

Advent Devotional December 9, 2021

Scripture

Revelation 2:8-17

⁸And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

⁹I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

¹²And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

¹³I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. ¹⁴But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. ¹⁵So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Devotional

The Rev. Alan D. Olson '14

I have to admit, Revelation is one of the last books of the Bible that I think about reading as a devotional exercise in Advent. Yet it somehow seems appropriate here in the year 2021. For nearly two years, our lives have been upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. This season of pestilence has been a revelation to all of us. The pandemic has removed the scales from our eyes and shown us how deeply divided we are; how far we are from Jesus' command to love one another, as he has loved us. In this season of Advent and pandemic, as we prepare for the arrival of our Lord, it seems appropriate to spend some time in the uncomfortable spaces of the book of Revelation.

In this reading, we encounter the instructions of John of Patmos for two different congregations: Smyrna and Pergamum. These are two very different congregations, with different problems. The church in Smyrna was rich in spirit and firm in its faith, yet it had few resources and was threatened with persecution. In Pergamum, there was great pressure for the congregation to assimilate to the cultural pressures of the Greco-Roman world—rather than being threatened, they were being seduced.

In our lives of faith, we reflect bits and pieces of all the problems from these congregations. We see this in our fights over wearing masks in worship. These internal conflicts threaten to overtake some congregations. At the same time, some pastors choose to erect walls of hostility, telling worshipers that they will be turned away from God's house if they choose to wear a mask. These instructions to the churches in Smyrna and Pergamum invite us to contemplate where we are in the midst of our own conflicts, and how we witness to the love of Christ for all of humanity.

Prayer

God of grace and mercy, in this season of Advent, we ask that you open our eyes and ears and hearts. We ask that you help us to see where we are in the midst of all the chaos and strife in our churches and in our world. Finally, we ask that you use us to reveal the love of Christ in and for the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.