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Continuing the sermon series for this Easter season...started last week on the book of Revelation and the message to the seven churches...we look at the second church this morning...from the book of Revelation, chapter 2, verses 8 to 11...listen for God speaking...

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

“I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich.

I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not,  
but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer.

Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison  
so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction.

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.”

The Word of the Lord...**Thanks Be to God!**

***KEEP THE FAITH***

Last week John preached on the passage immediately preceding today’s verses...the message to the church at Ephesus...the church that while they might be theologically correct they were missing a very important piece...the ability to love. So the question was asked...how do we maintain our passion and service?

This week we’re talking about the church at Smyrna, which one commentary notes – “unlike the church at Ephesus, Smyrna has no tragic flaw.” Now I wasn’t here to hear John’s message to you last week but I would argue that one way we maintain our passion and service in the world is by “keeping the faith”. And that’s a big part of the message to the church at Smyrna...“they face problems that could send them into a downward spiral unless they remain faithful.” So the question remains...how can the church at Smyrna keep the faith and perhaps much more important...is how can we? But first things first...before I get ahead of myself...let’s talk about the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation...it’s a book full of mysteries. Some find the book the strangest in the New Testament. Perhaps that’s because of the symbolism...“The messages to the seven churches, the seven seal judgments, the seven trumpet judgments, and finally, the seven bowl judgments...The number seven appears to have a special significance. There are seven churches symbolized by seven lampstands...seven angels symbolized by seven stars...seven spirits before the throne of God...seven horns and seven eyes...the judgment scroll has seven seals...the seventh seal unleashes seven "trumpet judgments," which are heralded by seven angels...the seventh trumpet unleashes seven "bowl judgments," where the bowls of God's wrath are poured out by seven angels...there are seven mysterious thunders about which John is not permitted to say anything...7,000 people are killed in an earthquake...the dragon has seven heads and seven diadems on his heads...and the beast from the sea has seven heads.” (Wikipedia!) You get the picture!

Then we have a colorful cast of characters...the "Lamb," is a hero of magnificent proportions. Almost as impressive is the antagonist, Satan, an archvillain who is also known as the "dragon." There are various other characters, both good and bad...the archangel Michael, the beast from the land, the beast from the sea, the woman clothed with the sun, the great harlot, and the angel who leads John through the vision. The book packs so many symbols and obscure details that it often makes the readers even more perplexed. It's perhaps the most intimidating book in the Bible.

So where to begin? Revelation was written about 60 years after Jesus' death. It was not intended to be the "last book in the Bible" but instead a letter to Christians that John knew and for whom he felt a pastoral responsibility." (Interpretation - Boring, 5). It was written to be read aloud in the worship services of the churches. One commentary poses that Revelation was written to answer the pressing questions of the day...such as:

- Was Jesus coming back as promised?
- Where did he go?
- To do what?
- Why didn't he return immediately?

The church that the writer John was speaking to "was in a transitional and vulnerable situation, trying to find its way forward in the generation between the death of its apostolic leaders and the emergence of a firm structure and sense of self-identity" (Interpretation - Boring, 9). They were asking the question...what it meant to be a Christian, to try to follow Jesus as Lord, in such a place or time. Isn't it amazing and a bit sad at the same time that some might argue that not much has changed between 60 AD and 2010?

Revelation was written like other Jewish apocalyptic books of the same time, symbolically picturing the ultimate destruction of evil and the triumph of good. There have been countless commentaries written on what the prophecies in Revelation mean. Yet the ordinary men and women in these churches in the first century didn't need a pile of commentaries or find it necessary to have study groups to discuss the meaning of the letter. Every generation since the first century has come up with different interpretations of the prophecies in Revelation. But whether you believe that the predictions in Revelation have not yet been fulfilled or that the events prophesied in code took place during the Roman empire or perhaps throughout these past 2000 years...I believe that these words can speak volumes to us TODAY! "The issue for them (and for us) was not what the book meant, which was transparent for them in their situation, but whether or not they would respond to its call to the kind of faithfulness advocated by John, even to the point of dying for the faith" (Interpretation - Boring, 47).

So what can we learn about the church in Smyrna from John's letter to them?

*"I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich.*

Okay...even though they are financially poor they are spiritually rich.

*Do not fear what you are about to suffer.*

Okay...they are going to suffer...and we even know for how long...

*Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison  
so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction.*

But if they keep the faith...if they are able to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches...

*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

*...Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death."*

If they keep the faith...they will receive eternal life

So what's the church at Smyrna missing? What's their missing piece? We know that even though they are financially poor they are spiritually rich...but still they're being tested. John pleads with them to remain steadfast in the face of societal pressure. What about us today? How do we stand firm when it seems like everything is against us? We're in the midst of finalizing our summer staff at Skyline and one of the questions we ask each applicant is "tell us of a time when you took a stand for something that was unpopular?" This helps us to learn a bit more about each potential applicant. And it makes them squirm a bit! It's a very useful tool!

The answers have been rather interesting...they've ranged from the issue of abortion and homosexuality...to standing up for a classmate who was being bullied...to a political discussion in class. But what these young adults had in common was that they believed so strongly about what it was that they were taking a stand for that even in the face of being ridiculed or bullied or getting a lower grade... they remained steadfast in their commitment to what they believed to be true and important. What do you believe to be true and important? It's not an easy question to answer. In today's society that encourages people to want more and want it now...in today's society where violence is so prevalent...how can we not only keep the faith but share the good news? It seems impossible at times, especially if we try to do it alone. But there's the good news...we don't have to do it alone.

I would argue that as Christians one way we can remain steadfast in the face of societal pressure is to come together as a community of faith, as a community of believers and work to make a difference in our communities. There's no doubt that we are called to be faithful witnesses.

So...riddle me this...What do Camp Hosanna, the Alcott Tutors, Skyline, the FAR Conservatory, the Filmer Foundation, New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church and the Kirk in the Hills have in common? Well if you answered that, they are all a part of what we at FPC call our Pontiac Shared Partnership; you would be correct! As the body of Christ connected with one another, this group of faithful witnesses are reaching out in Christ's love in Pontiac. Why? Because we know that together we can do far more than we could ever do alone. Why? Because we're called to be in community with one another. Why? Because we are called by our God to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. Why? Because we're called to love our neighbors as ourselves...even if our neighbors don't live right across the street...but across town. So what is Pontiac Shared Partnership?

Camp Hosanna is a three week summer program for 60 Pontiac children entering grades 2-6 designed to boost reading and writing skills and provide Christian education and character development. We here at FPC partner with New Bethel Missionary Baptist and the Kirk in the Hills to provide volunteers and funding for the camp. The camp is held at New Bethel, and we are pleased to have with us this morning the New Bethel Anointed Vessels Mime group.

Each year for the last three years, Skyline has provided scholarships for at least ten students from Alcott Elementary School in Pontiac to attend camp. It's been a blessing for Skyline to work with Alcott to identify these campers and help them enjoy their childhood by experiencing God's love and creation while at Skyline.

A Filmer Foundation grant has provided funds for Alcott that also provide for FAR to partner by offering music and art therapy each week at Alcott in addition to field trips and a young author's day that would not otherwise be possible. And about forty tutors – volunteers from this church -- work one on one with Alcott students to improve reading and writing skills. This is a huge ministry...and a wonderful way for us to be able to keep the faith together and be a faithful witness.

One scholar noted that the audience that was hearing this in Smyrna, "needed faith that, no matter how things looked, God was in charge of history and good would ultimately triumph." And just as the

persecuted Christians who first received this book needed to hear that word of encouragement and hope... in this day and age...so do we! The evangelist John if he had made this letter to Smyrna a bit longer might have encouraged its members to continue worshipping together, serving their Lord, sharing the Gospel. That message holds true for us today too. The church should be the setting where the Spirit speaks and the power of God is at work. That's what we should be striving for. Even amidst all the external conflicts and internal tensions...can we continue to be faithful witnesses? That is our call. That is why we strive to keep the faith...this day and every day. And one of the best ways to do that is in community...in shared ministry...so friends...keep the faith!