

November 6, 2022

Something's Happening Here ...

Revelation 3:1-6

This week we look back in remembrance. That's good to do. We remember the sacrifice and heroism of men and women in the past. It's also a time to look around, recognizing that there is still conflict, war, and suffering. We pray for peace. We pray for mercy. And we look ahead. We pray for a better future, for a way forward, for hope, peace, love, and joy.

Back to Sardis

The letter draws on the unique heritage of the city. Sardis was one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, the capital of the province (once the Kingdom) of Lydia. It was famous in legend as the place where King Midas washed off his Golden Touch, creating golden sands and fantastic wealth (it had rich gold mines). In Sardis, King Gyges minted the world's first coins (thank Sardis for Loonies and Twonies).

At Sardis, sheer cliffs rise from the farmland below to an "acropolis" (literally "high city") or citadel, 500 m above the plain. The Greek writer, Lucian, quipped that to capture the acropolis of Sardis was a metaphor for doing the impossible.

But the impossible had happened to Sardis. The impregnable fortress had been captured. King Croesus of Lydia, eager to expand his kingdom, had enquired of the famed Oracle of Delphi about going to war with Persia. The Oracle told Croesus that, if he attacked Persia, he would destroy a great empire. Croesus went to war. After a few indecisive battles, Croesus fell back to Sardis for winter, retreating to his citadel at Sardis to wait for spring. The Persians, surprisingly, followed and laid siege. Croesus had spent vast sums of money reinforcing his fortress so it could withstand any assault. But on the fourteenth day the city fell. A Persian soldier climbed to an unguarded point, *"where no guard was stationed, for there was no fear that it would ever be captured at that place, for the acropolis is sheer and impregnable there"* (Herodotus). A great empire had been destroyed: King Croesus' own.

Greek historians drew clear moral lessons from Sardis:

- Pride comes before a fall.
- Don't rest on your laurels.
- All the money in the world can't buy security; you have to keep active and vigilant.

By New Testament times, Sardis still claimed it was the true cultural, economic, and military centre of the world, not to be outdone by young upstarts like Athens or Rome, without real pedigree. Apparently, the church reflected the city. The glory of the city and the church were their pasts: *"I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive – but you are dead"* (3:1).

The church at Sardis had a reputation as a vital, strong church. There were no problems with Balaams or Jezebels (like other churches). But outward appearances can be deceptive. The

reality, as Jesus looks beneath the surface, is a church vulnerable to attack. Not an open assault, but a subtle, insidious sneak attack. *"Wake up."* Jesus says. *"Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again. Yet there are some in the church in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes with evil. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy"* (3:2-4).

They hadn't done anything obviously filthy (like the previous cities' compromises with idol worship and sex), but they had wandered into enough moral mud puddles that their white robes had become grey. They needed to "wash their clothes" – clean up their act. In spiritual terms, they needed to examine themselves, confess their sin, and repent ...

They needed passion again. They needed a vision again. They needed to rekindle their faith in the great and awesome God who can and does amazing things.

Here in Lethbridge

We have an amazing church. We have an inspiring ***past***. There's some wonderful stories and saints we can be encouraged by and draw strength from.

I think of Elizabeth Stott, who died in 2003. Elizabeth was a single lady, a retired elementary teacher. She always wore purple. She was concerned that, if we wanted a new generation of young adults in our church, we had to do something. She decided that every Sunday, after church, she would invite every university/college student over for stew. For a student to have a meal? Nothing was more like good news of great joy than that. She understood the importance of community and care. She was the most unlikely person to build a college and career group. But Elizabeth, simply being Elizabeth, touched dozens of lives.

More recently, I think of Ruth Wyton, who passed away in September. In a brief reflection on her life, she wrote, *"To some, my life may seem boring. To me it has been excitingly good. I do not sing well, but love doing so. I do not possess great artistic talent. However, since I was very young, I knew that loved to help. My mother was very aware of any needs in our neighbourhood and from a very young age we were encouraged to assist young mothers in our area by babysitting, doing dishes, or just helping in any way possible. From when I was nine years old, every Saturday was spent helping out wherever I was needed on the street. If mother knew of a family, often newly arrived immigrants, who might be short of food, I was always allowed to take some to them. We were not wealthy, but I learned at a very early age that serving and sharing made life rich. After finishing my schooling, I worked for a bank and the Department of immigration. Here again, I realized that my gift was serving. While I did not mind administration, my fondest memories were being able to be of assistance to the many people of so many nationalities who came to this great land."*

Those of us who knew Ruth, knew what an amazing servant she was. We also know she had the gift of encouragement. She had the gift of, when she was talking with you, giving you her undivided attention and making you feel like you were her only friend. She would leave random gifts for people at their homes. And she would pray. She would pray through the

church directory every day. She had close to a 100 people she prayed for regularly. Ruth, simply by being Ruth, touched dozens of lives as well

I could list dozens of other people who have been incredibly inspiring, encouraging, and impactful for me in our congregation over my 21 years here.

Our challenge is to not simply remember the past, but to see how God is at work *in the present*, and to pray and dream about *what the future* could look like.

I was talking with Stan Coxson recently. Stan and Jeanne live in Martha's House. Because of their health, they don't get out much. In a place like Martha's House, you cannot be an overt evangelist. But you can care for people. Stan and Jeanne regularly have staff drop in to talk, often about their personal problems. They are grandparents to many of the staff. Stan also texts six people every morning – an interesting collection of people he has bumped into over the years. Mostly younger people with a variety of issues. But every day, from 9:30 til noon, Stan sends each one an encouraging text (he often sends me an encouraging text too 😊). Stan and Jeanne have found ways to be good news of great joy to the staff and residents of Martha's House, and many people beyond the walls, too.

Other examples of how we see God at work *in the present* (from our Council members):

- I see God working as people stick around more after the sermon and enjoy coffee and fellowship with one another. I have also seen the people being so happy to be back in person at small group bible study. I think God's working in those areas.
- I am seeing more effort on the part of our 'regulars' to reach out and meet new faces who arrive on a Sunday morning.
- Our services are upbeat. We are blessed with great musicians.
- I attended Katelyn Enns' bible study last week and was greatly encouraged by the young adults (and a couple of us older folk) in attendance.
- We have people doing mission locally and praying for the global mission.
- Groups that meet at our church – hand bells and art class, for example. These groups build relationships with non-church people that can lead someone to faith in Jesus.
- I am pleased that the Cuba mission group has had an intergenerational flavour.
- We are keeping in better contact with our mission partners, using technology to get to know them better, and increasing our prayer for them. Including opportunities for those who can't actually go on a mission (e.g. cooking zoom session, leaf rakers, etc).
- Kids handchimes is involving a couple of moms and well as the kids in new ways.
- Our daily devotionals. For the entire pandemic, other than one in-person visit, that was the only contact my mother (back east) had with church. It is a life saver.
- I feel nurtured and challenged through the Thursday book study – the ladies let me express my doubts and questions and don't judge me for them.
- The level of creativity and originality shown by Angela in children's ministry.
- There are a lot of new folks helping with coffee.
- Our finances are holding in there. And we have a roof that doesn't leak.
- Leadership development. While the RCs suffer from lack of priests, we have Troy and Kyle, soon to be ordained and Katelyn and Hannah in theological education. We have

a variety of ages of trained leaders who are committed to serve Jesus. Our church is an amazing incubator for leadership development.

- I'm glad to be part of a small group that wants to study the Bible together. These small groups allow for micro connectedness to happen within the larger community.
- I am pleased to be part of a congregation that is being positive instead of negative

We're also looking praying, dreaming, and looking forward to what ***God will do in the future*** (again, more insight from Council members):

- I hope and pray we will continue to 'preach the Word in season and out of season', to encourage us to study the Word of God, to pray, to learn how to deal with our own issues so we can be healed and join together in communities of hope and peace – this will be the catalyst in our society to help move it towards wholeness and peace.
- My hope is that our church would grow in numbers of people and that these people would represent a wide variety of people.
- My hope is people would feel called to service and would eagerly volunteer to help.
- I pray and hope for our church to tackle the issues of woundedness in our congregation and world and work towards living lives of daily forgiveness and creating communities of forgiveness to be 'good news' to our neighbours near and far.
- To be a safe place where more people can come and experience the love of Jesus.
- How can we be authentic in our witness to a doubting world? How can we be active in intergenerational reconciliation? How can we be more active cross-culturally?
- People will want to be involved if they are welcomed warmly and personally invited to become involved.
- I pray we can meet and get to know the older members and people that have been here longer. Being able to share together in meals and just doing more things together as a community of believers.
- A call to deeper discipleship that leads us to better engagement with the world.
- To become good news!
- I think love, connection, and community must be central. We have to know one another to care for one another. Love is very messy. It means time, risk of misinterpretation, and long-term commitment.

How can we be good news of great joy to all people? It all seems overwhelming. That's when we need to remember this word comes from Jesus, "*the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars*" (3:1). Our mighty God, our amazing Saviour, our ever-present Spirit is with us. We face the future with love, with faith, with hope-filled patient endurance, knowing God is with us. And if God is with us, nothing can stand against us. We have a great and awesome God who can and does amazing things.

- Where do you see God at work in our church right now? (please share them with me)
- What are your hopes, dreams, prayers for the future? (please share them with me)
- How can we be good news of great joy to all people? (pls share your ideas with me)