

February 14, 2010
The National Presbyterian Church

An Invitation to Supper

Revelation 3:14-22; Luke 12:35-40

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

I thought that I was the one that was in Antarctica, and then I came back and this snow in Washington, D.C. is amazing. I was in Antarctica. I did have a marvelous time. My son and I went there. I was invited to give four lectures on the Christian understanding of creation and redemption to our group and we were on a ship of 100 people or so. We did have a chance to go to that great continent and it was an unbelievable, an amazing experience. I was totally struck with the immensity of Antarctica, the immensity of the ice. Imagine that the polar cap of Antarctica is three miles deep of solid sapphire-like impacted ice. And we saw immense and huge amazing icebergs. Icebergs that we were told that would sit in the water for over ten years before they would melt because of how highly impacted they are as ice. And we saw penguins, seals, birds and of course whales. I was so struck with the teeming life there is in Antarctica. It's this amazing source of life for the entire ocean systems of the world. That I wasn't prepared for. And the intricate balance in the way of God's providence, of how the balance is of all these marvelous parts of the created order and how everything is so timed and so amazing.

Here's a statistic that is just amazing. There is 500 million tons of biomass in

the waters of Antarctica. That's more biomass than all human beings in the world combined, in the waters of Antarctica. They are plankton and krill that feed the baleen whales and the seals and vast quantities of fish. What an amazing gift that great subcontinent is.

But I was so glad that John Huffman, my good friend, was the preacher here for the last two weeks and he stayed in the yellow house; loved it, loved being here, and he greatly appreciated preaching to this congregation. I know you appreciated hearing John when all 70 of you who as a result of the snowstorm were here last Sunday in the chapel.

We are in the midst of a series of sermons on the last book of the Bible. During these weeks we've been looking at the seven letters that start the book. Like all the letters of the New Testament they are written to churches, to real people in real places. And they're written facing up to the challenges, the problems that each individual church faced. It was Karl Barth who said that no letter in the New Testament was written to any church apart from the problems of the church.¹ These letters are realistic, facing the issues that the people are facing in their churches. That's true of these seven letters that John writes from the island of Patmos to his people. He was a Bishop of the church of Ephesus and he writes to the churches that surround Ephesus. He knows those churches well and he writes to them on behalf of Jesus Christ to comfort them and encourage them. That is the book of Revelation. It's a book of encouragement, to let those people know that all of history is in faithful hands, and that as terrifying as the world they're in is, and they live, the letters are written right in the 60s, just before the fall of Jerusalem in my view. Nero is the Emperor. It's a terrifying time for these churches. Will they survive? How will they make it? And that book of Revelation is a book of comfort that affirms to them that history is in God's hands.

Following these seven letters John has a great vision, and the vision will dominate the rest of the book. We'll start that next week in Chapter 4. But right now in these seven letters these churches hear from the Lord through John. Today we look at the last of those seven letters. The last letter is written to a church called Laodicea. We know about that city because Laodicea is mentioned by St. Paul when he writes to the Colossians. It's near Colossi. We also know a lot about the city because Tacitus, the Roman historian is

interested in that city. It was a very wealthy city. As a matter of fact in 60 A.D. when an earthquake hit that area in the Middle East it was the one city in the Roman Empire that said to the Roman government, we don't need any assistance. Imagine that. This city was so confident of their own economic stability that they said we don't need assistance; we can take care of ourselves. And Tacitus the historian decides to note that, that this city refused any relief effort when they were hit by their earthquake in 60 A.D. It's a city that has a medical school in it. One of the city gods is Asclepius, the god of medicine; the god Asclepius is the snake on the stick and that's why, in modern medicine, the symbol of medicine is the staff with the snake around it. That's the god Asclepius and that's one of their city gods; therefore, they have a medical school. They also produce an ointment that's sold throughout the Roman world. It's called Phrygian Ointment. This ointment was sold throughout the Roman world and it was used for both eyes and ears. That seems odd that you'd have one ointment for ears and eyes, but I guess the people said since it's coming from the medical school it must be the right ointment. And so people bought it for their eyes and or their ears, depending upon what their problem was, same ointment. And that was Phrygian Ointment, very famous.

They also produced a very wealthy fabric; they're a fabric making city and sell colored fabrics like purple and gold and red fabrics to the wealthy people throughout the Roman world. So they were also famous for that as a fashion center and had that source of wealth as well. Not only that but there is a hot springs six miles from Laodicea in Hierapolis. It's a famous hot springs where people would come for curative powers of the hot springs. And this city is so rich that they decided to build their own private aqueduct just for themselves from the hot springs to Laodicea, six miles away. The only problem is that the hot springs water leaves the hot springs at about 105 degrees with it's sparkling curative powers, and by the time it's come the six miles in the private aqueduct it's quite smelly and no longer hot springs hot water; it's instead kind of lukewarm water by the time it gets to Laodicea. But yet that's how rich they are, to have their own aqueduct to their own hot springs. No one else can afford that, but they do, even though the water is not much to brag about by the time it gets to their city, but there it is. They have that.

That's the city of Laodicea. It's interesting in all of these seven letters the features of each city are noted. For instance, the letter to Smyrna, the little

town of Smyrna which has its tremendous center of emperor worship with its acropolis. On that acropolis were temples mostly for emperor worship. Very scary kind of worship in the first century. Should you worship the emperor? Shouldn't you worship the emperor? And if you don't, what will happen? And so these shrines were all on the top of their acropolis and therefore the people of the world referred to the crown of Smyrna, which was this acropolis with all these temples. And in the letter to the church at Smyrna, which is a very poor church, in fact the letter starts "You're very poor, I know you're poor, but you're really rich." But they think they're poor because they're a very poor church. But you're actually rich and then at the end of that letter, Jesus Christ says, "I'll give you the crown, diadem, the crown of life" (Revelation 2:9-10). Notice it's a play on the very fact that they have a crown in that town that's a terrifying crown, the crown of Smyrna. I'll give you a better crown, the crown of life.

It's true of each of the letters. The letter to the church of Pergamum, which is the seat of the Roman government there in that whole province of Asia -- they were frightened of that Roman power and also the fact that there are false teachers there. They are all noted in that letter, he talks about the throne of Satan that's in your city, referring to the Roman throne of the Roman power. And then that little church of Philadelphia, which is an outpost church that has an open door toward the east and the Silk Route, and so in that church, The Lord says, "You have an open door to walk through. You don't think you do but you do" (Revelation 3:7-8). And that other church, the Sardis church which is kind of a lazy church, he warns them about not getting sleepy because the Lord may come like a thief in the night because that city had been attacked twice by thieves in the night that scaled the walls and surprised the city. So Sardis gets that kind of letter. Each church gets a letter that focuses on facts about that church that make the letters very timely. The letters of the New Testament are the same way, and that's true of the Revelation letters.

Well, we're ready to listen to the letter that's written to the church at Laodicea. And some of these facts that I've just shared with you about the city may help make this letter more interesting. Here the third chapter of the Book of Revelation, the 14th verse is the seventh of the letters, the last letter. "To the Angel of the Church, the messenger of the church in Laodicea," this church is on the Lycus River called Laodicea, "The words of the Amen, the faithful true witness, the beginning, the origin of God's creation." In

other words referring to Christ. "I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot." Reminds us of their aqueduct system. "I wish you were either cold or hot." I mean why didn't you bring water from the Lycus River and put ice cubes in it, that would be cold. Or at least maybe you should have a thermos type aqueduct instead of the one you've got because your hot spring water is not hot. So he said, "I wish you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm," and that's where that word appears, "you are neither cold nor hot. "I am about," notice he doesn't say I am going to, but "I am about to spit you out of my mouth." Now you have to realize the prophets used overwhelming language sometimes. There's some good news coming, but he says when I taste you don't taste very good. The water does not taste good. Let's face it, you're proud of it, but it's smelly and it doesn't particularly taste good. So I'm about to spit it out he says. "For you say," and now listen to this, "You say I'm rich, and I have prospered, and I need nothing." And it's interesting, the earthquake has just occurred in 60 A.D. this letter is written probably 67 A.D. John knows that they didn't get any aid for their earthquake -- so you say you're rich, you don't need anything. It's kind of nice to be able to say we're totally taking care of ourselves. Quite a difference than the church at Smyrna. The church at Smyrna is poor, they're like victims and they feel like victims and they feel poor. And notice when our Lord speaks to that church he says, you say you're poor and you feel poor but you're rich. He says just the opposite to these people. You say you're rich, and now in a minute watch he's going to say: I don't think you're so rich. So you say 'I'm rich, I've prospered, I don't need anything'; you don't realize (and now there's a little bit of overstatement, he overstates it but that's the way the prophets always do and that's the way our Lord decides to do here when he uses strong language) "You say you're rich, you don't realize that you're wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." Therefore, now comes the good news; that's the harsh news right there. It's hard to hear that kind of language spoken to the church, but now comes some good news. "Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich." A new source of wealth, a source of wealth that I have. Notice gold that I refined, refined by fire, so that you may be rich "and white robes to clothe you." It's interesting; they're famous for their colored clothes, the colored clothes that are for the rich, he says I want you to have some white clothes. By the way, in the first century white clothes would be worn by servants or by slaves. The colored clothes by wealthy people. That's how you could always spot wealthy people with these gorgeous robes, and the slaves or servants would wear white, bleached, just simply bleached mate-

rial. But isn't it interesting, our Lord says to this church I want you to wear ordinary clothes, I'll give you some ordinary clothes, white clothes, "to keep you clothed and the shame of your nakedness from being seen." And now listen to this, "and salve to anoint your eyes." They're famous for their salve. They're famous for Phrygian Ointment, good not only for the eyes but also the ears. But I've got salve for your eyes so that you can see.

And then comes the really good news. "I reprove and I discipline those who I love." Have you ever thought of being scolded as a mark of love? I'll tell you it really is because it means you're being paid attention to. And the worst thing in life is to be ignored. That is worse than being paid attention to. When God is arguing with you you're not in trouble because he's paying attention to you, he knows you're there. What would really be bad is if God did not know you were there. If other people didn't know you were there, that would be really sad. So in a way being scolded, being taken seriously here, where all these little features about their life are being highlighted in the rebuke, they hear: the fact that they're lukewarm... the fact that they don't taste good... the fact that they think they're rich when really they're not rich... all of these things, these self perceptions they have are being challenged by the Lord who knows them best. And so he says: I reprove those who I love. "Be earnest therefore and repent." Turn around. And then comes the best sentence in the whole early part of Revelation. "Listen! I am standing at the door knocking. If you hear my voice," notice he doesn't say here comes the Lord through the door whether you like it or not. I'm coming in. No. Jesus Christ never does that. He doesn't crash your party. He never crashes through the door. He says instead, "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear." Or "Listen, I'm standing at the door knocking, you get to open the door." Your freedom, my freedom, is always preserved in the New Testament. "Listen, I am knocking at the door, standing at the door knocking. If you hear my voice and open the door I will come in and eat with you and you with me." It's an invitation to supper. It's an invitation to eat, to have food, good food. And by the way I don't think this invitation, 'behold I stand at the door,' is just for the church of Laodicea; you'll see in a minute the plural is going to be used. I think this is for all those seven churches. Those seven churches that all have problems. The one church Smyrna that thinks it's so poor, but you're really rich, they're invited too. They're invited to have some real food, to come in and eat. The church at Pergamum that is so terrified with the power that's there, the church is be-

ing tempted; Thyatira, Pergamum are both being tempted by false teachers. The church that's sleepy like Sardis and is kind of lazy, they're being invited. The church at Ephesus that left behind their first love, they're being invited to dinner; they're being invited. Every one of these churches was scolded. Every one of these churches had a shock of recognition, had a chance to see the true picture of what they're really like, and that's not always pleasant. It's not pleasant for someone to tell me, you know you don't taste good. There's something that doesn't ring true about your life. You're calling yourself so rich when I think you're really not so rich. Or when a person says 'I'm very, very poor' when you're really not so poor. You don't know that you have riches there in front of you. So you're getting a clarity check. You're getting a reality check, and that's happening to all seven of these churches. And then the invitation to supper. Come to me, eat with me and be with me. And then, "To he who conquers, I will give a place on my throne, just as I have conquered and have sat down with my Father on his throne." And now notice it's all plural. "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying" to the plural churches, all seven churches. They're getting this invitation.

The one thing that does intrigue me about the Laodicean church is that they're called lukewarm. The other churches have all their problems but the church at Laodicea is called lukewarm. I've tried to figure out what is that state? How do I become lukewarm? The one thing about lukewarmness is they weren't aware of it. You're not aware of moving into that lukewarmness in your life. It happens so gradually you don't notice it. And sometimes the most terrifying things that can finally result in my life or our life happen so gradually we don't notice them as they're happening. Selfishness is this way. We don't realize that we're getting more and more self-referential, more and more focused on ourselves. We just aren't aware that that's happening to us.

I love the prayer at the beginning of worship today. It's from the church in New Guinea. "Turn the key O Lord to my heart's door. I am too often ungrateful and disobedient. And my door has gathered rust." Have you ever thought about the reality of rust? Rust doesn't happen immediately. A door doesn't immediately rust. A hinge doesn't immediately rust. Rust is like that water that started hot in Hierapolis and ended up lukewarm in Laodicea, and you weren't even aware it was happening. At what point did the hot water become lukewarm? At what point did the fact that I had a warm and hearty faith, become lukewarm and casual? It sort of casually happened. It

casually rusted, and I think in this prayer that was such a moving line, “It has gathered rust.” And then the prayer goes on, “Forgive my sins, forgive me when I turn from you and do not hear you knocking. Lord Jesus, oil the hinges of my heart’s door that it may swing gently and easily to welcome you.” And I think that’s what the Lord’s doing when the Lord confronts the church at Laodicea. He is oiling the hinges of the door. It’s not fun, it’s not fun to have WD-40 sprayed on your door, and it’s not fun to have that anti-rust put there. Why do I need it? Because my hinge is rusting. I am turning lukewarm, I am losing my initial love, the initial faith is going casual. And that was what happened to the church of Laodicea. It needs to have this reality check. And our Lord is so good that he does that. It’s harsh in a way. He uses very strong language. You’re wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. He could have just said you’re poor, but he decided to pour it on so they would really hear it. And you don’t taste very good. But the ones I love are the ones I rebuke. Listen, I’m standing at the door, I’m inviting you to dinner, and I’ll tell you that dinner is going to taste good.

Heavenly Father, thank you for that dinner. Thank you that you stand at the door and welcome us. Lord may we in this room today and those hearing my voice, may we open the doors of our lives, of our hearts, to welcome you in and experience your love. Maybe we feel lukewarm... maybe we feel rich when we’re not... or maybe we feel poor when we really are rich. Lord help us to know who we are, that we belong to you, and we can open the door of our lives and you will enter in and we can eat together. May we have that experience of your grace. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

1 Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. Harper & Row Publishers, 1959.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20016

www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800