

"The Remnant"

"The Unsoiled Minority"

2 Kings [18:1-7], 19:29-31; Mark 1:1-5; Revelation 3:1-6

We are continuing our series on the book of Revelation. Let us remember that, for Christians, it was meant primarily to be a message of encouragement. However, it also functioned as a word of warning for those who would be inclined to give in to the anti-Christian (read: devilish) forces of culture and deny the Christian faith in one way or another.

Let us also remember that we should be aware of passages surrounding a particular passage of Scripture, those that precede and those that follow. Today's Lectionary Gospel passage is set to begin at verse 4 of Mark 1. However, there is something critically important about verse 1. We will look at this in a moment or so.

Today is specified as Baptism of the Lord Sunday, commemorating the Baptism of Jesus. While the theme centers on Jesus's own baptism, by extension it presupposes we will consider our own baptisms and the implications derived thereof. The church has long known the necessity, wisdom, and benefits of periodic reminders of Baptism in general and our own baptisms in particular. Those who were baptized as adults took certain specific vows, vows that are understood, by Scriptural standard and by expectation of the church under whose auspices Baptism is administered, to be inviolable. This means we promise not to violate them. We understand that to forsake these vows is of the gravest nature and can have the gravest of consequences. Conversely, we understand that to seek to fulfill those vows, however imperfectly fulfilled, portends blessing upon blessing. As caveat, we need to know that Baptism does not promise a life of spiritual or physical ease but a life with spiritual blessings beyond any present understanding, even unto eternal life.

Before I get into the heart of today's sermon I want to return for a brief moment to something we learned in last week's sermon.

I shared the sad bit of information about the latter part of Charles Schulz's life. Schulz we will remember was the creator of the Peanuts cartoon and *Charley Brown Christmas*. We know that the theological center portion of *Charley Brown Christmas* begins where Charley Brown cries out in frustration, "Can anyone tell me what Christmas is all about?!" Linus, of course, goes center stage (a theological and theatrical point not to be dismissed), drops his "security" blanket, and recites the King James version of Luke 2:8-14. That recitation is the theological center of *Charley Brown Christmas*. Schulz perfectly and precisely got to the heart of the Gospel message. It saddened me to discover in my research, therefore, that by the end of Schulz's life he had stopped going to church and seemingly came to reject all the crucial truth claims of Christendom, thus becoming, in his own words, "a secular humanist." Thus, it appears that, in the end, Schulz repudiated the very thing he put forth as most important in the show he himself created. I was that day, and always will be, quite saddened at the tragic shift and rejection.

One reason Christendom places great stock in Baptism as a critical sacrament is that there is much to be gained by thinking and talking about it,

theologically and in practical terms. Two questions are thus placed squarely before us. What is in the inherent nature of Baptism and what are the vows which we have made? Were we serious when we made them? Are we serious now? Let us remember that Baptismal vows are made first and foremost to God, not, in one sense, merely to the church as in a denominational system or even a local individual church. There is no vow of any greater importance, in either the keeping or breaking of said vows, than vows made to God himself. Yet, and with no contradiction, we must also remember that "the church" is in fact the earthly manifestation of Jesus himself. He is the head and we are the body. Thus, the vows made to the church are also vows made to God. It is not sustainable to say I made my vows to God but not the church, for the church is the earthly manifestation of Jesus's life and ministry. "I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus said. The church is his body, hands and feet.

The book of Revelation makes it abundantly clear there are many implications in terms of either keeping or breaking our faith promises and violating terms of discipleship. Revelation reveals God has promised blessings beyond measure for faithfulness. But Revelation also reveals God has promised the practical and undesirable opposite for those who would give in to apostasy, that is, giving in to the world, the turning away from faithfulness. This is in part why Schulz's shift away from the critical Gospel center, which he seems to have clearly understood early on, to a Gospel-less belief system will always be a sad part of my remembrance of him and *Charley Brown Christmas*.

But this also reminds me of part of my calling. As undershepherd of the true Shepherd, Jesus, part of my calling as pastor and preacher is to keep teaching and reinforcing what God has revealed to be true.

The following story I shared with Session this past Monday. It came to me via our Presbytery Stated Clerk recently when he and I were having one of our monthly luncheons.

Most of us probably remember praying for Rev. Andrew Brunson a couple years back. Andrew was the Presbyterian pastor who was held in a Turkish prison for approximately two years. The summer after his release, being a minister member of our denomination, Andrew was invited to speak, twice, at our annual General Assembly that summer. Andrew had spent the previous 25 years in Turkey shepherding a church there. Thus, except for brief and infrequent trips back to the states, Andrew had lost most context and awareness of American life and culture by the time of his incarceration and finally his release. He hadn't been back in the states for very long before he became aware of the enormous cultural changes that have taken place in the United States during his 25+ year absence. Without his lengthy time away he might not have noticed quite so vividly and distinctly the tectonic shifts that have come about in our nation and culture. Because he is a Christian, because he is a minister, and because of his calling from God in respect to these first two, he was particularly struck and alarmed at what he saw in terms of our nation's cultural attitude toward Christians and Christianity. During those 25+ years in Turkey, Andrew witnessed and experienced an ever advancing antipathy, antagonism, and oppression toward Christians and Christianity in that almost exclusively

Muslim country. What Andrew witnessed in Turkey was a shift from covert, under-the-radar oppression and antipathy in the early years to an overt, publicly and openly expressed oppression and antipathy. In other words, what once was restrained and limited in scope and method was given almost free rein. With this background life experience, Andrew noted that after his return to the U.S. he became and is very alarmed at what he now sees happening here. As it was related to me, Andrew told our General Assembly that the very forces and changes he saw come to pass in Turkey are the very forces and changes he sees under way here. It is not whether Christians and the church will face oppression and persecution in the United States of America or not. And it is not whether or not it has yet begun. According to this assessment, it is here and is well under way.

But I believe Andrew telling the church of his observations and concerns was not to cause angst and fear but offered as a word of encouragement and direction for the church to prepare for what is coming to pass. This, again, is the very purpose of Revelation. We can't help but think of God's encouragement to Jeremiah at the beginning of his prophetic ministry: "But you, [Jeremiah] gird up your loins; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them." (Jeremiah 1:17, RSV) The LORD was preparing Jeremiah for the difficult time that lay ahead for them.

American Christianity, the church, individual Christians, and every critical thing we believe in and stand for are under increasing attack. This unavoidably means that we are under increasing pressure to cave in to the will and ideologies that are increasingly opposing us. But let me suggest that this shift has been going on longer than just the past 25 years.

We have considered this issue a number of times this past year. As I have noted previously, I believe the mid 20th century was not simply a time of great social upheaval but a time where seeds of antipathy and oppression toward Christians, the church, and the values and doctrines we hold as sacrosanct were planted. These seeds sprouted of course and took root slowly. We are seeing the plants coming to greater maturity.

This of course is very concerning to us, and for good and multiple reasons. But let us not begin to fear and fret. At least not yet. There is always good news in the economy of God's word and Jesus's kingdom. Let us remember that is said that one reason we can appreciate and use light is because we know about and have experienced darkness.

As I've noted before, I have to laugh from time to time during my sermon research. God supplies me with illustrations and new and better understandings of God's stories than I can ever see coming. God is not dead! God is alive and his Holy Spirit works in opposition to the forces of evil and so-called synagogues of Satan (as referenced in Revelation 3:9), referring of course to false churches.

In any event, the verse of our Epistle lesson that jumped off the page for me was verse 4. "Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy." (NIV) The unsoiled clothes of course have nothing to do with literal clothing but refer to the spiritual lives and activities of those who are thus unsoiled. It doesn't say they

have many people who have not soiled their clothes but only a few. It is unavoidable that we would think of the "remnant" that God has always kept safe. Over and over in the OT story, no matter how apostate and how egregious the people of God would become and act, the LORD always preserved for himself a remnant, a few who would not give in to the cultural voices, the anti-religion voices, the anti-Israelite religious voices, the pro-Baal, Ashtarte, and Asherah voices, and all the various sexual immoralities that went along with those pagan religious and cultural programs. There were multiple OT "remnant" passage choices to choose from. With only the thematic connection in mind, I chose at random 2 Kings 19:29-31. As I studied those verses and those that precede it I began to laugh. Perhaps you will see why in a moment.

Not only does the passage speak of the promise from the LORD that he will preserve a remnant in a difficult and trying time, these brief verses stand in stark contrast to that which came immediately before.

In short, the story is this. King Sennacharib was king of the Assyrians. But it was a previous king some 20-30 years before who had carried off the Northern Kingdom of Israel into captivity (721 B.C.) and thus gained all the wealth now at Sennacharib's disposal. Arrogant and insolent Sennacharib considered all his wealth and power as of his own doing and prowess. He bragged about his exploits, accomplishments, wealth, and power, and scorned and reviled Israel's God. With Israel, the Northern Kingdom out of the way, he was now assaulting Judah, the Southern Kingdom at the time of our OT lesson. He was insolent and vain and ridiculed the LORD and those who followed the LORD. Insolence means presumptuous and insulting, rude and impertinent.

But over against this outrageous human being is juxtaposed Hezekiah. My eyes glistened in excitement (metaphorically) as I read what Scripture has to say about Hezekiah, king of Judah as found in 2 Kings 18:3-7. Hezekiah, conversely and in juxtaposition to Sennacharib, "did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done. He removed the high places [of illicit worship], smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it..... Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses. And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him." (NIV)

Let us remember that the people of Israel lived through a seemingly unending cycle of rebellion against God, resulting in a foreign enemy conquering them. This was followed by mournful sorrow, repentance, and a plea for mercy, responded to by God with forgiveness, on God's part, and a renewed promise of faithfulness, on their part. This cycle repeated itself over and over and over. But the LORD always preserved a remnant.

One of the great lessons from this is that just because others abandon the faith, just because other churches and Christians turn away from their baptismal

vows and true Christian belief, that doesn't mean we should or will. It does, however, call for vigilance.

As part of my research, for this sermon in particular and in terms of this series on Revelation, I did a quick overview of the 7 letters of Revelation 2 and 3. I encourage you to do the same. If you haven't, it is eye-opening! Distilled down we find the following issues God has against the various churches. There are numerous instances of false teachers, false apostles, wicked people, false Christians, Christians who accept and hold false teachings and participate in cultural activities that are not allowable for Christians (both civic and religious rituals and activities). They listen to and heed false teachings, religious and otherwise. They tolerate that which is intolerable. There are some who are spiritually dead or sleepy and lethargic, and some are of the synagogue of Satan. Another frequent charge is their involvement in various sexual immoralities. As I came down to the last letter, to letter to Laodicea, I saw an unexpected connection with king Sennacharib. It is noteworthy that the church at Laodicea is the only church of the 7 that the Lord doesn't have a single thing for which to commend them. They are utterly corrupt. This church was a very proud, self-assured church. They believed that everything they had acquired was of their own doing rather than from the benevolence and provision of God. This was precisely the connection with Sennacharib. God had the same response and plans in terms of both. The words to Laodicea were sharp, precise, and cutting. "You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked." Can we imagine the reception and response as this letter was read publicly to the Christians of that church; remember it was to be read during worship. Also consider what their response was because they knew that each and every of the other 6 churches would have read it in worship, too. Every church was to read, publicly, all seven of them.

And lastly, in 5 of the 7 letters the word "repent" and the practice of "repentance" is a critical part of the response called for. Reject, utterly and fully, what is wrong, false, and ungodly, and go in the right direction.

This is precisely why the beginning of the Gospel, that is, the good news, about Jesus Christ begins with the waters of Baptism which unavoidably anticipates repentance that leads to eternal life. It is no small point that the text tells us that "confessing their sins, they were Baptized." No one will see God, spiritually in this life and/or physically in the next life, without a humble, contrite, and repentant heart.

The world in which we presently live is going to increasingly press in upon us in ways we can foresee and those we cannot. It is important for all of us to consider life and world matters as they unfold. But do not fear but be encouraged to be faithful in whatever ways it is necessary. Pray without ceasing, lean on the Lord and his precious Word. Listen to and talk with other true believers, and remain steadfast. As it is said, the benefits of doing do are out of this world!

Let me close noting a couple things about the concluding verses of the letter to Sardis. It sets forth an encouragement for those who would remain faithful. Let me read those important final 2 verses. "He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but

will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels." We who are faithful will have Jesus acknowledge our name before his Father. What a fantastic promise that is. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." This is a fantastic invitation to consider, study, and think about these matters that are so vitally important. Amen.