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Letters to the Churches 1: Ephesus – Revelation 2:1-7

Someone tell me why people go to scary movies: right, for the excitement, the thrill – even the thrill of being scared. I had a friend who decided to read “The Exorcist” one night: by herself in the only cabin on the only island an isolated lake in Maine, in the middle of the thunderstorm of the century. Go figure. Part of that thrill, that desire to be scared out of your wits is why Revelation remains a mysterious, scary, but tremendously fascinating end to Holy Scripture.

Revelation *is* a difficult book. No question. It was the last to be included in the collection we call the Bible, probably because of its tone, which is used to describe every other passage in Scripture like it: “Revelation” is, in Greek, where we get the word “apocalypse,” and refers to literature that talks in explicit and often flowery terms about the events of God’s final judgment. While it has never caught on in the Eastern Christian churches (it’s not even in their lists of readings to be used in worship), Revelation has always been popular in the West – our – tradition.

It was extremely popular in the early church, while persecution of Christians was nearly universal, not least since it proclaims the great

triumph of God, giving new courage to hearts that might be flagging – after all, how many of us would be willing to give up everything, endure torture, and be killed just for a few words? *They* were, when those words denied Christ.

But after the third century, it was viewed with a cautious eye: the Reformers, Luther and Calvin, both wondered how it ended up as Scripture, and it was the only book of the Bible that Calvin didn't write a commentary on. And “why” is easy: it's full of imagery that's allegorical, and easily misused. Often is.

Being a cocky young minister when I was first ordained, I took Revelation head-on, and started off teaching a year-long course on it in Adult Sunday School. Taught it a few more times, each time more and more concise, until now I can give you the bottom-line message of the whole book in two words, “Don't Panic.”

“Apocalypse” is a word we hear used loosely these days, as in “zombie apocalypse,” but it's actually the first word of the Greek title of Revelation (not plural, mind you): you can call it “The Apocalypse (revelation) of, or to, John.” What we don't know for certain is who John was, and although tradition says it was the Apostle John of the gospel, even in the earliest days of the church there was a smidgen of doubt.

No matter. What we have is the word, the word of the Lord, and we have to deal with what we have: a book written in the early days of Christianity, in particular to seven churches, some of which were recipients of letters from the apostle Paul. Seven is an important number in Jewish thought, along with twelve: they both imply completeness, seven of course being the number of days in the week. There were twelve in Jesus' inner circle; now we Christians are fond of three, because of the Trinity. Apparently, there were seven key churches at this time.

Today, the church we're looking at is in the city of Ephesus – one of the churches that Paul worked hard on, in, and with, and one of those whose letter Paul wrote to it survives. They are often referred to as the church of light, because Paul uses a large part of chapter five of his letter to them to talk about how they once dwelt in darkness, but now in Christ, they shine like light in the darkness.

But before we go any further, there's an important point that you'll hear in each of these messages: they were not written to each church member: they were sent not to the church, the people who gathered together, but to the "angel" of the church.

The Greek word *angelos* is what we have turned into angel; but it can mean several things: in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was used by many Jews of this time, it was used to render

the Hebrew word *malek*, or “messenger.” One good way to see how Paul spoke about this same quality was “spirit.”

The very last verse of Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi is, “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.” Now, reading the Bible as we often do, alone, looking for God’s word to each of us as individuals, it’s easy to automatically think that means “my spirit” – that Paul is saying that Jesus be with *each* of our spirits as we live this life in faith.

But that is emphatically **not** what Paul is saying. He is saying, the grace of the Lord Jesus be with *the spirit of the church*, the spirit of the group meeting together for support and replenishment in discipleship to Christ.

Do you see the difference? My “spirit” may be quite different from yours, but, collectively, as a congregation, as the church, the ones whom God has called out (the literal meaning of the Greek word *ecclesia*, which for us has come to mean church), we have a spirit.

It’s this spirit, this messenger, this angel that John knows is Christ, is addressing his message to: the spirit of the disciples of Ephesus.

The seven lampstands, the seven stars (which stand for the seven churches), carry the light, but the true light is the One, Jesus himself, who walks about the light of the lampstands, and praises the church at Ephesus, pulling in the metaphor that Paul used: they are a church that is

itself a light. They have been strong, they have been courageous, they have endured, they have done many things right.

But they seem to have forgotten their first love. That's their problem, says Christ to the spirit of the church.

Have you forgotten your first love?

For me, there are two ways in which I have experienced this. You know that I take a keen interest in many things. At times in the past, these things have ended up being almost obsessions, things that have occupied my thoughts day and night. I *loved* them.

I loved photography in my youth. Opened my own business at thirteen, a photography business, and my first big job was to be the publicity photographer for a summer-stock theater company. I lived and breathed photography, and spent hours and hours in the basement of our old house, the oil burning furnace my only company, crafting images.

But, somehow now I can realize that I knew something wasn't right about that. You see, I always had a sense of God around me; I can't really explain it, except that I always knew that God was there. And God wanted my attention, which, like many kids, I tried to avoid giving. Sounded too much like work.

I knew that my love for photography stood in the way of my love for God, and I even prayed that God wouldn't take away that love.

For me, photography is taking pictures now.

And there have been many things that attracted me so strongly that I have to say I loved them – but somehow, they managed to get in the way of God, and I lost them, even my love for serving others in the specific venue of the military. And then, there's another side to this love.

I loved music in college, but in my senior year, as I prepared for law school (there were no teaching jobs then, but lots of room for lawyers), God laid it on me that I had no choice but to go into ministry.

I fought that, too – for two years, waited for it to go away as the call kept sounding stronger and stronger in my heart. I know that for some of you, parents or others pushed you toward ministry; I did a lot that I loved doing that pulled me away from ministry, but somehow I could not resist. God's call was just too strong.

And since then? There have been times when I tried to leave, to go to medical school, to work in various arts, to be on the stage, to do just about anything but ministry, ministry in that peculiar form that makes people into pastors. I kept hearing from people who ought to know better that somewhere in me beat a pastor's heart, and no matter how hard I tried, the spirits of different churches had messages for me: come and work among us, until I heard and answered the call to come to what John Dunham used to call, "The Valley called Green."

So what was your first love? The early psychologist William James, in his pioneering work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, recognized that there are many ways that people come to faith, and that most people, unreflectingly, expect that everyone does so as they did, whether from birth, like me, or slow growth; through conversion, or having what we sometimes call a “born-again” experience – and I’ve had one of those, too. There have been times when I knew if I opened my mouth, sounds I wouldn’t recognize would come out of my mouth, and there have been times when I didn’t recognize what I was saying: it was far better than I could do on my own.

I’ve watched people be born; I’ve baptized people; I’ve watched them die. I know a physician who does not believe in an afterlife describe to me watching the soul leave the body of a dying man.

But the message of Christ to the angel of Ephesus is a message to the spirit of Valley, too. What is the spirit of Valley Presbyterian Church? Have we lost our first love? How have we become wrapped up in ourselves, in our comfort, in our survival, and lost sight of who made our *selves* possible in the first place? What *is* the spirit of VPC? What is the spirit messenger saying to us, its message from Christ?