

Revelation 3: 1 - 6(pew Bible page 94)
Sardis and the Call to Waken the Sleeping Giant

One of the foremost Christian thinkers today is a man named Brian McLaren, from Washington DC. He recently published a book called *Everything Must Change* – powerful title. Book begins with a story about a trip to Burundi in 1995 with his family – a mission trip. He is at worship in Burundi on the border of Rwanda, the site of the most horrific genocide of the 1990’s. The preacher is preaching to a group of pastor’s– “how many of you have preached that we are to love our neighbors, even if they are from another tribe?” Only two hands in a room of many tens of pastors go up? The preacher continues, “We are preaching the same sermons the missionaries taught us, and the missionaries taught us how to get to heaven, and that is good. But they did not teach us how to participate in the will of God on earth.”

Brian knows what anyone who has been to the third world knows – that they have faith to move mountains but they are living in hell. So the message preached is important. It matters. Brian then begins to see parallels between what he sees in Africa and what he sees at his church in D.C. – “I thought to myself,” he writes, “This is not just an African problem.”¹

The book *Everything Must Change* is an attempt to wake the church up. To move the church beyond trivialities. In the estimation of many, the church has been asleep far too long. Brian was startled awake. Today I find myself wondering how much of the church, near and far, remains asleep. How do you wake a sleeping giant?

Today we continue our series on Revelation – and what Revelation might be saying to the church today, in 2010. Revelation you may recall begins not with fantasy creatures like dragons. Nor does it begin with plagues and terror. Instead it begins with a message to seven churches – a message to seven churches throughout what is now modern day Turkey.

Revelation was written by John of Patmos at around the turn of the first century – at around 100 AD. Four weeks ago as I began my study of Revelation and as I began these sermons, I wrote, “I do not think, as a student of scripture or as your pastor, that anything in Revelation is set in stone. I am not a dispensationalist, I am not a literalist – this book is not an answer book or a book that requires a decoder to predict the future. You will find many on television who think that it is. I disagree.” Revelation to me is equal parts prophecy and description – it is both what will be and what is – it is both tomorrow and today.

I think I would say that Revelation is a helpful guide – one that was never intended to scare us outright. It was designed to get our attention, and that it does. But once it has our attention what do we do?

I for one think we should try to learn from it – for in it are positive and negative examples of who and what we should strive to become as a church in 2010. My last sermon on the topic was a review of the church at Laodicea – a church that had become lukewarm in its faith. Laodicea was tepid in its witness and Jesus spoke tough words to them through John of Patmos the writer of revelation. Laodicea was told – “Be hot, be

¹ McLaren page 20.

cold, be anything but lukewarm.” Could the church need the same lesson today – could we deserve the same warning?

My answer was yes – especially in light of a record 70,000 person membership loss in the PC(USA) in 2008 alone. It is time we either made ice cream or put the half and half on the stove – but just sitting and doing the same things over and over and over again was not an option for Laodicea’s church and held that it was not an option for us either.

This brings us to the church at Sardis. It is asleep – and Jesus is demand that it wake up.

Now let’s give Jesus his due – this is a common challenge he faces – keeping people awake. This may be the only activity that Jesus and I hold in common. Jesus is constantly telling his hearers – be alert, stay up, you don’t want to miss the bridegroom when he returns home or the banquet when it starts (Matthew 24, 25). The night before his arrest he scolds the disciples – will not one of you stay awake with me (Matthew 26)? But they are asleep. It is so easy to fall asleep, isn’t it? It is usually a sign of health. But spiritually it can be a metaphor for inaction and complacency. If indeed the church is asleep, I have to keep coming back to the question, how do you wake a sleeping giant?

I remember many years ago at my in-laws home in Connecticut when my then three year old nephew was playing a game with my father in law. My father in law would pretend to be asleep, snoring loudly. The child would approach from the side, a huge smile on his face – creeping, moving so slowly until he was right beside the reclining chair. “Wake up Grandad!” the boy would scream and my father in law would pretend to be startled awake and they would laugh and then the game would be reset.

An hour or so later the game went downhill in a hurry. As grandfathers do, Grandad had actually fallen asleep in the chair. It wasn’t so cute this time though when the creeping child shouted “Wake up Grandad!” Startled Grandad fell out of the chair halfway and sent the child away. It is not so funny, is it, to be awakened with a fright?

Sleep requires some satisfaction, some stasis, some sense of safety, correct? The nights I am unable to sleep are usually the nights when I am not sick, the nights when my mind is at peace, the nights when I am satisfied with has been done and satisfied with my preparation for what is coming tomorrow. Sound sleep requires a sense of peace and a sense of security – it is hard to fall asleep if we are laying and wondering, are the doors locked?

No one likes their security disrupted by a rude awakening. No one. Especially when we might have substituted self satisfaction and security for faithfulness. In my experience this is one of the most common spiritual anomalies and it just might be the one the church most commonly suffers from.

This brings us back to Sardis.

Sardis was the proverbial city on a hill – near the center of modern day Turkey – it was thought to be impregnable – it was believed to be invulnerable. A river ran through the city – a river where Gold was panned and sifted – they also exported woven fabrics. Unlike many ancient cities, Sardis was not often besieged. On two occasions though, it was conquered, both times the result of over confidence. The people knew the enemy was coming but they thought they were safe. They were asleep when they should have been awake and preparing.

The verses we read from Revelation are full of contrasting words Zoe- live and Nekros – dead. Jesus tells them that they are alive in name only – a charge that stings! Jesus tells them they are asleep and it is time to wake up.

History – by the writing of Revelation – Sardis, home of one of the original churches is – the home of the temple of Artemis – the 4th largest temple in the ancient world – read: the church was succumbing to idolatry.

Brian Blount, president of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond calls Sardis a place where the witness of the church is a witness façade – they are a church in name only and their passion, their fire, their zeal, their energy is gone. They are sleeping while the kingdom is being built, and Jesus is demanding they arise and start building.²

The words to the church at Sardis, some 2000 years ago bring us back to the basic question – how do we wake a sleeping giant? How do we rouse from slumber a church and a way of being Christian that reached a zenith in 1965? How?

C.S. Lewis had an interesting theory, one that takes the experience of suffering and attempts to make didactic and instructive. In his book *The Problem of Pain* Lewis argues that if we suffering unduly, locked in a spiritual hurricane, then we most likely asleep and God is trying to get our attention. One of his most challenging quotations is precisely this difficult point: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Is it possible, or even likely, that the church is asleep? That the church is self satisfied? Dreaming our way through the status quo?

If the church is sleeping, then Jesus is likely saying to us what he said to Sardis. It is time to wake up. Break into our sleep. Begin to change so we can be awake for the age to come.

It is my opinion that the vexing challenge the church will face in the decades to come is represented in all the changes taking place in media and technology all around us. To be sure we have not seen iChurch nor have we fully integrated video and audio advances into every aspect of our church’s life. But one wonders how long we can avoid the conversation and avoid the challenge to our security?

It is commonly assumed by many that we are in the throws of a new reformation, a new realignment of church life similar to that the church went through in the 1500’s. Back then, Martin Luther became a leader of movement for change – a great wake up call to the larger church that thinking about God, church, and Bible would have to change. What made Luther’s Reformation possible? The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1439. Luther’s ideas benefitted from the great technological invention of his day. The technology available in the culture began to change the very nature of the church itself. It is likely that the same thing is happening to us right now.

Unfortunately, many of our churches, our lovely Presbyterian brothers and sisters are sleeping through it. Secure in the needs of today, they are not preparing for the church of tomorrow. They are under siege, like Sardis, and they are not preparing.

So what do we do? How do we do our part to help the larger church wake up?

One of the common metaphors used when folks talk about restarting our nations economy is the image of turning around an air-craft carrier. Indeed, restarting the church will not be like turning around a jet-ski. It will be more arduous, more time consuming

² Brian Blount, Revelation. This whole section is derived from his scholarship beginning on page 66.

than most of us will have patience for. Changes in the church come slowly. Always have. Always will.

Regardless though, the first step in turning the tide, is setting the alarm clock, proclaiming the urgency, and waking up from the slumber of the age.

In my opinion, it will take a recovery of theological integrity. We will need to relearn and retell the good doctrine of the church. We will need to recover Biblical literacy. We will need to meet the challenge of media and integrate into the life of our churches bringing computers into the classrooms and new technologies into our worship.

We will need to continue our strong record of service and witness for justice?

Of course we will. But in this regard the church has won culture over and most people inside and outside of the church have acknowledged the centrality of service and the importance of community and humanitarian witness. Everyone these days is a fundraiser. Everyone seems required to offer community service. The church has convinced the culture that loving our neighbors is the right thing to do and the right way to live and believe.³

And while the world is better for this, I do not think that the answer for us in 2010 in a marginalized church lies solely in service.

It lies in witness, knowing what we believe, why we believe it, and our willingness to share these beliefs. Our theology is the essential nutrient for spiritual growth. How to wake the sleeping giant? By stating clearly what we believe and who we are as children of God in Jesus Christ.

I recently came across a statement in *Christianity Today* that said this well: “The decreasing lack of interest in core Christian beliefs is due in part to church leaders who chase after relevance over substance – focusing on the *feeling* that something is meaningful rather than the *truth* that something is meaningful.”⁴

Like Brian in Africa all those years ago, I think many of us are aware that the church needs a new sermon. We need to wake up already. Like the people of Sardis we are too secure in where we are. We need to stop the dreaming and get to learning, sharing, and confessing.

The time for slumber is over.

Awake, arise, and discover the truth of God’s amazing love and amazing grace. Ask yourself – what do I want my church to become? What is most important to me about what I believe? What would happen if there were not a church?

It just may be that in avoiding these questions we are avoiding God’s truth all around us. It just may be that the alarm clock is ringing and we are satisfied to hit the snooze. It just may be the time to be alive again.

Amen.

³ This is the conclusion of *Souls in Transition* –page 287.

⁴ This and the previous paragraph – Darren Marks, *Christianity Today*, March 2010, 23-27