



Mt. Lebanon Evangelical Presbyterian Church Pastoral Letter

May 12, 2022

“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.” – Revelation 2:10

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

I feel like I have watched spring come out twice, once on my vacation in Virginia and South Carolina, and now again here in Pittsburgh. As I have prayed for the church recently, God has repeatedly given me the image of spring breaking out. It has been a very long, very gray winter—both literally and metaphorically. But God whispers to us, in the words of the Song of Solomon, “Rise up, my love... for, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth” (Song of Sol. 2:10-12). As you breathe deeply in the warmth of sunshine, remember the faithfulness of God to bring new life.

As we turn to our second church in Revelation this week, we focus on Jesus’ words to the church in Smyrna. Our video this week points out that the city had once been destroyed but then was brought back to life and given a place of honor in the empire. Thus, the letter opens by declaring that Jesus is the one “who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again” (Rev. 2:8). Despite this being a thriving seaport, the Christians in town were facing persecution both by the Gentiles and by those in power in the synagogues. They were forced into poverty by being excluded from trade, and they were slandered by those who shared the same Old Testament but denied that Jesus was the Messiah.

Joe Stowell points out that the very name of Smyrna points to their biggest trade commodity: Myrrh. Myrrh was the strangest gift the wise men gave to baby Jesus—why would anyone give an embalming spice to an infant? The myrrh was a prophecy of the kind of life and death Jesus would endure, beginning with the end in mind. And yet, it was precisely through Jesus’ suffering and death that His biggest victory would be won.

Jesus wants to remind the people of Smyrna that their suffering will not end in defeat. Their faith is what makes them rich. They need not fear, even if they are thrown in prison. All God asks is that they remain faithful to the promise, and they will be victorious end the end.

Suffering is hard. People who teach that Christianity makes everything all better are preaching a false gospel. But in the midst of suffering, Jesus has not abandoned us. He has entered into the suffering of the world and has taken it upon himself. He wants us to cry out to him and give Him the pain. He is the one who will help us endure to the end, when we will receive a crown of victory.

As we cry out in our own suffering, sometimes also we need to remember that the Bible calls us to intercede for others. Christians in places like Ukraine, Eritrea, China, and Myanmar are literally dying for their faith. In some countries, Christians are given only the lowest jobs like cleaning out latrines and digging graves. One Christian woman in Pakistan was jailed on the mere accusation that she shared a common drinking cup with her Muslim colleagues. This is not at all to say our suffering is not legitimate, but there are times God is calling us to set our issues aside and get on our knees to pray for our broken world.

Throughout all of our struggles, we hold onto the hope Jesus offers to the church in Smyrna, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown” (Rev. 2:10). Even death is not the end of the story. Jesus and His victory is the final Word.

As you prepare your hearts for worship this week, lay your struggles and the hurts of the world before the Lord. Consider praying through Psalm 13, once for yourself, and once for persecuted Christians around the world. God hears our cries in lament, and He promises to turn our mourning into dancing.

Blessings,
Pastor Carolyn