

## ***The Letter to Sardis: Lethargy – Slow Death***

Fourth Sunday in Lent (YrB)

[Psalm 139:1–4, 11–12, 23–24; Isaiah 29:13–16; Revelation 3:1–6; Matthew 24:42–51]

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Rev. Frank C. Ruffatto

Redeemer Lutheran Church – Charleston, WV

### **POINTS TO PONDER**

1. For what does our congregation need to be ‘watchful’?
  2. What are the ‘false gods’ we face today that compete with our fealty to Jesus?
  3. How can we show that our works are done, ‘by faith?’ Or should we even worry about that?
  4. How can we help our brothers/sisters in Christ to keep away from complacency?
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**Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and our Lord and King, Jesus the Christ. Amen.**

**Let us Pray:** Gracious Lord, our zeal has often been lacking in fruit and witness for You. We have slumbered while Your Spirit has been calling us through Your Word. Awaken our deaf ears and enable us to do the works of love and faith You desire. In Jesus’ holy name I pray. Amen.

This is not my favorite task, scolding you. I would just as soon put it off indefinitely. But our Lord Jesus Christ, whom I serve, has given me a job, and I am going to do it.

But first let me introduce myself. I am Gregory, your angel. My name means “watchful,” which is what Jesus wants you, the Christians at Sardis, to do: Remain alert with a watchfulness that translates into devotion and good deeds – things you have been lacking.

Why am I, an angel, telling you these things? Because that is what we angels do. Our job is to serve God by looking out for you, defending you when necessary, and bringing you messages from your Savior and King. You have not seen me till now because I prefer to remain invisible.

But I have been with you for years. I have just come from meeting with the Lord and with the apostle John. The words I have for you were written by John but spoken by Jesus Himself. So, wake up and take notice!

To be blunt, that is why I am standing before you today. I am here to give you a wake-up call. You seem to have become complacent, lazy, lethargic. Your faith could be likened to the history of your city: Sardis, once glorious and wealthy, is now a poor backwater town, neglected by those in power. You continue to make beautiful cloth and jewelry, but things in

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<sup>1</sup> Worship & Sermon resources for this series: *Revelation for Lent*, Donald H. Neidigk, (Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, 2004)

Sardis are in a state of cultural and economic decline. Croesus [kree-suhs], the richest king in the world, whose palace once graced your city, would hardly recognize Sardis now.

Nor would the apostles – all of whom but John have been martyred for Christ – recognize your faith. They died rather than compromise the truth of the Gospel. But you have chosen an easy faith and an easy morality, fitting in with the pagans around you, becoming barely identifiable as Christians. Perhaps this is the result of the worship of Cybele [sai-bel], whose cult is so strong in Sardis. Her temple may have been destroyed and the temple of Artemis built in its place, but to your neighbors, Cybele and Artemis are one and the same.

I wonder if your careless regard for Christ is because you see little difference between Him and the gods of your neighbors. You see a resemblance between Cybele, the mother goddess, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. As Cybele is considered to be the mother of the god Attis, you think of Mary as the mother of the God-man, Jesus.

Thus, Mary is a goddess to be worshiped. As Attis is supposed to have killed himself and been resurrected, you think Jesus is just another resurrected god. Cybele and Attis have sacrificial meals in their honor; so, does Jesus our Christ.

The resurrection of Attis is celebrated in the spring; so is that of Jesus. It is all the same, you think. One person follows this god, another that god, but each path has the same goal: eternal life with the god of one's choosing.

If this is how you think, no wonder you have lost your zeal for Christ. No wonder you care so little if your neighbor has heard of Jesus, of His life and death for sinners. No wonder you have no sense of urgency, no fire in your hearts for a holy life and the conversion of your friends and relatives.

Did it ever occur to you that the shallow similarities between the cult of Cybele and the faith of Christ are calculated deceits of the devil? Why is it that just when the Good News of salvation in Jesus is being proclaimed everywhere, all these mystery religions appear, claiming to offer the same benefits? A few years from now, the Christian theologian Tertullian will say that Satan is the author of these prevarications, and he will be right.

Our Lord, Jesus implores you: **“Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of My God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.”**<sup>2</sup>

The Lord Christ is jealous for you. In the agonies of the cross, He shed His life's blood for you. He gave His life to forgive your sins. He rose again to give you new life in Him. He will not share you with another. Jesus is yours, and you are His. Now, in Jesus, you stand before God as innocent and undefiled as He is.

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<sup>2</sup> Revelation 3:2-3

Of course, you are sinners, but God has declared you righteous because of Jesus, who was innocent but was declared guilty for the purpose of your redemption. All your sins are now washed away, including the ones of which I accuse you.

So, wake up, I say. Welcome the Holy Spirit of God that stirs the flame of faith within you and put away these evil things. This is the will of God. If you ask for His help, He will give it to you. He will enable you to repent, to put away false doctrine, and to turn to Him in faith and love.

Alive by His grace alone, you will eat at the Lord's Table, receiving His body and blood. You will not eat at the table of Cybele, the table of demons. By grace, you received in Baptism a new life of righteousness in Christ and rejected the false and immoral values of the world. Christ will not share you with another.

It is time to wake up. Jesus warns: **"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."**<sup>3</sup>

He came in love and mercy to redeem you, to offer Himself as the all-sufficient sacrifice for your sins. Jesus came to commute the death sentence you deserve and to bring you God's pardon. Jesus' saving work was finished at the cross and the empty tomb. Now God is kindly disposed toward you and all sinners. His welcoming arms of grace are spread wide to receive you.

But the day of grace is quickly coming to an end. One day Jesus will return. He will come as the long-awaited Savior to all who have loved Him but as the dreaded judge to all who have spurned Him. The day of Jesus' coming is known only in heaven, but it will be soon, very soon. Thank God many of you will be read to receive Him in faith. Jesus encourages, **"Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy."**<sup>4</sup>

By faith you will be among that blessed company that is "dressed in white" and walks with Jesus, the company of those made "worthy" by faith. To be ready is to believe in Christ and to act based on that belief. All good works done by faith are pleasing to God.<sup>5</sup>

If this is your desire, then by faith be assured that when Jesus comes your deeds will be found complete and acceptable. A white robe of righteousness that far surpasses anything you make and sell here in Sardis will cover your sins. Not only will your sins be covered, but your name will be written in the Book of Life, never to be blotted out. When the day of Christ's coming arrives and your name is read from the book, He will proclaim in a loud voice that all will hear, **"Well done, good and faithful servant! ... enter into the joy of your Master!"**<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Revelation 3:3

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 3:4

<sup>5</sup> cf. Hebrews 11:6a

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 25:21

Some of you are still spiritually asleep. The purpose of my visit is to warn you, to sound the alarm, to tell you to wake up. There's still time for you to repent, to complete what is lacking, to claim what is promised, to live your calling. The white garments of your Baptism are still gleaming for you. Do not delay and thereby cast them off. Leave them on!

Holy Scripture says: **"Now is the time of God's favor."**<sup>7</sup> **"Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts."**<sup>8</sup> **"The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed . . . Let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light."**<sup>9</sup>

Years from now, the false gods you find so tempting will be forgotten, replaced by others that are equally false and forgettable. The things Sardis has valued so highly – its textiles and jewelry – will be rotted and buried. Your great buildings will be heaps of rubble. Even the magnificent Byzantine church you will someday erect will be nothing but a ruin to be unearthed by archaeologists.

Only two things will endure: the name of the triune God and your name written in the Book of Life. All who by grace believe in Jesus and repent will find their names written there.

Yes, it is difficult to go against the world, doing and believing what is right, standing up for truth when so few stand with you. Jesus and the blood of the martyrs can attest to how difficult this is. But Jesus promises that He will help you. He will give you every gift of His sevenfold Spirit. He will enable you to join Him in heaven's victory celebration. **"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."**<sup>10</sup>

My name, Gregory, says that I am watchful. And I leave you with the words of Jesus: **"Wake up! Strengthen what remains ... Obey ... Repent."**<sup>11</sup> This is exactly what I am confident you will do. The Lord did not shed His blood for you for nothing. By grace, you will heed His Word, and one day, He will acknowledge your name before His Father, the company of the saints, and all the angels. Amen!

**"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."**<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:2

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 3:7

<sup>9</sup> Romans 13:11-12

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 3:6

<sup>11</sup> Revelation 3:2-3

<sup>12</sup> Romans 15:13