

“Standing Strong”

Rev. Jordan McKenzie

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[TITLE SLIDE] What would we do if Jesus sent our church a message? What would we do if Jesus sent our church, Belmont United Methodist Church, a message? How would we respond?

Well there were once some churches that did actually receive a message from Jesus. These were churches that actually existed in the first century with real people and real issues. And Jesus sent each of them a message through John, who wrote down the messages as they became part of the book of Revelation. These messages were probably given in the 80s or 90s BCE, so it was about 50 years or so after Jesus walked on the earth.

Now as we began to talk about last week, some of these churches received a good message from Jesus. Some received a bad message. And some received an ugly message. In other words, Jesus was pleased with a couple of the churches, he was frustrated with a couple of them, and a couple he was downright angry at. I think by going back and looking at what Jesus said to each of these churches Jesus can

speak to us today. So we're going to look at these. And we're going to start with the two churches that got good messages to see what they might say to us. Let's pray.

The churches that received the good messages were in the cities of Smyrna and Philadelphia. Here's a map of all the churches that received these messages.

[NEXT SLIDE] So let's take a second just to look at the cities where these two churches were located. Historically we have quite a bit of information about these two cities. And I want to take them one at a time.

So first, let's take a look at Smyrna. You can see it was a seaport right on the coast. And because it had a great location right on the coast it had been the site of conflict and the city had been rebuilt several times. At the time Jesus sent his message to the church the city was thriving. It was a bustling center of activity of trade and culture because it was easy to travel to and visit. It featured a famous stadium, a library, and the largest public theatre in Asia at the time. Here's what it may have looked like at the time the church existed. **[NEXT SLIDE; NEXT SLIDE]** It had majestic buildings and many temples to the Romans gods. That was one of the most popular things about the city; people loved to visit to worship the Roman gods. And that's where the problem came in. Because it was a thriving city and

much of that was because it the Roman Empire who had rebuilt the city and made it a great city. And so the city's wealth was viewed as a result of Rome's success. Just as we might view New York City as a symbol of America's success, people saw this city as a place symbolizing Rome's success. And so in this city the Roman Empire had become idolized. People were worshipping Rome and its gods. Just as some might worship America and be overly patriotic to the point of idolatry, that was the situation here. T. Scott Daniels says, "the peace that had been established by Rome- the Pax Romana- had made life easier, orderly, and prosperous. And it was not difficult to the turn the Spirit of Rome into a power which men [and women] were gratefully willing to worship." So those in the church at Smyrna were living in the midst of this city where Rome was idolized and there was this temptation for the church to also bow down to Rome just like the rest of the city. To worship the nation above God. And the problem was that if they didn't do this they would get them into trouble. If they didn't participate, they could lose their jobs, lose their families, even be thrown in jail. So not worshipping Rome was a very real risk for the people in this church. It was a big deal.

And to make matters worse it seems that some of the Jews living in Rome, who didn't like the Christians, were pressuring city officials to be tough on the Christians. And they were lying about them and slandering them. That's why in the

message, Jesus calls the Jewish people liars and says the synagogue is a synagogue of Satan. Because the Jews were lying about the Christians and pressuring the Romans to be tough on the Christians and make them worship the state. So this is a very difficult situation for those members of the church in Smyrna. Either worship the empire or lose everything. And they're getting pressure from Jews too. So what does Jesus say to them? He says this:

I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. But be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown. ¹¹ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.”

Now there's some symbolism in there that we could talk about. But here's the message. It's pretty simple. Jesus is saying do not be afraid! Do not be afraid!

[NEXT SLIDE] He says, ¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. But be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give

you life as your victor's crown." In other words, do not be afraid of Rome, or the Jewish people slandering you. And why are they not to be afraid? He says because I, Jesus, I am the first and the last. I am the one who rose from the dead. And I will give you the victor's crown. And you will not be hurt by the second death. So Jesus is saying do not be afraid because I am with you and I'm not going to be defeated no matter how powerful your enemies look because I've already defeated death and anything else. Now that's a powerful message. It's an encouragement to them. To stand strong. And you know this is an encouragement for us too.

Because, I don't know about you, but it's really easy to be afraid right now for the church. You look at the world and sometimes it just seems so upside down. Like there are just so many black clouds hanging over our world today. Nuclear war threatening the world, division and hatred causing riots and problems at home, and then at church what do we see. People don't even want to come to church anymore, the church is in decline. And so sometimes it's easy to lose hope to think maybe the church is a lost cause. But this is a reminder to us. Do not be afraid! Scott Bader-Saye says, "we live in a time when this biblical refrain of do not be afraid cannot be repeated too often. Among all the things that the church has to say today, that may be the most important." Like the Christians in Smyrna, we live in a culture that can make us afraid. But as we live in the midst of that, as we sit here

in September 2017, Jesus says to us do not be afraid! Jesus was with the church at Smyrna and he is with us. It reminds me of the children's song Jesus loved me. It says they are weak but he is strong. That is us. Sometimes we are weak, but he is strong. He is strong. He is the first and the last. He is the one who rose from the dead. That's an important message.

Now, let's look at the second church, it was in the city of Philadelphia. Here's a picture of the map again. **[NEXT SLIDE]** And here's a picture of the city. **[NEXT SLIDE]** Oops, wrong Philadelphia. This Philadelphia was a city that was inland from the port city of Smyrna we just talked about. **[NEXT SLIDE]** It was a much newer city than Smyrna and was probably a smaller, less developed city but still a city of culture and wealth. So Philadelphia is not quite as big as Smyrna but it's still a nice-sized, prosperous place.

Now the message to the church in Smyrna we just saw was to not be afraid as they were facing persecution from the powerful Roman Empire and the Jews who didn't like them. Well the church in Philadelphia was facing some similar but slightly different issues. They too are in conflict with the Romans and the Jews. And the Jews are arguing that they are really God's chosen people not the Christians.

And so again, Jesus starts by saying the same things he said to the church at Smyrna. “I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.” So just as he said to the church at Smyrna he saying to the church at Philadelphia; stay strong. I know what you’re doing. I see your good deeds and I’m going to show those who aren’t righteous the truth.

But then he says this. “I am coming soon. So hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.” So in other words, as he saying don’t be afraid he’s also saying, don’t forget your mission. **[NEXT SLIDE]** Hold on to what you have. Or in another way, Don’t forget your mission. Because that’s a great temptation. Again, that’s also a great temptation for us today. In our time of fear, when there is talk of church decline, we can so easily forget our mission. And notice what he commends this church for. He says, I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. The temptation is for them to doubt themselves because they have little strength, because perhaps they’re not influential. But what’s important is not that they don’t have strength or influence,

but yet they have kept Jesus's word. It's not success by the world's standards but faithfulness that matters to Jesus.

Robert Muehlholland says that the description of the faithful church at Philadelphia certainly sounds strange in our culture with its many preachers of the prosperity.

The successful church stands in stark contrast to much of what is defined as a successful church by proclaimers of the prosperity gospel and church growth.

A recent article from the New York Times describes the construction of a huge Hindu temple in New Dehli, India. And the temple was said to have received the "Disney Touch." The megatemple features "an indoor boat ride, a large-format movie screen, a musical fountain, pink elephants, and a hall of animatronic characters." Seems pretty over the top doesn't it? **[NEXT SLIDE]** Well you know where some of the inspiration from the temple was. American megachurches.

American megachurches. Many churches have forgotten this message to the church at Philadelphia. I'm sure many of you remember pastor Jim Baker and the Heritage USA Theme Park that he was going to build. Even just last week we heard about Joel Osteen supposedly not opening up his beautiful, luxurious church to flood victims instead wanting to keep it ready for church.

T. Scott Daniels says that all preachers and I would add all churches face the temptation to shape the gospel to be attractive to the culture. So instead of calling people to count the cost of discipleship, we create specialized ministries and build churches that look like malls, coffee shops, and pizza places. **[NEXT SIDE]** But that's not what we're supposed to be about.

There is a local church, Ginghamburg Chuch. Many of you have heard of it. I was previously on staff there and it was at one point the third largest Methodist Church in the United States. And at one point they were talking about a brand new building, a retirement home with condos, they were even offered to have a weekly TV broadcast on TBN. But then they decided that's not what it was about. So they decided they were always going to keep their building as simple as possible and spend as much money as possible on mission. Now that's not to say they're a perfect church, by no means, are they. But the point is clear.

This is what it's about. We're about making new and growing disciples for the transformation of the community and beyond. We're here simply to tell people of God's love and forgiveness and embody that so we can make a difference. Now, perhaps we'll be a big church. Perhaps we'll get some attention from the media. Those aren't bad things. But we have to make sure that they're not our focus. Our

focus is on Jesus. But it's what we're called to. And so that's what Jesus says to the church at Philadelphia. Don't forget your mission.

So these were the messages that Jesus gave to these two churches. Stand strong, do not be afraid, and don't lose track of your mission. Those message were fitting then and those message are fitting today for our church Belmont United Methodist Church today. **[NEXT SLIDE]** Let's pray.