

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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Pentecost 12**

Revelation 3:1-6

“How to stay awake!”

Pastor Tom Voss

Hymns: 226, 472, 206, 582, 313

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. 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. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 3:1-6)

If I asked you to picture a church that was dead, what would you expect that church to look like? Would you expect high membership and full pews every Sunday? Members gathering for fellowship often? Would you expect them to be helping the poor and needy? And involved and respected in the community? Probably not. But all of those attributes would perfectly describe the church in Sardis, the fifth of the seven churches that Jesus spoke to in the book of Revelation. And Jesus words to that church are clear, “Wake up! You are dead!” he says. So something doesn’t add up. As we look at this church with our eyes and hear Jesus’ words, we have to wonder, “Why would Jesus tell this “successful” alive church to wake up?” But that question is easy to answer. Jesus tells us, “ I know your works, you

have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” With his letters in Revelation to the seven churches of Asia Minor, Jesus reminds us that he keeps a close watch over all of his churches on this earth. And as he observed the church in Sardis, he witnessed widespread involvement from all of the members. He also heard as the community and other churches spoke well of the church in Sardis for all that they were doing. Jesus heard about their works as people took notice.

But more importantly, Jesus knew their works as God saw them. And he tells us that things were much different in God’s eyes. In God’s eyes, this church was dead. All of their works were missing something as God looked at them. They were unfinished. Like a house without a roof, they were worthless.

The discrepancy lay in what Jesus could see and what others couldn’t. As God once said, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7) This was also the case when it came to the church of Sardis. The simple truth is that what people saw was a lie. Jesus saw it how it really was and the church of Sardis was missing the one thing that gives a church life. They were missing the Gospel. And without the Gospel, everything this church would do was worthless to God. “Without faith, it is impossible to please God.” (Hebrews 11:6) Because of that, Jesus could tell this church they were dead.

So, how could the church get to this point? How could they go from being alive to being dead? How could they lose their focus so completely?

As a church ourselves, this is a question that we NEED to answer. The answer is most simply explained for me by the comedy of Jerry Seinfeld, season 7, episode 113, titled “The Maestro.” One of the sub-characters in that episode is a security guard at a clothing store. He stands at the entrance of the shop all day long and keeps watch. George Costanza, Seinfeld’s lazy friend, notices that the guard has to stand all day and takes pity. He gives the guard a comfortable rocking chair to sit in during the day. And while the guard was happy to sit, his comfort had a direct impact on his ability to keep watch. Soon, the guard became drowsy and fell asleep. When he woke up, the store was empty.

Really, that story closely resembles what happened to the church in Sardis. The church had been founded when the HS opened the hearts of people to the Gospel message as it was preached in Sardis. The good news was spread and the congregation grew. The Gospel was their most precious treasure. It changed their lives and they kept watch over it closely. It was their focus. This close connection to the Gospel showed in their lives. Motivated by this message of God's love, the people in the church produced fruits of true faith. Everything they did was motivated by love. It was all a result of knowing what their Savior did for them and having it reflect in their lives.

In addition to the faithful proclamation of the Gospel, God had also blessed the church of Sardis in a rare way. Unlike many of the other early Christian churches, there had been no persecution to deter members of this church. There also had not been any heresy, or false teachings, to lead them away from the truth. God had made sure that the church of Sardis had a relatively easy watch over the Gospel.

And for awhile, they stood guard faithfully. But the devil was able to use the relative comfort of the church against them. He wanted them to be comfortable as they kept watch over the Gospel and somewhere along the way; he gave them a comfortable chair to sit in. As they sat, the church was sure that they were still keeping watch diligently. And from where they sat, everything still looked good. People were continuing to attend worship and other church events. Parents were still having their children baptized when they were born. Members continued to help the poor and needy. The church was carrying on in their involvement in the community.

But as they sat, their attention and watch was not as sharp. They were missing the whole picture as their eyelids drooped. Though the church was full, the message being preached was not focused on the Truth. Baptism wasn't being followed with lifelong instruction. Helping out at and around church had become a duty. Providing help in the community was done for respect. Without a close watch, all these warning signs were being missed. Just as the drowsy guard missed the robber scoping things out, the church had become too comfortable to do anything about the warning signs.

At this point, the devil had rocked the church to the verge of sleep. His work was almost done. He had used the blessings that God had given the church against them. If the church fell sound asleep, he could come in and snatch the Gospel completely away. Without the Gospel, faith would die. The store would be empty. Jesus was concerned that he would show up and find nothing but empty works in the church of Sardis. Without faith, Jesus could not give them the rewards of heaven. The devil's work was so cunning that the church did not even know what had happened. I'm sure that Jesus' message to wake up came as a complete shock to them.

And that leads us to a scary situation. As we look at that church in Sardis, we see with our eyes a church that is alive. It has the members, it has the attendance. It has the fellowship and the help for others. And as we turn the focus to ourselves, it's hard not to see a church that looks very similar outwardly to the church of Sardis. And that puts a very uneasy feeling in my stomach. Could the devil be doing the same thing to us? Could he be rocking us slowly to sleep, waiting to empty our storehouse of faith, leaving us to be caught unaware when Jesus returns?

Brothers and sisters, it's not possible if we stand strong. It can't happen if we stay awake! And the good news is that we already have what is able to keep us alert. As much as we residents of Seattle might want to imagine, it isn't a continuous supply of our favorite Starbucks blend. It is the same thing that Jesus implored the members of the church in Sardis to get back to. "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard." (3:3) This is the Gospel. It is the treasure we get here that we can't get anywhere else. It is the message of God's promise of salvation. It is the message of Christ carrying out that plan of salvation by living a perfect life, dying on a wretched cross and rising to life again. It is the message that all of that work was done for each of us. With this plea, Jesus also wants us to remember the effect that the Gospel had on our life when we first began to hear it. Even if that was as a baby being washed in the waters of baptism, the Gospel changed your life completely when it first came into your heart. It changed you from lost sinner to redeemed child of God. As we remember the great impact of the Gospel, we will want to hold onto it.

To do that, Jesus tells us, "Obey it!" This is how we guard the Word. It tells us how to keep it safe. It tells us what dangers to stay alert to. Our watch begins by continuing to regard the entire Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God. This isn't a collection of the opinions and stories of a bunch of different men. It is God's truth from beginning to end. From the account of creation to the words of promise at the end of Revelation, it points us to Christ.

For that reason, we will not want to add any human teachings to it. We also will not take any truths out of it that we don't like, as popular as that might be in today's Christian circles. We will be careful not to change the message so that it agrees with human reason. The safest guard of the Gospel is to listen to Paul's warning in Romans, "I urge you to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them." (Rom. 16:17) Though it may be difficult at times, this means that we stay away from those who willingly add to, subtract from or change the Word as God has given it to us.

In order to know when we have to stand up and defend the Gospel against those who abuse the Word, we have to stay awake and alert. A daily shot of spiritual energizer can be found in personal study of the Word. It is the only way that we can daily remember the treasure that we seek to desperately hold onto. And as we study, "we are better able to watch our lives and our doctrine closely." (1 Timothy 4:16) With a firmer grip on what we believe, we will be better equipped to defend the Word. We can see when we go against it. We can see when others are going against it. And by continuing to stay connected to all the truths of the Word, we can point all who err, both ourselves and others, to repentance and the continued assurance of forgiveness that Jesus gives to those who have faith.

And this close watch on the Gospel is not done without an eternal purpose. We stand guard, always alert and awake, so that we will be ready when the owner comes. We will be awake, using the Gospel as our source of strength. The treasure will be safe. Our faith will be rooted in the Word. And our reliance on the two will show in a full store house of works, done in the right way, rooted in love for our Savior.

Jesus has a promise for those who are ready when he comes, "They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 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." (3:4-5) These robes of white have been earned by the blood of Christ and are freely given to those who hold to the message of the Gospel.

Stay awake! Remember what you have heard! Guard its truths closely! Be motivated by the Gospel in all you do! Eagerly wait for the Savior's return! Look forward to the robes of heaven which are certainly yours!