

Revelation 2:12-17

Behold Jesus is Coming... to Defend the Truth

> Truth of God's Law

> Truth of God's Promises

Dec.5, 2010

Free Series

Lord of Life

Sunday readings:

Isaiah 11:1-10



Matthew 3:1-12



Romans 15:4-13

The king is coming to restore peace.

Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.

Produce fruits of repentance

Greetings in the name of the One who says, "Behold, I am Coming Soon."

Greetings and grace and mercy and peace be yours through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Or maybe at this time of the year I should greet you with "Merry Christmas."

Oh, that's right, I'm not supposed to do that. It's supposed to be Happy Holidays. We wouldn't want to offend anyone or exclude anyone. So we say, Happy Kwanza, Happy Hanukah, Happy Holidays, because this is the season of tolerance because we live in a culture of tolerance.

And understand, I'm all about tolerance and I hope you are too. Let's be tolerant when it comes to the color of our skin and the differences in our culture and background that has shaped each one of us differently and made us each unique with different views and thoughts. Those differences are the very things that make life interesting. When it comes to those things, we should get along and being able to talk about things openly.

But not when it comes to morality and the differences between right and wrong. Not when it comes to God's absolute truth. There - there - can be no tolerance – not when it comes to family or human life or human sexuality. God's Word leaves no room for that. "Who am I to judge?" you may ask. "Who am I to tell you what to do?" But isn't that word "tolerance," just apathy in disguise?

For example, when I see a boy ball up his hand into a fist and drill his sister in the arm, I can't just let it go. It's wrong. He should not do that!

When I see a little girl mesmerized by the Advent candle, and start to stick her hand out to grab on to it, I can't say, "Oh, how cute, she's going to discover fire." No, I say, "stop." "You're going to get hurt." I know that's a simplistic way of thinking of things, but we will always have to say some things are wrong, that it shouldn't be done, that you can't do that – because people will get hurt.

Did John the Baptizer sound tolerant in the Gospel lesson this morning? Here's this rough looking man in a rough place speaking a message to match:

- "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near."
- "You brood of vipers," he called the Pharisees. Descendants of snakes, descendants of Satan, even!
- "The ax is already at the root of the tree."
- "Don't say, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" Don't say, I'm a member of the church, it's OK.
- "The Lord is coming and he will separate the wheat from the chaff and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

- Later in his life, John goes before the king who stole his own brother's wife. He's the king. John could let it go. He could live and let live. He could let bygones be bygones. He could have... but not when a soul is at stake and not when the truth of God's Word is at stake. So his message is, "Repent" and it cost him his head.

No, there is no tolerance when it comes to sin and our relationship with God.

Let's not just talk about "those people" outside of these church walls either. Let's talk about you and me, because John is calling us into the wilderness this Advent season, away from the business and the distractions to focus on our own heart and the wicked, sinful things we tolerate there. That sounds harsh, I know. But the computer click to the wrong site, the second glance at him or her, the gossip the so easily flows out of our

mouths – and not just small things, not just the things you can put off as not harming anyone else, but all of it, if left alone festers – like a sliver that you tolerate for a while. But eventually it digs deeper in and causes more pain and brings infection and poison. No, sin is sin and it is not to be tolerated.

And that's the very reason Jesus says, "Behold, I am Coming." To defend THAT truth and to make sure we know the truth of why he came.

Today we look at the third letter in a series of seven letters to the seven churches of Revelation chapters 1-3. Today we look at 2:12-17.

Like the first two letters, this one was written to Christians living in a prominent Greek city.

- Pergamum was the capital of the province. That means they lived under Roman rule and were faithful to the empire and therefore were to think of the Roman emperor, great Caesar, as god.
- Pergamum was also the location of one of the ancient wonders of the world, the temple of Zeus. Thousands and thousands of people would have traveled there each year to see this magnificent structure as well as worship there. And let's just say that worship wasn't PG-13.
- Pergamum was also center of worship for another Greek god, Archipeus (sp?), the god of medicine – the medical staff with the snake twisting down it is the symbol for this god-.

Those are the temptations and pressures the Christians in Pergamum faced every day, a city of wickedness and evil, "the city of Satan," where you find the "throne of Satan." And the Lord knows it and he compliments them for remaining faithful to His name – even when a Christian brother, named Antipas, was put to death for his faithful witness (witness in Greek is 'martyr').

Nevertheless, despite that compliment, they were being too tolerant. "Nevertheless, I hold a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality."

Are you familiar with the story of Balaam and Balak? (Read more about it in Numbers 21-24)

- Balak was the king of Moab and the entire nation of Israel, with their 1 million plus people, was about to pass through his country on their way to the promised land. He didn't see that as a good thing, what would be left? So he called on the false prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites.
- But on his way to do that, a strange thing happened. Balaam's donkey all of a sudden veered off the road into the middle of a field. So Balaam beat the donkey.
- Next the donkey, when it came to a narrow place in the road, pinned Balaam's leg up against a wall. So again Balaam beat his donkey.
- After that, they came to a narrow passageway and the donkey just sat down. So again, Balaam beat his donkey...
  - That's when the donkey turned around and spoke to Balaam. "I've been faithful to you, you keep beating me though I've never let you down before."
  - And that's when Balaam saw what the donkey saw each time it stopped – the angel of the Lord with a sword standing before him. The Angel of the Lord informed Balaam that he would not curse His people – but in turn would only utter blessings.

God would not tolerate curses spoken over his people, so Balaam and Balak tried another approach. They tempted them to join them in their worship life which was often rated R and even higher. They enticed them to eat food sacrificed to idols – "better" food, "religious" food, food that they weren't allowed to eat under God's direction... and so many were led astray.

And now the Christians at Pergamum were tolerating the same behavior in their church and the Lord was not going to tolerate it.

"Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans." We don't know exactly what the Nicolaitans were teaching but commentators think it was "live however you wish," since you're forgiven anyway. But again, that is something Jesus will not tolerate. "Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."

At Christmas, we see Jesus as a little cute baby born in Bethlehem. When we think of his life, there is a temptation to see him as the warm, fuzzy, flannel graph figure who tells everyone what they want to hear to make them feel better about themselves. But make sure you see him as he is described here. See him as understanding, of course, of loving and patient and forgiving – but don't ever see him as tolerant.

- Here, he has a sword coming out of his mouth ready to cut anyone down who opposes Him.
- Here, he has eyes of flame that pierce into our minds and thoughts.
- Here, he is pictured with a face and robes so white and bright that John can't bear to look at him... and when he speaks his voice thunders!

See him, that way, and then you see just how he came to defend the truth – that sin has to be done away with, that God cannot live and let live, that the sinner cannot stand before God. And when you see that truth, that God will not tolerate sin, then you can begin to understand his love and the reason why he came into our world at Christmas – because each and every soul was at stake.

And then you might begin to see why we can not, must not, tolerate sin... Because souls are at stake. So we speak the truth, because Jesus came to defend the truth, and we speak it not in arrogance, not in judgment, but in love... because we know how great that love is.

Listen to the last paragraph about that love: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”

Now there is a Christmas gift list – some bread and a stone. That's better than the new tie or the sweater that doesn't fit, or the xbox 360. Bread and a stone.

- And understand it's not fruitcake, it's the manna from heaven, it's the gift of Jesus himself. He satisfies our hunger. He fills us with good things. He gives us life and hope and heaven. Notice, too, that it is hidden. It's something you can't buy in the shopping malls or get by standing in line on Black Friday. You receive it only as a gift from God.
- And a stone... In a 100 AD when these words were written, a white stone was what the jury would use to proclaim someone's innocence. Picture being on trial with prison or freedom awaiting you, with life or death awaiting you. And the stone comes out – and it's white, you're innocent, you have a new name and a new reputation.

That made me think of the Gospel writer for today – Matthew. His name was Levi and he was a tax collector. He was known as a thief, a traitor, one who took advantage of people. But then Jesus found him and called him and gave him the white stone with a new name on it – Matthew, which means gift of God. And that is how Matthew preferred to think of his life in Christ – a gift of God.

That made me think of another Matthew – one you know indirectly, because Matthew was the ring leader of the break-ins that occurred here at church a year ago. Recently I went to a restitution hearing for Matthew and the sight was sad, this 6'6" young kid with hands and ankles in cuffs, shuffling along the floor, not looking up because of his guilt. What was sadder is what his lawyer told me: that Matthew was in a juvenile home that he hoped would give him some direction in life because he was getting very little of it at home. How sad, for a young man, not to have anyone at home who didn't really care whether he was out all night or not.

Know that Jesus is not like that – not in the least bit. He cares about what you do; he cares about what you are; he cares about what you are to become – because he cares for you, more than you and I will ever fully know - and wants you do be with him forever. That's why he came at Christmas, why he comes now in his Word and promises, and why he is coming again in all his glory – to defend that truth! Amen.

\*For more on toleration, read Mark Paustian's book, Prepared to Answer.