

Bucket List

Sermon text: Revelation 2:8-11

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I. Greetings to the church in Smyrna

What's on your "bucket list?" You know what I mean – like the movie that co-starred Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman as two men dealing with terminal cancer. Each of them had a list of things they wanted to do in life before they "kicked the bucket" – before they died. I've shared before that one of the items on my "bucket list" is to hike Bright Angel trail from the south rim of the Grand Canyon to the bottom and back. How about you? Take just a couple of minutes to share with someone near you – preferably someone you don't know very well. What's something that you'd like to see or do or accomplish in this life? (pause)

This morning as we turn our attention to the second of the seven letters to the churches in John's Revelation, we encounter a congregation that was dealing life and death issues. The church in Smyrna was facing eternity. Let's begin by considering the greeting to that church. Specifically, I would like for us to focus on the one who sent the greeting. It was the risen Christ – the one who was and who is and who is to come, the first and the last.

In the closing verses of the first chapter of the Revelation, John describes his vision of the radiant Son of Man, standing among seven gold lampstands that represent the seven churches of Asia Minor – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The resurrected Christ was wearing a bright white robe with a gold sash across the chest. His hair was white as snow and his eyes shown with a fiery brilliance. When he spoke his voice thundered like the sound of many waters and his face was like the sun shining at full force. John paints an awe-inspiring picture with his words. He got a glimpse of eternity.

The only sane response on his part was to fall down on his face in worship before the triumphant Christ, the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. But Jesus called John to his feet and instructed the apostle to write his words to each of the seven churches represented by the seven lampstands. Last week we looked at the Lord's message for the church in Ephesus. This week our study takes us further north along the Mediterranean coast on the ancient Roman postal route to the city of Smyrna.

We learned last week that Ephesus was the leading Roman city in the province of Asia Minor. It was large and vitally important in commerce and politics. If Ephesus was the number one city in that part of the Roman world, then Smyrna was certainly number two. What it lacked in commerce and politics, Smyrna made up for by being the cultural center of the area. The arts flourished. The city's architecture was known throughout the Roman world. For example, in the middle of Smyrna there was a hill and at its crest was a stunning circular portico of dozens and dozens of gleaming marble columns. Even more impressive was the road that led up the hill – it was paved in gold! If you ever wondered where the idea originated of heaven being a place where the streets are paved in gold, it was from the city of Smyrna. The people there were understandably proud of the impressive place they called home. So they gave it the not very humble nickname of "The City Beautiful."

II. Growing in faith in the First and the Last

With its beauty, wealth, and cultural importance, Smyrna's fortunes were highly intertwined with the success of the Roman Empire. Consequently, annual worship of the

emperor was required of the residents there. As you might imagine, this requirement to worship the Roman Caesar was not something that Christians in the city would do, so they were considered unpatriotic outlaws and subject to arrest. Followers of Christ were shunned in the business community. Other people wouldn't buy from them or employ them.

Thus, although the city in which they lived was beautiful and wealthy and important, the people who were the Christian church in Smyrna were despised, poor, and marginalized. They suffered a great deal for being faithful to the Lord. So the risen Christ was not overstating the gravity of the situation when he said, "I know your affliction and your poverty... I know the slander... Do not fear what you are about to suffer... The devil is about to throw some of you in prison..." You see, it was truly a hardship to be a follower of Jesus Christ in the city of Smyrna.

An example from history of the how difficult it was to be a Christian in that place is Polycarp. He became a Christ follower after hearing the teaching of John the apostle – the one who wrote the message to the church in Smyrna. Polycarp committed his life to sharing the Christian message. He may have had a key role in compiling, editing, and publishing the New Testament. He was a bridge between first generation Christians, like John, who knew Jesus personally and those who came to the faith later.

Polycarp became the spiritual leader of the church in Smyrna – its bishop. A persecution of Christians by Roman authorities led to a search for Polycarp. When they found him in a farm house near Smyrna, the elderly bishop greeted those who came to arrest him congenially, served them a meal, and prayed for them. Nevertheless, Polycarp was taken before the city leaders and ordered to deny Christ and worship the Roman emperor. He replied: "Eighty and six years I have served him and he never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? Bring forth what thou wilt."

Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, was sentenced to be burned at the stake on Saturday, February 23, 155 A.D. The only problem was that the flames refused to touch him. Finally, in exasperation, the Roman authorities had the executioner stab Polycarp to death.

You see, Christians in Smyrna paid a price for living out their faith. It was personally, economically, and relationally costly for them to bear the name of Christ. But they persevered in the face of opposition, imprisonment, persecution, and even death. That is why the triumphant Jesus greeted the church in Smyrna with the words of the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the one who is and who was and who is to come. That is why the church in Smyrna is one of two churches in these seven letters about whom the Lord has no criticism. He wanted to reassure them that, in spite of the sufferings they were experiencing, it was important to remain faithful. Jesus wanted them to keep an eternal perspective.

Regardless of the expectations of worldly authorities, regardless of the popular trends of their time, regardless of preferences of the wealthy and influential folk of the city, the word of the first and the last was the ultimate word for the church in Smyrna. Although the beautiful crown of marble columns atop the hill in the center of the city at the end of the street paved in gold seemed to declare that Rome was in charge. Jesus wanted to assure his followers that the crown of thorns he wore was the true sign of eternal victory, the true path to significance. He is the first and the last – the object of Christian faith for now and eternity.

III. Giving ear to what the Spirit is saying

I love the phrase that recurs throughout the seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." Let us give ear to what the Spirit is saying to our church and to each one of us. This word from the first and the

last to the church in Smyrna is also a word to you and to me. While we may not be experiencing poverty and persecution for our faith, we do need to be reminded that Jesus is the first and the last – the one who was and who is and who is to come. In other words, we need to keep the same eternal perspective as the church in Smyrna.

This passage brings us face-to-face with an important truth. Jesus, the eternal Word, through whom everything was created and who now reigns in glory is going to come again. He is the one who is and who was and who is to come. That is a biblical fact. Each one of us will stand before the Lord, whether it is when we die or when Jesus returns. We will all be personally accountable to answer for our lives. So there are several important questions we need to ask ourselves. Are you living your life right now, today in the light of eternity? Are you right in your relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ? Does your life reflect God's purpose and priorities for you? Are your significant interpersonal relationships in order?

In other words, if the first and the last, the one who is and who was and who is to come, were to return today, would you have any regrets? Are there important things that you are leaving undone? Under the bright light of eternity, are there wrongs you need to make right? Are there fences you need to mend? My intent is not to be overly dramatic. My intent is to be realistic. The Revelation is realistic in bringing us face-to-face with eternal questions – issues that are much more important than what's on our "bucket list." But the church in Smyrna was dealing with life and death issues, and perhaps we need to do the same.

So it is with great love and utmost concern that I ask you to consider questions of eternal significance with me this morning. First and foremost – have you trusted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of your life? Are you reconciled in your relationship with God through faith in him? If you know in your heart that you are not right with God, please, please, please attend to that issue first. I would be happy to speak with you about it. Your relationship with Jesus Christ is an issue of eternal importance. Make sure you get it right.

There are many here who already know Jesus as Lord and Savior. But in the light of eternity, you may need to wrestle with the issue of purpose in your life. If Jesus returned today would you be content that you are the person God intended you to be? Are you investing your time and talents in the most God-honoring way possible? If not, why not? Facing the truth that we have no guarantee about tomorrow, are there changes that you need to begin today to align your life with God's will? Do it. Start now. I would consider it a privilege to talk with you and pray with you about it.

Finally, are there important relationships in your life that are broken? Have you wronged someone you love? Has someone important hurt you deeply? In the name of the first and the last, I urge you to deal with those relationship issues. There are few things more bitter than counseling a person with deep regrets about a relationship with someone who has died. "If only I had another chance to tell him I loved him." "If only our last conversation hadn't ended with such bitter words." "If only we had one more chance to work through our issues." Please, avoid the "if only's." Look at the people you love in the light of eternity.

The Chicago Tribune reported the death of a man killed in a traffic accident. Onlookers watched in horror as the man ran onto the freeway and into eight lanes of traffic chasing a hat that had blown off his head. He was killed instantly when one of the cars speeding by struck him. When the tattered hat was recovered an astute bystander commented, "Isn't it amazing how often we are willing to risk everything chasing nothing?" Jesus, the first and the last, says, "Live your life in the light of eternity. Be the person God created you to be, and you will have no regrets." Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying. Amen.