

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH  
October 14, 2018  
A Matter of Life and Death – Dear Church  
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Well, hello. Here we are one more time. We are in the fifth week of a seven-week series looking at the start of the last book in the Bible, the book of the Revelation and it's the letter to the seven churches. I love that intro Dear Church with the pen and I mean, it just captures the feeling of it. And when I listened to the messages that have come before this one I listen to Pastor Joel sort of frame everything about what was the culture and who were the Caesars who were in charge when this letter was written or this whole work of the Revelation. We learned about what was it like in a Pagan culture and Pagan cities and who are the messages from? Well, they're from Jesus the A to Z God. And we learned about swimming upstream as we listen to Josh talked to us, Pastor Josh and then Pastor Heather last week just so captured the essence of the presence of Christ needed in the middle of all of this stuff going on in the first century as we approach the end of the story. My question tonight looking at letter number five is what kind of person did Jesus use to pen these letters, like see him there? He's just on that barren island off the coast of what is now Turkey. There is an island called Patmos, his name is John. All of his early life he was a fishing kid. I don't mean like Opie and Andy Griffith, I don't mean that kind of fishing, I mean like commercial fishing family, like hard work all of his teenagers going out fishing at night. I don't know how many hundreds of times he watched the sun come over the Golan Heights on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. I don't know how many nights they spent coming up empty or when they had to haul in big nets of fish. You end up being a studly young man when you have all that kind of work and now he's old and exiled to the Isle of Patmos. He's 60 years and 600 miles away from where he grew up as a boy. He was probably a teenager with Jesus back in the day because he's one of his closest guys. Okay? Quite possibly a relative and the work he had done growing up was brutal work, fishing work with nets is brutal work. And then Jesus comes along because he spent all of his then growing up years catching, fishing, mending nets, that's what you do and Jesus comes along and says, why don't you come with me and catch some people. Why don't we do that? So he's still doing that on the Isle of Patmos? He's calling he's catching and he's mending nets, there are holes in the nets. He's the just right person to write these things. Okay, and when he does he describes glory and power when those opening phrases in that first chapter when he talks about this person standing among the candlesticks and his eyes are bright like fire and his hair as white like wool what he describes is glory and intimacy. You see in this time period somewhere between 80 and 100 AD people aren't quite sure but it's in that last quadrant if you will those last couple of decades of the first century, he'd written several things.

So, he writes the story of Jesus which we call the Gospel of John and then he writes three other letters; first, second... We call them first second and third John, they're in the New Testament and these are these are intimate portraits. These are challenges to be together to be in the light and not in the dark and when he speaks of Jesus, this is how he speaks of him. He says we have seen him, we have heard him, we've touched, we have beheld his glory. It's this combination on the one hand of glory and intimacy on the other.

I have a friend; pastors near Las Vegas who back when I was a college president out in California, back in the day as they say this would have been in the 80s. He was driving through Las Vegas and a guy ran a stoplight. He was inebriated and he T-boned their car; his little boy who was five or six was in the backseat, it was pre-seatbelt days and the window was open and the little boy was thrown maybe a hundred feet some long distance and landed on his head, was in a coma. It was some days, maybe weeks but I think some days before the little boy woke up and when he woke up, this is what he said to his dad and his mom. He said they said how are you? I'll call him Joshua. How are you Joshua? He said okay. He said was it dark or what? You know, they were asking him questions about this time and he said he went to heaven and there a lot of heaven stories out there, just want you to know that right. He said I saw Grandma she lives in a big house, this is a five/six year old boy, lives in the big house. He said did you see Jesus? He said yes. He picked me up. He said what did he look like? He said he had real bright eyes and white hair that stuck way out like this. Now, I don't think they were reading Revelation in the preschool class when he was in Sunday school. I don't think he did... but you get this sense of glory and intimacy when you hear that story and you read those words at the front end.

So John has been with Jesus on the road, he's been with him at sea, he's been with him in the Last Supper, what we call the Last Supper. He was with him in the garden, he was with Jesus at the cross, he was the one who Jesus looked at and said son behold your mother take my mom have her be yours, if you will, he was that close to him. He was at the empty tomb; he was at the ascension of Jesus. He was there at the day of Pentecost, he was at the Jerusalem Council, he was there when they came up with the three things that you're not supposed to do if you're a Gentile; the idolatry, the sexual immorality and the blood sport; the things we've heard the last four weeks, okay. He was there and now he pens these closing prophetic words of the Revelation and when I read him I feel his heart, I feel his heart when I read him he was so close to Jesus and you get the feel of that when you read these letters.

There's something about writing a letter Pastor Mark alluded to it when he talked because he quoted my wife Ruth who writes letters. She is the consummate letter writer and a day of email when you get a snail mail; it's like gold. I'm just saying unless it's a bill but I'm just saying it says, okay? In my house I have a pen like this; this is a fountain pen. This isn't the fountain pen, but I've got a pen like this at my house that my sister gave me several years ago that came with my mother's things that was her father's pen. It was a Parker Diamond Black Diamond pen, that just means a little plastic thing on the top looks like a diamond and it has little indentations and you can track when it was made because of that. I never met my grandfather Boyd because I went as a three-year-old with my parents to India. But I turned four in March of 1946; the pen that I have of his was made in the spring of 1946. He died in October of 1946; I don't remember him at all. I'm sure he held me, his name was Zack, but when I write with my grandfather's pen, in my heart, I'm connected to him. So, this is spooky your old and getting weird. No, no, I'm just saying there's just there's something, there's something about holding something that your ancestors held that has value if nothing. And so when I read John and I read his letters to the church, there is something so powerful and present and prescient, it looks forward that it's powerful. So here we are 20 centuries down the road and I sense his passion. He's writing on parchment just like we saw in the in that deal, you know. And he writes this way and we've said this before you said, you know, some of the other folks who spoke on this they said stuff like

you're saying well, yes, we're saying it again, because we have to hear it a number of times to get it, right.

Here's the format; to the angel of the church in a given city write: Jesus says and then he says I know these good things about you and then he have... I got a couple of things we need to talk about. I got some things against you, that's what it says. Now in relationship there are several ways that we can deal with confrontation and one of the things you find out especially in the close relationship like Ruth and I've been married like 55 years, right. And so you'll learn you don't, if you start with the issue, and you make it personal like, who's the idiot who left the diet Pepsi on the end table in the front room? That's probably not a good start for resolution to a problem, just saying. So, what he does here is what Jesus always does he affirms the person and he confronts the issue. He's the one who when the woman is caught in the act of adultery this is a Foth paraphrase. He says this is not the thing, you are a great lady and this is not the thing great ladies do go and don't do that anymore. He affirms the person and confronts the issue. He takes me to Bethlehem and says, let me show you what a perfect human being looks like and then as he shows me that then he says now let's walk to the cross and I'll deal with all your junk, affirms the person, confronts the issue, that's what's going on here. And at the end of it, he says let the one who has ears hear, which is sort of a classic prophetic thing. Listen up troops. Listen to this.

We saw last week the map of the seven churches, we're going to see it again. These are the seven churches in what is now Turkey and it's off the coast of Patmos. There are the seven things with the island of Patmos is right there, it's close, these are relatively close to each other in a car; walking there further. But the point is that each church receives the entire book of the Revelation. Each church is getting the whole document not just their letter and so how is it received? Well churches are invited by getting the whole deal to read each other's mail, okay. Each church is called to hear what the spirit says to the churches plural. So if I'm in Smyrna and I'm reading what he wrote to Laodicea, there's saying well, I'm glad I'm not as bad as those dudes over there, you know. I don't know if that's what they said. But each church is summoned to overcome because it's a battle and each church shares the hope promised in the letters for the end of time. We have heard this for four weeks and we're hearing it for the fifth. Jesus says through John where they were, where the church was. Where they are, this is where you were, where you are and where you need to be. That's the sequence of the letter; where you were, where you are, where you need to be. That's a fascinating format and for us reading it 2,000 years down the road in a culture that shouts don't judge me, okay. Our culture shouts don't judge me. And it's exactly what Jesus does because there's only one person capable of judging me. There's only one person who's perfect who can say, you know that thing stop that. Or you know that other thing let me take that out. Let me excise that. This is the one who has the gravitas and the knowledge and the designer's heart if he built me he has not only the right but the responsibility in some way as I allow him to fix me.

The great challenge, of course as we've heard before is culture. What is culture? Culture is a compilation of symbols and language and values and norms. Think about high school. Maybe you say, you know, really I'd rather not but let's just go there for a moment. Think about high school and you have the groups in high school and we have sort of names formed. Those are the jocks and those are the nerds, the smart people and those are the Goths and those are the dopers and those are the drama mogs and all that kind, we have categories that we put people in. But

culture is a word for a way of life. NCC has a culture; National Community Church has a culture that's created with Jesus who's the alphabet God, the Alpha and Omega at the heart of it. It's a focus on Jesus. We sang it this weekend already. But it also has core convictions; NCC believes that we are to be the most creative place on the planet. We believe that we belong in the middle of the marketplace. We believe that God blesses our church in proportion to our focus on mission and helping the poor; that creates a culture that creates a culture that wants to bless people and baptized believers and christen and anoint babies and say we believe for the future.

You know some folks say in business, we need a better strategy to grow this, baby. I would submit 'no' what you need is a better culture. Culture any business person knows this in terms of a corporation, culture beats strategy every day of the week and what's being introduced here is a more profound culture. We heard about it when we talked about the kingdom and the dedication of these children. A culture is how we see life, what we value, how we think and how we act; how we see life, what we value how we think and how we act. Romans in the Phillips translation of scripture, I love how Paul says it to the Romans...

*12<sup>1-2</sup> With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.*

We keep getting pointed in these letters toward a kingdom culture. And the kingdom is not out there people say where's the kingdom and Jesus says it's within you the kingdom is among you. When you come this weekend to a time like this you sort of bring your part of the kingdom to the party. That's how that works. And I don't know that creates the presence of God, but it certainly expresses the presence of God. Where's the capital of the kingdom? Well, it's in your transformed heart; it's in my transformed heart. That's the church with a Capital C.

I love answering the question when somebody says what church are you apart of and I say well, I'm a part of the only one there is because there's only one it has lots of flavors, lots of names. You know what we call denominations I sort of called families; well, that's the Jones over there and those are the Garcias and so forth, okay. But the church no matter how small in a given society can have an impact on the larger culture and in part these letters are saying that because there weren't a gazillion people in a number of these churches, okay. These were oppressed minority people they were minorities in a pagan culture.

I love the story of Jonathan Woolman who was a Quaker preacher, I think in the 1700's on the east coast. And Jonathan Woolman would go to every Quaker farm up and down the East Coast for I don't know how many years. He rode thousands of miles on horseback going to them saying slavery is wrong. Do not keep slaves. So, by the time of the Civil War you couldn't find a slave on a Quaker Farm because one guy who had a mission and a passion saw the kingdom culture alive in him to be able to do that and be motivated to do that.

So, what's been said to the churches? Well, we heard it Ephesus challenges the loveless church; Smyrna encourages a persecuted church; Pergamum addresses both persecution and compromise. Last week words to Thyatira challenges compromise, and now we come to Sardis.

Let's see how Sardis stacks up here's how it reads.

*3 "To the angel<sup>[a]</sup> 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 for being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! (death and sleep are corollary in scripture) <sup>2</sup> Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.*

*<sup>3</sup> Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, 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.*

*<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. <sup>6</sup> Whoever has ears, (Whoever has ears) let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

So Jesus is summoning a sleeping church to wake up, he calls it a dead church. When I was president at college the first dean who worked with me those first few years had a PhD in business communication and this is what he said, a business letter should not be able to be understood. A business letter should be so clear written in such a way that there is no possibility that it could be misunderstood. It's not important for a business letter to be understood. It's important to be written in a way so it could not possibly be misunderstood. There's no way people in Sardis got this letter and say, I wonder what he means. I don't think so. I don't think it's going there. This is like that iconic line from Princess Bride where they bring the hero in and said he's dead just no, he's not dead, but he's mostly dead. Okay, just saying if you haven't watched it I encourage you to see it, they're saying there's a mostly dead. But they say you look alive. Jesus is saying you look alive you have the appearance, the reputation of being alive. But you're mostly dead, mostly a fraud.

Why do we sleep? Well, we need to, its part of the circadian rhythm it's what you do is you're worn out; you sleep that's what you do, alright. So, the sleep isn't the bad thing, the challenge is that they're supposed to be alive. They're supposed to be vital and something it doesn't say what has gotten in the way of that. I mean John in writing this letter this has to be poignant for him, because on the night of the greatest battle of Jesus life, the night before he goes to the cross he says to those three who are closest to him; why don't you come and pray with me for...remember you remember that he said come and pray with me for an hour and it says that they what? They fell asleep. I think he gets it. I think he understands the power of what is being said.

It's a challenge for a small church, small group of believers in a pagan culture because they get up every day to go do battle. It's like Washington DC. People get up every day in various quadrants of the city to go do battle and even in trying to do well scripture says don't get weary in well-doing. It's terrible that they're mostly dead. It could be worse. They could be like dead, totally absolutely hundred percent dead.

Ever have a sentence that changes everything. You've heard me share several times about five years ago last May 22nd when Ruth collapsed in Estes Park, Colorado. She suffered with doctors and medical community called sudden cardiac death where the ventricle in your heart gets shorted out, stops pumping blood and starts to quiver, you call that fibrillation and your brain loses blood and brain cells start dying in an older person like me in two to three minutes. And when she collapsed, slumped next to me on the seat, I turned to her and her eyes were open almost rolled back, her mouth was open, she wasn't breathing and I just shouted, I grabbed her and shouted Ruthie, don't leave me. And when I did that I started praying, everybody we had nine other people in the room they started making two calls one to heaven and one to 911. And within three minutes a young rookie cop ran into the room because they told us to lay her on the floor and he dropped on his knees in that first compression we heard her ribs crack and they're doing it a hundred beats a minute bam, bam, bam and they're counting so, it's like a metronome. They're doing that and all of a sudden there are five or six people around her, they cut her clothes off all I can see is her bare feet. And I'm sitting like from here a little closer than to the front row and all I can see is her feet and they're doing the metronome thing bam, bam, bam, like this and I'm in shock. I don't know what's going on and somebody's holding my hand and then they put the paddles on her and they say clear and her feet come off the floor and I still hear the metronome one, two, three, four like that and they shock her again at her feet come off the floor and one, two, three. And then they shock her third time and her feet come off the floor. And there was a sentence four words that are like the most profound sentence in the world to me and they are these words; we have a pulse. And God is saying, you know, you have a reputation of being alive, but you're mostly dead, but you still have a pulse. And we can work with a pulse. He can't even work with the dead, I mean like he could do that.

But in that in that moment Sardis, hears you're almost dead, you're in a deep sleep, but you have a pulse. That part is good, it's a sign of life, a heart that beats but you need more. It's a letter about life and death. You've heard me say this before. I don't know who quoted it, its many source to many people that "Jesus didn't come to make bad people good; he came to make dead people live."

I like the words that I think Randall Wallace put in the mouth of his ancestor William Wallace in Braveheart where it says every man dies, not every man really lives. But the words I like best are what John wrote quoting Jesus in the Gospel where Jesus says I am the resurrection and the life. This is a matter of life and death. There's a reason John writes about the Jewish leader Nicodemus and Jesus exchange and part of it is that Jesus says to this learned man, you need to be born again. You need to take a first new breath. I've been there for four first breaths, Erica, Jenny, Susanna, Chris; been in the room. And there's that moment when the child comes and you're waiting and then you hear the squall or whatever. I've been there for many first breaths. I've been there for more than my fair share of last breaths and I'm here to tell you there's a stark difference between life and death. There is a stark difference in those two.

They no doubt had a culture issue, swimming upstream and a pagan culture, but it may just have been their own lack of focus, their lack of self-control, their lack of self-awareness and being involved in their spiritual lives in ways that were meaningful. It's interesting when you read the Pastoral Epistles in the New Testament how many times the writers talk about self-control; quit blaming that, quit blaming her or him or whatever and understand that it lies in you?

So, how do we wake up? What can we do? He says three things and I'll just run through these very quickly.

- Remember - Do you remember where you were when Jesus touched you? Do you remember? Years ago this guy named Bill Gaither, do you know that name Bill Gaither who sings gospel music? Had a friend and Bill was in town and we were in a house and after dinner he sat down at the piano and somebody said play a song. He said I'm not very good on the piano. I said, well go ahead and play and he was playing some songs and he said what song surprised you the most that you wrote and he started playing this song {singing} 'He touched me. Oh he touched me and oh the joy that filled my soul.' That song, he said, that went around the world in 85 languages, he said I had no idea. There's something about that moment when Jesus touches you and I think he's calling the church at Sardis. Do you remember what happened? Because you were totally dead and he brought you totally alive. Do you remember that? Do you remember how lost or lonely how disconnected or disoriented you feel? Remember the moment? Remember the feeling recall the impact? Remember when you couldn't wait to be with other believers?

1968 to 1971 were crazy years in this country, there were riots in the streets, there were assassinations, there were riots on college campuses. We were pastoring a congregation like this near the University of Illinois and the thing was just going topsy-turvy in a good way because when there's confusion in a culture the kingdom culture has a chance to explode in ways that would not otherwise do, I just see that over and over again historically you see that? And just a few years back. I met a couple of those folks who were college students at the University of Illinois, and they said they said, you know, we came to Jesus in that congregation and you need to understand that for us that was Camelot, it was Camelot. And we've never found that kind of place exactly again because where you were born and that family that nurtured you is unique. It's just how it is. And I said, yeah, it was crazy, people came to church and all kinds of weather they would walk and and this woman said, yes, we walked through the snow from the campus two miles away because we wanted to be there when the doors opened to be in that service because we never knew from Sunday to Sunday what was going to happen and that's what made it exciting, but we knew it was going to be good.

There's something about that first expression. And God is saying through John remember how that was, recall that. Remember when you hung on the scriptures taut because they were your life. Remember what you heard at moments in your life. I'm a 17 year old freshman at UC Berkeley in 1959, and you've heard me say this but I'm trying to sew whatever few wild oats I have but I'm a church guy and I went to a missions... I tell people by today's standards there weren't many oats and they weren't very wild but I'm just saying. But I went to this mission's conference and the missionary like preached for an hour and a half and he hadn't showed his movies yet and I mean it was ridiculous. But I was convicted something was going on and I went up to this little chapel area and I just opened my Bible like you're not supposed to do, just you know, but I'm gonna do this and but I just let it fall open and a light was coming through the window and a band of light through the venetian blinds fell across the verse in The Sermon on the Mount. It says you are the salt of the earth; if the salt has become tainted or in the King James, has lost its savor. How is the earth going to be salted? And it was like a knife going into my heart in a good way. There was something about that moment that when I recall it, I

understand that it's a matter of life and death. It's not just I believe a few things and I get along; it's a matter of life and death. It says hold fast cherish those memories, hold them close to you, grasp it again. Hold it, hold it down, hold it tight.

Five hours south of here is Nags Head North Carolina and I have a fisherman friend down there that I've told you about before but he's 90 now. I met him in 1972 sitting on a pier in Hatteras and he was coming down the piers pants were rolled up he was pretty handsome dude, he had you know, there's a blue eyes and all this, he's tan he's... And I said hi and he has this unique Nags Head accent that on the Outer Banks and he said hi. I said, my name is Dick, what's yours? He said my name's Charles Daniels. I said are you a fisherman? He said I am. He said but I ain't going out today, it's blowing too hard. It was right at the end of Hurricane Agnes in June of 72. Years later we had included Charles in a group that met once a year for two or three days. And in that meeting time we were talking about how the challenges were in a church where people come and then they leave and his comment was because they fished by taking two boats and putting long nets down in the sound and then staking him down and his comment was you boys need to sit your nets tighter. That's what you need to do, put them stakes down tighter. So people don't just scoot out from under the net like that. He says hold fast because when our memory goes that's what you call dementia. There's no place for spiritual dementia when it comes to the memories of what God has done in our life. It's a matter of life and death.

- And then he says repent it's not saying I'm sorry. I'm sorry is not repenting; turning and doing the other thing is repenting, you've heard that a lot of times here. A hundred small decisions that take me down the wrong path. I believe can be reversed by one Holy Spirit moment decision. I believe that, I've seen that happen over and over again. I have a friend and I close with this. I have a friend in this town by the name of Barry Black, he's chaplain in the United States Senate. He tells the story of a mom who raised him in the hood in Baltimore and paid him a quarter for every scripture verse that he memorized and then he started going for the short ones like Jesus wept and she dropped it to a nickel but he knows more scripture, I think, probably than anybody in this town. I mean, he just knows scripture, but he said and scripture holds you. He said there was the day when I was about 13 and some of my buddies said we're going to go do this come go with us Barry and in that moment. He remembered a verse and he said no. Those boys ended up in jail because they killed a man and Barry Black ended up as chaplain the United States Senate. There's something about holding it fast, remembering it, making the right kinds of decisions. And we hear it from the Old Testament; I heard a voice behind me saying this is the way walk in it repent turn this way go over here. There is a small faction at Sardis that has clean white clothing and in essence the writer says join them, fan that flame, put gasoline on that part over there.

At 2:10 a.m. in the morning two days after Ruth collapsed. I heard another sentence and the sentence was Ruth is waking up. We have a pulse; Ruth is waking up. The church at Sardis, it's a matter of life and death. You're not dead but parts of you are dead and you need to stir that, let the Spirit stir you to bring those things alive. The basic principle for applying these letters to ourselves I think essentially is this if the shoe fits wear it. I ask the question this weekend; what is the Spirit saying to you? Even in the reading of this letter I believe he's saying something to me. What are you hearing? Listen hard. Is there a necrosis in some part of my life? Is there some



order I've given myself I will never set foot in that whatever and I need to rescind that order because it's not bringing me life. It's bringing me more death, whatever it is come alive because there's more.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for your word. Thank you for your grace. Thank you that with you there's always more. And we just want to tell you we're standing on tiptoe because we can't get enough. Thank you that your Spirit brings us more than enough. In Jesus name. Amen.