



This morning we are beginning a new series entitled, “*You’ve Got Mail*,” where we will be taking a look at God’s conversation with 7 specific churches found in Revelation 2 & 3. I am sure most of you have seen the movie, “*You’ve Got Mail*”. It is about a man and a woman, who have never met correspond by email, finally meet and fall in love. The movie came out when email was just becoming popular and it was fascinating to look over Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan’s shoulder and read the correspondence between the two of them.

We want to do that in this series using pictures and insights that Kathy and I found as we visited each of these cities, some digging I have been doing historically as well as looking at what the Word says. In this, I think we will find some important insights about how God would have us live as a Church and as individual today. What I have found fascinating is how the city and the circumstances in which these churches resided had a profound impact on each church, to the point that the culture and philosophy of their cities had a profound influence on how each church functioned. And because of that I think these churches will have a lot to teach us as we live in the middle of our city at this particular time in history.

This morning I want to do two things; first I want to give you the context in which these seven letters were written and then I want to pick one of the churches (Smyrna) and see what we can learn from reading its mail.

## **I. Introduction to the Book**

### **A. Patmos & The Cave**

The book of Revelation was written on the Isle of Patmos. For Kathy and I, it is hard to express the excitement we felt as we approached the Isle of Patmos after a 3 hour boat ride from the coast of Turkey. As you approach the Island the first thing you see high on the hill is the Monastery of St. John. Your first impression as you enter the harbour is that it is a beautiful place but as you start climbing the hills you find that it is rocky, dry and a pretty desolate island – that was especially true when John arrived there in 94/95 AD. However, it was on that island in a cave that God gave John a Revelation of himself. Today, you can enter through this door and then go down into the exact cave where John had this encounter with the risen Christ. I need to tell you that unlike many other ‘holy sights’ that the Greek Orthodox Church oversees, this cave was sparsely decorated and had a feeling of reverence. There in the quietness, I was struck by a palpable presence of God – it was quite an experience. On top of the cave, a monastery was built in the 11th century. This was where we had the honour of having lunch with the under-abbot of the monastery. We asked a monk, “*Why did you choose to become a monk?*” And he responded, “*I didn’t choose to become a monk; it was simply responding to the gracious invitation of my God.*” Following lunch, we were privileged to join the monks in an hour long Greek Orthodox Prayer Service.

### **B. The Book**

Revelations is a unique book:

(i) Revelations is full of amazing images of dragons, wars, martyrs and various views of God. So many people want to use the book in which they are able to break secret codes about the end times. In doing that I think they miss that fact that because Revelations is written in poetry form, the point is not to give you information or facts but rather (just like other poetry) it is written to give to paint pictures, to give you an experience of standing in the middle of all that God is about to do. The point of the book is that no matter what we face in life, in the End, God wins and we win with him.

(ii) It is the last book in the Bible. Of the 404 verses in the book of Revelations, there are over 518 references to Old Testament Bible verses. And while you don't find John quoting whole verses, it is obvious that the God used Old Testament words and ideas throughout the whole book. This means that reading the book of Revelations without reading the Old Testament first is like reading the last chapter of a book and expecting to get the full impact of those last words.

(iii) It has been written for people who are living in the 'Middle' of time. Revelation readers know that God created all things in the beginning and they are being told that in the end God will win and make all things good again. But, as we will see, they are still forced to live through tough things in their daily life. WE can relate! Although we know God will make sure we are eternally fine, it is today, in the middle of all we are doing that we need His help.

(iv) John is a pastor. While Jesus told him what to write, to miss that it is written to churches John loves through the heart of their pastor is to miss its beauty.

(v) It was written to 7 churches, some famous –some not, who are churches in Asia that are listed in order of where they appear on a common Roman mail route. They are 7 churches for whom John was their area minister. So when Jesus gave a word for them it excited him.

### **C. John & The Letter**

Turn to Revelation 1:1, 4. The John mentioned here is John, one of the 12 disciples, one of the 2 sons of Zebedee, the fisherman brother to James, one of the inner circle of 3, the one who stood with Jesus at the cross, the one who took care of Mary, Jesus' mother and the one whom upon entering the tomb on the first Easter, saw and believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. John went on to be an evangelist, pastoring the church in Ephesus and eventually was the 'overseer' of the churches in Asia. All his life he kept preaching, teaching, leading churches and being a faithful Christ follower telling others about Jesus.

Now, approximately 60 years later, John is the last living disciple as all the others have been martyred. Under Emperor Domitian, John is exiled to the barren prison colony on the Isle of Patmos. While it was hard being a prisoner of this island, harder yet was the fact that he kept hearing reports of things that are happening in the churches that he was involved in, which didn't sound very good. Because of that, one Sunday John slipped into a cave entrance on the Isle of Patmos and listen to what happened. (Revelation 1:9 – 19) As John kneels in the cave in prayer, all of a sudden behind him he hears a voice blaring and echoing off the cave walls which say in verse 11, *"Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."*

Of course he turned around to see who was speaking and saw 7 huge Golden candle standards (representing the 7 churches from Asia). As he attempted to focus his eyes because of the pulsating bright light, he saw someone who looked kind of like the Son of Man (what they called Jesus). It looked like the Jesus he knew back in Jerusalem 60 years ago BUT He is wearing a long white robe with a golden sash across it (it was the vestments of a Priest – for you remember Jesus was said to be our high Priest on God's right hand in Heaven). His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow (He glows with purity). His eyes were like blazing fire (as if He could see right through him). His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace (purest metal that is unmovable and strong). And His voice was like the sound of rushing waters (it was like the reverberating power that seems to spray off 10 foot breakers that cause you to stand back in fear). In His hands, He held 7 stars (He had the 7

main planets they could see in their day in the palm of His hand). Out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword (His ability to tell truth from lies) and His face shone like the sun brilliance. Verse 17 says as he took in this picture of Jesus and John fainted dead away. Can you imagine what it would be like to see Jesus standing a few feet away from you like that? How would you react? Probably just like John did! Jesus reached over gently placed His hand on John and said in verse 17, *"Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last."*

Stop here. One of the problems with how people have looked at the book of Revelations is that they get caught up in the details that they miss the experience God is trying to pour into their spirit as they read it. Place yourself in John's position. He was the last living disciple in his late 80's having served Jesus all his life and now cold, hungry and forced to work hard for his keep abandoned on this desolate island. He is wondering why he is still alive and maybe after hearing of the some of the messes his churches are in, wondering if it has all been worth. Then Jesus appears. Only he is so much more glorious, wonderful and powerful than he could have imagined and yet: (i) He came to meet John in the cave (in the middle of his questioning/ struggling for answers); (ii) He reached out and touched him in His usual gentle way (personally sitting with him) and (iii) Jesus' presence brought hope afresh to his soul.

Maybe you are in a place where things haven't been working out just as you planned, people have let you down, it seems like your needs aren't being meet and you feel alone and discouraged. If that is how you feel, then today, step into the poem of Revelations. Picture being in the cave with John, feel Jesus' touch and let Him remind you that He is still King of the Universe, the risen Lord and your Saviour. That is why He wanted John to write this down so when you read it and remember, *"Oh yeah! Jesus promises that in the end we win with Him. And in the Middle of the things of life, I am not alone!"*

Jesus says in verse 19, *"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later."* John's job was to write down what Jesus told about future things and about the 7 lampstands which represent the 7 churches who give light to the world. Whether or not they feel it, Jesus is always standing right in the midst of every church. In a prayer meeting, Youth event, Hub gathering, Congregation meeting and gossip in the corner of the Foyer that Jesus is present and listening; He doesn't miss much!

As we look at each church we will see a similar pattern occur: (i) Jesus describes Himself in ways that relate directly to the need of the individual church; (ii) He will say, *"I know what is going on in your church,"* and (iii) He will tell the church what they need. I believe that we could probably find churches exactly like these 7 churches in our world today. There is probably a little of each of these churches in Brentview as well. So let's go on a journey over these next few weeks looking at these 7 churches. Due to time, I picked the church at Smyrna to look at for the remaining few minutes today.

## **II. You've Got Mail...Smyrna**

### **A. The Situation**

Smyrna (modern name Izmir) was one of my favourite places that I visited in Turkey. It is a beautiful port city situated 35 miles North of Ephesus and has over 100,000 inhabitants. On its money was the slogan, *"The 1st in Asia in Size and Beauty."* It was known for its great harbour and it's manufacturing of the spice, Myrrh for perfumes. Today, you can still walk on one of its old city walls. It is still a city that has its old shops, street bazaars and ladies making rugs. But you need to know that back in John's time; the city was so wealthy that it had its own West Edmonton Mall. Right in the middle of this modern city they have uncovered this huge

Agora (market place) with its marble pillars, internal water systems and 3 stories of shopping which cover a huge area! It was also a city known as the Center of Emperor worship. They were the first city to build a huge temple to the Emperor, whom they saw as being a god; in John's time, the Emperor being worshipped in this city was Domitian.

With that in mind turn to Revelations 2:8 - 11. First, look at how Jesus describes himself in verse 8, *"These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again."* In a city whose claim to fame was that they worshipped the Roman Emperors as gods (for example, Nero called himself the 'the Almighty God' & 'Saviour.') Jesus began by saying let me introduce myself. I am He was the First and the Last. He is saying, *"Let me set the record straight, I am the one and only true God who was alive from the beginning of time and who will be there throughout all time. No matter what Caesar says (or the priests in the temple on the hill say,) only I am the true God."*

As it was read, I am sure they remembered what Isaiah 44:6 says, *"I am the First and the Last, (and then Isaiah added this line,) and there is no other God besides me"*. Remember, the person saying this is the Jesus that was just described in all His glory in Revelation 1:13 - 17 (that caused John to faint dead away) and He adds I am the one who died and came back to life. If you want proof I am God, remember I was dead and then rose back into life. This church is living in a culture that said Jesus wasn't God and while He may have been a great teacher, they didn't believe He was God. Jesus starts by stating the obvious, while others may claim to be God. By rising from the dead I have proved that I am God for their Caesars certainly didn't rise from the dead to back up their claims.

Second, look at how Jesus comments about their situation (verse 9) and says I know your afflictions; Jesus hasn't missed a thing that they have been going through. He has seen each tear, each trial and each struggle; He hasn't missed a thing. What has been going on? The city saw their identity as flowing from the fact that they were the number 1 city in the world when it came to Emperor Worship. A number of times each year all the citizens, (especially those involved in the trades,) would line up at the Emperor's temple and offer their allegiance to the Emperor by saying out loud, *"There is no other god but Caesar."* If you proclaimed that you received a certificate that you would hand in when you applied for a job. If you didn't have the certificate you couldn't get work; Christians believed there was only 1 God - Jesus couldn't get work.

The result is that when Jesus describes their poverty He uses the term 'abject poverty - having nothing.' When the word got out that they were Christ followers, their *"affliction"* - (another word for persecution or pressure *'thlipsis'*) literally meant *'to have the life squeezed out of you like juice is squeezed out of a grape.'* It would seem that the Jews in the city were very anti-Christian and were being used as 'tools of Satan.' Jesus looked at the church in Smyrna and said, *"I know that because of your faith, you have lost your jobs, are financially barely making it and you are always looking over your shoulder wonder who will be the next to be carted off to jail, to be beaten if not killed and because of your Spiritual Faith in Me, you are feeling like your life is almost unbearable."* In a city with astounding affluence, they were starving, beaten and meeting in secret in order to follow their Jesus.

#### **i. The Question being Asked?**

I bet was being asked was, *"Why do Bad things happen to Good People (faithful followers of Jesus)?"* If I had been in that church, struggling to feed my family, unable to get work and wondering if I would simply disappear one night and die on a cross out behind the jail, I am afraid I would be asking that question, *"Jesus where are you? Why haven't you stopped this persecution?"*

Look at Jesus' comments in verse 10, *"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."*

He does not state some things we know about suffering like (i) some tough stuff may enter our lives to cause us to re-evaluate how we are living (I Corinthians 11:30 – 32; drinking the wine at communion in an unworthy way), (ii) some tough stuff may keep our ego's in line (II Corinthians 12:7; Paul's thorn in the flesh kept him from become to proud) or (iii) some tough stuff may happen so others may see Jesus at work in our lives during the hard times and through that find Jesus themselves (Acts 9:16).

Instead, Jesus says:

(i) Don't be afraid. When our kids were little there were a few times when they were really ill with Measles or Chicken Pox and as a dad, I saw them suffering and I wished I could snap my fingers and make it all go away. (I think God must feel that way as He watching His people suffer and are persecuted.) As I sat on their beds and hear them ask, *"Why am I sick daddy?"* I could tell them that they are sick because of bacteria in the air or I could tell them that sickness happens because sin entered our world; but that is not what they wanted to hear. Sometimes the question isn't really the question. What they wanted to know was that I would be there with them during the tough stuff, that the pain would go away and that things will be alright in the end.

With that in mind, look at Jesus' response to the Smyrna Christians. Do not be afraid (I will be with you through it all and I am going nowhere.) There will be some more persecution (10 days – Message says 'a short period of time') but it won't last for ever. Be faithful to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life. Remember for the Christian, death isn't fatal; for it is not the end as He would give them the crown of eternal life. Jesus tells this amazing church that He will walk with them, He will not forsake them and therefore, they need hang in there and trust Him.

## **ii. The Challenge from Christian History**

This past week I started reading stories of how the Christians were persecuted around the time of John. From early in the 1st century to the end of the 3rd century, our Christian forefathers and mothers died after being dipped in wax and used to light the games in the coliseum as other Christians were ripped apart by lions, run over by chariots, sealed inside caves to starve, crucified, burnt alive, beheaded, imprisoned and tortured by the hundreds of thousands. Each one of those folks were no different than you or I, they had the same dreams for life, their children, their future and had the same fear of pain but knew that they would be able to stand strong in their faith to the end. They did as has been said, the blood of the martyrs have often been the seeds from which the church has grown. Let me add on more sobering fact. More Christians die each year today than in those who died in the coliseums of Rome. Many claim that each year, over 136,000 Christians die for their faith.

The cross in our Prayer Room was carved from the remains of a charred pew on a church which was burnt down when it was full of Christian women and children which is why there are the outstretched hands on it.

Wang Ming Dao was a Chinese pastor who had been led to Christ by another Chinese. At the time of the Communist takeover, he was pasturing the largest church in what was then Peking. He was tolerated for a couple of years then thrown into prison by the Communists because of this testimony and ministry. While in prison, under torture, afraid of even more severe suffering, Wang Ming Dao recanted his faith and was therefore released by the

authorities. In the days and weeks that followed, Wang Ming Dao was seen wandering the streets of the city, weeping and mumbling, "I am Judas! I have betrayed my Lord!"

Unable to bear his shame any longer, he went to the authorities, confessed his faith in Christ and asked to be placed back into prison. The authorities complied with his request and he was imprisoned for twenty-seven more years! When released once again, at the end of his life, Wang Ming Dao was considered by the Chinese church as a hero of the faith he once recanted.

When I read of what my brothers and sisters lived through in Smyrna and when I place in beside the story of Wang Ming Dao it causes me to:

(i) begin to re-evaluate my commitment to Jesus.

I have met people from India, who have been beaten with rods for their faith – I have seen the scars on their backs. I have talked to Christians who spent years in the gulag camps in Siberia for telling their kids about Jesus in Communist Russia and when I read reports from what has happened recently in Nigeria, (Voice of Martyrs - <http://www.persecution.net/countryreports.htm>) it grabs my heart and causes me to pray for those who are right now living out what we read about in Revelation 2 in Smyrna. It also causes me to ask what my response would be like if I was placed in the position that others have had to go through. I pray I would respond with full confidence and courage because I know Jesus will walk with me. I need to ask, in a country where I have such freedom to live out my faith, am I living with the boldness that God would ask me to live it out?

(ii) It reminds me that we are richer than we think.

About 50-60 years after this letter was penned, some of the Jews on a festival day cried out to seize the Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna (Polycarp grew up in this city during the time Revelation 2 was being written.) He was to be given a choice to worship Caesar by calling him Lord or die. They cried out, "*This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of the gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship.*"

Polycarp then gave his famous response, "*Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? I fear not the fire that burns for a season. Come, do your will.*" As they began burning him at the stake, he prayed, "*I thank You, O God, that You have graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of Your Christ.*"

Here, in Smyrna, was this small group of Christians who thought they were barely hanging on to their faith in the middle of terrible persecution (verse 11.) What they missed was not only (i) did Jesus promise to walk with them no matter what they would walk through, but (ii) their testimony still is igniting passion in persecuted people around the world who read this passage and say, "*If they can do it so can I.*" This church should encourage our church to live out our faith with more passion and boldness, shouldn't it?

<p>For information about Brentview Baptist Church and its ministries, please contact the church office at: 3512 Charleswood Dr NW, Calgary, AB T2L 2C3 Phone: 403.284.4691 Fax: 403.284.0132 mail@brentviewbaptist.com www.brentviewbaptist.com</p>
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Agora (market place) with its marble pillars, internal water systems and 3 stories of shopping which cover a huge area! It was also a city known as the Center of Emperor worship. They were the first city to build a huge temple to the Emperor, whom they saw as being a god; in John's time, the Emperor being worshipped in this city was Domitian.

With that in mind turn to Revelations 2:8 - 11. First, look at how Jesus describes himself in verse 8, *"These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again."* In a city whose claim to fame was that they worshipped the Roman Emperors as gods (for example, Nero called himself the 'the Almighty God' & 'Saviour.') Jesus began by saying let me introduce myself. I am He was the First and the Last. He is saying, *"Let me set the record straight, I am the one and only true God who was alive from the beginning of time and who will be there throughout all time. No matter what Caesar says (or the priests in the temple on the hill say,) only I am the true God."*

As it was read, I am sure they remembered what Isaiah 44:6 says, *"I am the First and the Last, (and then Isaiah added this line,) and there is no other God besides me"*. Remember, the person saying this is the Jesus that was just described in all His glory in Revelation 1:13 - 17 (that caused John to faint dead away) and He adds I am the one who died and came back to life. If you want proof I am God, remember I was dead and then rose back into life. This church is living in a culture that said Jesus wasn't God and while He may have been a great teacher, they didn't believe He was God. Jesus starts by stating the obvious, while others may claim to be God. By rising from the dead I have proved that I am God for their Caesars certainly didn't rise from the dead to back up their claims.

Second, look at how Jesus comments about their situation (verse 9) and says I know your afflictions; Jesus hasn't missed a thing that they have been going through. He has seen each tear, each trial and each struggle; He hasn't missed a thing. What has been going on? The city saw their identity as flowing from the fact that they were the number 1 city in the world when it came to Emperor Worship. A number of times each year all the citizens, (especially those involved in the trades,) would line up at the Emperor's temple and offer their allegiance to the Emperor by saying out loud, *"There is no other god but Caesar."* If you proclaimed that you received a certificate that you would hand in when you applied for a job. If you didn't have the certificate you couldn't get work; Christians believed there was only 1 God - Jesus couldn't get work.

The result is that when Jesus describes their poverty He uses the term 'abject poverty - having nothing.' When the word got out that they were Christ followers, their *"affliction"* - (another word for persecution or pressure *'thlipsis'*) literally meant *'to have the life squeezed out of you like juice is squeezed out of a grape.'* It would seem that the Jews in the city were very anti-Christian and were being used as 'tools of Satan.' Jesus looked at the church in Smyrna and said, *"I know that because of your faith, you have lost your jobs, are financially barely making it and you are always looking over your shoulder wonder who will be the next to be carted off to jail, to be beaten if not killed and because of your Spiritual Faith in Me, you are feeling like your life is almost unbearable."* In a city with astounding affluence, they were starving, beaten and meeting in secret in order to follow their Jesus.

#### **i. The Question being Asked?**

I bet was being asked was, *"Why do Bad things happen to Good People (faithful followers of Jesus)?"* If I had been in that church, struggling to feed my family, unable to get work and wondering if I would simply disappear one night and die on a cross out behind the jail, I am afraid I would be asking that question, *"Jesus where are you? Why haven't you stopped this persecution?"*

Look at Jesus' comments in verse 10, *"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."*

He does not state some things we know about suffering like (i) some tough stuff may enter our lives to cause us to re-evaluate how we are living (I Corinthians 11:30 – 32; drinking the wine at communion in an unworthy way), (ii) some tough stuff may keep our ego's in line (II Corinthians 12:7; Paul's thorn in the flesh kept him from become to proud) or (iii) some tough stuff may happen so others may see Jesus at work in our lives during the hard times and through that find Jesus themselves (Acts 9:16).

Instead, Jesus says:

(i) Don't be afraid. When our kids were little there were a few times when they were really ill with Measles or Chicken Pox and as a dad, I saw them suffering and I wished I could snap my fingers and make it all go away. (I think God must feel that way as He watching His people suffer and are persecuted.) As I sat on their beds and hear them ask, *"Why am I sick daddy?"* I could tell them that they are sick because of bacteria in the air or I could tell them that sickness happens because sin entered our world; but that is not what they wanted to hear. Sometimes the question isn't really the question. What they wanted to know was that I would be there with them during the tough stuff, that the pain would go away and that things will be alright in the end.

With that in mind, look at Jesus' response to the Smyrna Christians. Do not be afraid (I will be with you through it all and I am going nowhere.) There will be some more persecution (10 days – Message says 'a short period of time') but it won't last for ever. Be faithful to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life. Remember for the Christian, death isn't fatal; for it is not the end as He would give them the crown of eternal life. Jesus tells this amazing church that He will walk with them, He will not forsake them and therefore, they need hang in there and trust Him.

## **ii. The Challenge from Christian History**

This past week I started reading stories of how the Christians were persecuted around the time of John. From early in the 1st century to the end of the 3rd century, our Christian forefathers and mothers died after being dipped in wax and used to light the games in the coliseum as other Christians were ripped apart by lions, run over by chariots, sealed inside caves to starve, crucified, burnt alive, beheaded, imprisoned and tortured by the hundreds of thousands. Each one of those folks were no different than you or I, they had the same dreams for life, their children, their future and had the same fear of pain but knew that they would be able to stand strong in their faith to the end. They did as has been said, the blood of the martyrs have often been the seeds from which the church has grown. Let me add on more sobering fact. More Christians die each year today than in those who died in the coliseums of Rome. Many claim that each year, over 136,000 Christians die for their faith.

The cross in our Prayer Room was carved from the remains of a charred pew on a church which was burnt down when it was full of Christian women and children which is why there are the outstretched hands on it.

Wang Ming Dao was a Chinese pastor who had been led to Christ by another Chinese. At the time of the Communist takeover, he was pasturing the largest church in what was then Peking. He was tolerated for a couple of years then thrown into prison by the Communists because of this testimony and ministry. While in prison, under torture, afraid of even more severe suffering, Wang Ming Dao recanted his faith and was therefore released by the

authorities. In the days and weeks that followed, Wang Ming Dao was seen wandering the streets of the city, weeping and mumbling, "I am Judas! I have betrayed my Lord!"

Unable to bear his shame any longer, he went to the authorities, confessed his faith in Christ and asked to be placed back into prison. The authorities complied with his request and he was imprisoned for twenty-seven more years! When released once again, at the end of his life, Wang Ming Dao was considered by the Chinese church as a hero of the faith he once recanted.

When I read of what my brothers and sisters lived through in Smyrna and when I place in beside the story of Wang Ming Dao it causes me to:

(i) begin to re-evaluate my commitment to Jesus.

I have met people from India, who have been beaten with rods for their faith – I have seen the scars on their backs. I have talked to Christians who spent years in the gulag camps in Siberia for telling their kids about Jesus in Communist Russia and when I read reports from what has happened recently in Nigeria, (Voice of Martyrs - <http://www.persecution.net/countryreports.htm>) it grabs my heart and causes me to pray for those who are right now living out what we read about in Revelation 2 in Smyrna. It also causes me to ask what my response would be like if I was placed in the position that others have had to go through. I pray I would respond with full confidence and courage because I know Jesus will walk with me. I need to ask, in a country where I have such freedom to live out my faith, am I living with the boldness that God would ask me to live it out?

(ii) It reminds me that we are richer than we think.

About 50-60 years after this letter was penned, some of the Jews on a festival day cried out to seize the Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna (Polycarp grew up in this city during the time Revelation 2 was being written.) He was to be given a choice to worship Caesar by calling him Lord or die. They cried out, "*This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of the gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship.*"

Polycarp then gave his famous response, "*Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? I fear not the fire that burns for a season. Come, do your will.*" As they began burning him at the stake, he prayed, "*I thank You, O God, that You have graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of Your Christ.*"

Here, in Smyrna, was this small group of Christians who thought they were barely hanging on to their faith in the middle of terrible persecution (verse 11.) What they missed was not only (i) did Jesus promise to walk with them no matter what they would walk through, but (ii) their testimony still is igniting passion in persecuted people around the world who read this passage and say, "*If they can do it so can I.*" This church should encourage our church to live out our faith with more passion and boldness, shouldn't it?

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This morning we are beginning a new series entitled, “*You’ve Got Mail*,” where we will be taking a look at God’s conversation with 7 specific churches found in Revelation 2 & 3. I am sure most of you have seen the movie, “*You’ve Got Mail*”. It is about a man and a woman, who have never met correspond by email, finally meet and fall in love. The movie came out when email was just becoming popular and it was fascinating to look over Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan’s shoulder and read the correspondence between the two of them.

We want to do that in this series using pictures and insights that Kathy and I found as we visited each of these cities, some digging I have been doing historically as well as looking at what the Word says. In this, I think we will find some important insights about how God would have us live as a Church and as individual today. What I have found fascinating is how the city and the circumstances in which these churches resided had a profound impact on each church, to the point that the culture and philosophy of their cities had a profound influence on how each church functioned. And because of that I think these churches will have a lot to teach us as we live in the middle of our city at this particular time in history.

This morning I want to do two things; first I want to give you the context in which these seven letters were written and then I want to pick one of the churches (Smyrna) and see what we can learn from reading its mail.

## **I. Introduction to the Book**

### **A. Patmos & The Cave**

The book of Revelation was written on the Isle of Patmos. For Kathy and I, it is hard to express the excitement we felt as we approached the Isle of Patmos after a 3 hour boat ride from the coast of Turkey. As you approach the Island the first thing you see high on the hill is the Monastery of St. John. Your first impression as you enter the harbour is that it is a beautiful place but as you start climbing the hills you find that it is rocky, dry and a pretty desolate island – that was especially true when John arrived there in 94/95 AD. However, it was on that island in a cave that God gave John a Revelation of himself. Today, you can enter through this door and then go down into the exact cave where John had this encounter with the risen Christ. I need to tell you that unlike many other ‘holy sights’ that the Greek Orthodox Church oversees, this cave was sparsely decorated and had a feeling of reverence. There in the quietness, I was struck by a palpable presence of God – it was quite an experience. On top of the cave, a monastery was built in the 11th century. This was where we had the honour of having lunch with the under-abbot of the monastery. We asked a monk, “*Why did you choose to become a monk?*” And he responded, “*I didn’t choose to become a monk; it was simply responding to the gracious invitation of my God.*” Following lunch, we were privileged to join the monks in an hour long Greek Orthodox Prayer Service.

### **B. The Book**

Revelations is a unique book:

(i) Revelations is full of amazing images of dragons, wars, martyrs and various views of God. So many people want to use the book in which they are able to break secret codes about the end times. In doing that I think they miss that fact that because Revelations is written in poetry form, the point is not to give you information or facts but rather (just like other poetry) it is written to give to paint pictures, to give you an experience of standing in the middle of all that God is about to do. The point of the book is that no matter what we face in life, in the End, God wins and we win with him.

(ii) It is the last book in the Bible. Of the 404 verses in the book of Revelations, there are over 518 references to Old Testament Bible verses. And while you don't find John quoting whole verses, it is obvious that the God used Old Testament words and ideas throughout the whole book. This means that reading the book of Revelations without reading the Old Testament first is like reading the last chapter of a book and expecting to get the full impact of those last words.

(iii) It has been written for people who are living in the 'Middle' of time. Revelation readers know that God created all things in the beginning and they are being told that in the end God will win and make all things good again. But, as we will see, they are still forced to live through tough things in their daily life. WE can relate! Although we know God will make sure we are eternally fine, it is today, in the middle of all we are doing that we need His help.

(iv) John is a pastor. While Jesus told him what to write, to miss that it is written to churches John loves through the heart of their pastor is to miss its beauty.

(v) It was written to 7 churches, some famous –some not, who are churches in Asia that are listed in order of where they appear on a common Roman mail route. They are 7 churches for whom John was their area minister. So when Jesus gave a word for them it excited him.

### **C. John & The Letter**

Turn to Revelation 1:1, 4. The John mentioned here is John, one of the 12 disciples, one of the 2 sons of Zebedee, the fisherman brother to James, one of the inner circle of 3, the one who stood with Jesus at the cross, the one who took care of Mary, Jesus' mother and the one whom upon entering the tomb on the first Easter, saw and believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. John went on to be an evangelist, pastoring the church in Ephesus and eventually was the 'overseer' of the churches in Asia. All his life he kept preaching, teaching, leading churches and being a faithful Christ follower telling others about Jesus.

Now, approximately 60 years later, John is the last living disciple as all the others have been martyred. Under Emperor Domitian, John is exiled to the barren prison colony on the Isle of Patmos. While it was hard being a prisoner of this island, harder yet was the fact that he kept hearing reports of things that are happening in the churches that he was involved in, which didn't sound very good. Because of that, one Sunday John slipped into a cave entrance on the Isle of Patmos and listen to what happened. (Revelation 1:9 – 19) As John kneels in the cave in prayer, all of a sudden behind him he hears a voice blaring and echoing off the cave walls which say in verse 11, *"Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."*

Of course he turned around to see who was speaking and saw 7 huge Golden candle standards (representing the 7 churches from Asia). As he attempted to focus his eyes because of the pulsating bright light, he saw someone who looked kind of like the Son of Man (what they called Jesus). It looked like the Jesus he knew back in Jerusalem 60 years ago BUT He is wearing a long white robe with a golden sash across it (it was the vestments of a Priest – for you remember Jesus was said to be our high Priest on God's right hand in Heaven). His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow (He glows with purity). His eyes were like blazing fire (as if He could see right through him). His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace (purest metal that is unmovable and strong). And His voice was like the sound of rushing waters (it was like the reverberating power that seems to spray off 10 foot breakers that cause you to stand back in fear). In His hands, He held 7 stars (He had the 7

main planets they could see in their day in the palm of His hand). Out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword (His ability to tell truth from lies) and His face shone like the sun brilliance. Verse 17 says as he took in this picture of Jesus and John fainted dead away. Can you imagine what it would be like to see Jesus standing a few feet away from you like that? How would you react? Probably just like John did! Jesus reached over gently placed His hand on John and said in verse 17, *"Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last."*

Stop here. One of the problems with how people have looked at the book of Revelations is that they get caught up in the details that they miss the experience God is trying to pour into their spirit as they read it. Place yourself in John's position. He was the last living disciple in his late 80's having served Jesus all his life and now cold, hungry and forced to work hard for his keep abandoned on this desolate island. He is wondering why he is still alive and maybe after hearing of the some of the messes his churches are in, wondering if it has all been worth. Then Jesus appears. Only he is so much more glorious, wonderful and powerful than he could have imagined and yet: (i) He came to meet John in the cave (in the middle of his questioning/ struggling for answers); (ii) He reached out and touched him in His usual gentle way (personally sitting with him) and (iii) Jesus' presence brought hope afresh to his soul.

Maybe you are in a place where things haven't been working out just as you planned, people have let you down, it seems like your needs aren't being meet and you feel alone and discouraged. If that is how you feel, then today, step into the poem of Revelations. Picture being in the cave with John, feel Jesus' touch and let Him remind you that He is still King of the Universe, the risen Lord and your Saviour. That is why He wanted John to write this down so when you read it and remember, *"Oh yeah! Jesus promises that in the end we win with Him. And in the Middle of the things of life, I am not alone!"*

Jesus says in verse 19, *"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later."* John's job was to write down what Jesus told about future things and about the 7 lampstands which represent the 7 churches who give light to the world. Whether or not they feel it, Jesus is always standing right in the midst of every church. In a prayer meeting, Youth event, Hub gathering, Congregation meeting and gossip in the corner of the Foyer that Jesus is present and listening; He doesn't miss much!

As we look at each church we will see a similar pattern occur: (i) Jesus describes Himself in ways that relate directly to the need of the individual church; (ii) He will say, *"I know what is going on in your church,"* and (iii) He will tell the church what they need. I believe that we could probably find churches exactly like these 7 churches in our world today. There is probably a little of each of these churches in Brentview as well. So let's go on a journey over these next few weeks looking at these 7 churches. Due to time, I picked the church at Smyrna to look at for the remaining few minutes today.

## **II. You've Got Mail...Smyrna**

### **A. The Situation**

Smyrna (modern name Izmir) was one of my favourite places that I visited in Turkey. It is a beautiful port city situated 35 miles North of Ephesus and has over 100,000 inhabitants. On its money was the slogan, *"The 1st in Asia in Size and Beauty."* It was known for its great harbour and it's manufacturing of the spice, Myrrh for perfumes. Today, you can still walk on one of its old city walls. It is still a city that has its old shops, street bazaars and ladies making rugs. But you need to know that back in John's time; the city was so wealthy that it had its own West Edmonton Mall. Right in the middle of this modern city they have uncovered this huge

Agora (market place) with its marble pillars, internal water systems and 3 stories of shopping which cover a huge area! It was also a city known as the Center of Emperor worship. They were the first city to build a huge temple to the Emperor, whom they saw as being a god; in John's time, the Emperor being worshipped in this city was Domitian.

With that in mind turn to Revelations 2:8 - 11. First, look at how Jesus describes himself in verse 8, *"These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again."* In a city whose claim to fame was that they worshipped the Roman Emperors as gods (for example, Nero called himself the 'the Almighty God' & 'Saviour.')

Jesus began by saying let me introduce myself. I am He was the First and the Last. He is saying, *"Let me set the record straight, I am the one and only true God who was alive from the beginning of time and who will be there throughout all time. No matter what Caesar says (or the priests in the temple on the hill say,) only I am the true God."*

As it was read, I am sure they remembered what Isaiah 44:6 says, *"I am the First and the Last, (and then Isaiah added this line,) and there is no other God besides me"*. Remember, the person saying this is the Jesus that was just described in all His glory in Revelation 1:13 - 17 (that caused John to faint dead away) and He adds I am the one who died and came back to life. If you want proof I am God, remember I was dead and then rose back into life. This church is living in a culture that said Jesus wasn't God and while He may have been a great teacher, they didn't believe He was God. Jesus starts by stating the obvious, while others may claim to be God. By rising from the dead I have proved that I am God for their Caesars certainly didn't rise from the dead to back up their claims.

Second, look at how Jesus comments about their situation (verse 9) and says I know your afflictions; Jesus hasn't missed a thing that they have been going through. He has seen each tear, each trial and each struggle; He hasn't missed a thing. What has been going on? The city saw their identity as flowing from the fact that they were the number 1 city in the world when it came to Emperor Worship. A number of times each year all the citizens, (especially those involved in the trades,) would line up at the Emperor's temple and offer their allegiance to the Emperor by saying out loud, *"There is no other god but Caesar."* If you proclaimed that you received a certificate that you would hand in when you applied for a job. If you didn't have the certificate you couldn't get work; Christians believed there was only 1 God - Jesus couldn't get work.

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