. Then the other day at the doctor's office with Carole some lady said she liked my hat and that opened a conversation. She had been attending the iWorship church and I asked about that church, and her background. Her husband had a Pentecostal background, she Lutheran and after attending a Christian church settled on iWorship, but they were looking for a church because they felt their church had gotten too much into entertainment and not what they were originally about. You know, perhaps they had lost some of their focus. Or like last week, maybe in order to grow or reach younger people, so this couple said that they had lost some of the Love of Jesus for all people, like the older ones or the ones already in the church.

Being able to tell others about Jesus, that's what we should be about. We should never be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ that transforms our lives. He is the heart of the church. He is the heart of our faith. He is the great I Am!

He is THE CHURCH, period!!!

So like Paul, you should be ready to stand strong for what you believe. We sing, "Stand up! Stand up for Jesus" and that is a song that should make us enthusiastic about our faith. As one of the country western songs says, "You got to stand for something." Me, I stand for Jesus...

We turn to another church this morning. This church is called Smyrna. Many referred to it as the ornament of Asia, the crown of Asia. It stood at the end of the road and was a great trading city. This city was very loyal to Rome and it was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess Roma and to the spirit of Rome. Culture flourished there.

One person of interest was born there... Homer, though some disputed the cities claim.

In the midst of this pagan city a new Christian community begins. A guy named Paul offers them new hope through a new belief in the one true God. Never mind worshipping in this pagan temple. Never mind bringing your offerings to the goddess Roma. Turn from that which cannot help, and trust in the only true God who only asks that you give your life to him and trust him with your life.

Once again in a great city where God's word was preached lives were changed and a church with faith in Jesus began. But there were struggles and hardships there as well. Listen to God's explanation about the second church in our series that we shall refer to as "The Crowned Church" **READ 2:8-11**

Hear now God's words about that church...his statement...**I know you are having tough times and are being persecuted.** Remember this was a very secular city and when a Christian community popped up this was not greatly accepted. The Message translation says, "I can see your pain and poverty." This church was persecuted because of its faith. We don't understand that because we have freedom of religion in this country. But since we have been in Iraq and in Saudi we might see it differently. Christians that are living there cannot talk about their faith in Christ. It is against the law and they could be in a lot of trouble for the mere mention of Jesus to someone.

Many years ago we had a fellow who was attending seminary come and speak to us in our philosophy class. He had grown up searching for what was right. He wanted to know the truth. His family was Muslim and he tried that religion, but he left because it just didn't satisfy his hunger. He then tried other religions but they just didn't cut it with him. Some were too strict, others too difficult; others just didn't meet his needs. He decided after a while that he must be an atheist because he just could not find true peace in any other religion so there must not be a God. But that didn't seem to satisfy him either. During his college days, I believe he said in California, he ran into some Christians who shared their faith with him and out of their witnessing there came a new hunger to find God. It was so strong that God finally got a hold of his heart. He accepted Jesus into his heart and became very happy with his decision to follow Christ. He went home to tell his story to his Muslim family hoping they not only would be pleased that he found faith, but in his sharing he was hoping they would trust in his God. However they weren't as excited about his new life as he was. In fact they hated

the thought that he converted to Christianity so they beat him up. I mean really beat him up and then threw him out the door into the street and his dad cried out to him and the rest of their family, “Our son is no longer alive. He is dead. I don’t want to see him ever again. In this house his name shall not be mentioned for I don’t have a son anymore.” This beating was so bad that it caused problems with his leg in such a way that he had to have a brace to walk. He would take a step, put his hand behind his knee of the bad leg and push it so that he could walk. He was persecuted for his faith in Jesus Christ.

But that is not the end of the story. You see he felt God’s call to go into all the world to make disciples of Jesus Christ and his mission was to go back to the Muslim community to share Jesus with them. He came to Asbury to learn how to do that. He told us he went back to his country to share the good news about Jesus and he was arrested and put in prison. However, while there he had a chance to share his faith with those Muslims that were incarcerated with him. He would take the Koran and point out where it was wrong and where it fell short and without having a Bible he was able to point these people to Jesus. He was able to tell them that “Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and those who believe in him will have eternal life.” Then he would tell them about having faith in the one true God, and receiving Jesus into their hearts. One by one these guys began to convert to Christianity. When the leaders of the prison heard what was going on they decided to release him. Then he would talk to others on the street and get arrested again and once more have a captive audience to speak about Jesus. And once again more converts to Christianity. So they released him again and decided he was doing greater harm in the prison with a captive audience than what he was doing on the street.

When he shared that story with our class I thought how Paul was being persecuted because he had begun to follow Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He had been whipped, stoned, thrown out of cities, rebuked for what he believed, tossed out of synagogue after synagogue and finally arrested and was waiting trial. They put him under house arrest with guards told never to leave him alone. So Paul shared the message of Salvation over and over again until many converted to Christianity. Though he was being persecuted he never stopped telling the story, even right to his death.

Persecution! This church was being persecuted, but they were handling it. They might have been poor but they were rich, they lived for eternal values, like to walk the streets of gold, to receive their crown of glory, to hear God say
“well done my good and faithful servants.”

God doesn’t seem angry with them like he was with the church in Ephesus. No! But we hear these words of warning and hope. **“FEAR NOTHING.”**

Fear! That's the one tool that Satan uses against us. You see fear drives out love. Fear drives out trust. Fear destroys. We all know that. When we are afraid we don't have our wits about us. People in Haiti today are perhaps full of fear. Why? Because so much of their country has been destroyed and now what? Many lost families, homes, employment. Now what? Food is not plentiful. Water is scarce. People sleep wherever they can find a place to drop... in parks, in streets, any place. And in our country scam artists are taking advantage of the situation telling people to send their donations to this address and they will make sure it gets to the Haiti relief fund, but it won't.

Fear! Jesus told us not to fear. He told Peter and the disciples not to fear when they were going through the storm at sea. "Relax guys," he might have said to them. "Fear not for I am with you." And the next thing you know Jesus calms the wind and the storm drifts off and the sun comes out and they can make it to the other side of the lake. In the Upper Room that Monday Morning when he appeared to the disciples he said, "Peace be with you." In other words, don't be afraid, for it is I, and I'm alive.

The messenger tells the leaders of the church even though they are going through tough times at this moment not to fear. Better still he might have said don't give up. Don't let that sneaky trickster talk you into giving up your faith. Continue on the journey because there is a great reward to those who stay the course and finish the race. Hold on to the anchor. Stay in the boat. Don't look down, but look up. Hang in there because they were not alone. God was with them.

I like those words from the Message translation, "Fear nothing!" If we would only practice that all the time.

The message to the church was not to fear. We need to hear that message as well. When things look bleak, fear not. When the money isn't rolling in as we would like, fear not. When the doctor gives a bad report, fear not. Remember God is still in charge! This is God's church! We are to be the fearless church, the fearless warriors that stand behind our Lord and Savior. We walk under his banner, "Saved by the Blood of the Lamb." We are to be the church and the people of God who cast out fear. In fact if anyone wants to join the adult Sunday Bible Study we are beginning next week to study Max Lucado's book, "Fearless" and we have some books, and if there isn't enough we will get more.

Listen to those final words from the messenger. "Don't quit! Even if it costs you your life. Stay there believing. I have a Crown sized and ready for you."

What powerful words those are. "Don't quit." Where would we be if people like the Wright brothers quit or Edison gave up when they first failed? Where would we be if we gave up after Pearl Harbor was bombed, or Bataan was

lost? Where would we be if Martin Luther never pinned 99 pages on the door for all to read telling it was time for a reformation? Where would we be if John Wesley never entered a church and heard the message about the book of Romans and his heart became strangely warmed? Where would we be if Jesus didn't die on a cross for us? Where would our hope be if when the women went to the tomb they didn't find it empty?

Don't quit! That's what God is saying. If we are struggling, if we have pain, if we have a job we hate and don't quit just keep believing and trusting Jesus because though you can't see him...he is there. Though you can't hear his voice he speaks to you. Though you think he is not listening, he is. Your fear may have silenced his voice...but he still calls out your name and whispers in your ear not to fear, he knows your situation.

Listen to the messenger of God. "Are your ears awake? Listen! Listen to the Wind Words, the Spirit blowing through the Churches. Christ-conquerors are safe from Devil-death. I'm spreading a banquet of Tree-of-Life fruit, a supper plucked from God's orchard."

One commentator ended his remarks with these wise words for us today when he said "It costs to be a dedicated Christian, in some places more than others. As end-time pressures increase, persecution will also increase; and God's people need to be ready, the world may call us 'poor Christians' but in God's sight we are rich!"

He who has ears...let him hear the lessons found in the letter to the Smyrna church...Fear not! Fight on! Stay the course! Remember God is with you and our rich reward awaits us. We continue to live through our faith in Jesus Christ.

So may our light shine brightly to the world.