Dear Church: Letters for an Uncertain Time, Part 1: Smyrna

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Scripture: Revelation 2:8-11

I. Then and Now

The series we start today didn't originate as a series at all. I simply knew the themes I planned to preach on in November. Then, one morning in the middle of meditation, I suddenly realized that connections exist between these four topics and four of the seven letters to churches in the Book of Revelation. Was it the Holy Spirit that revealed the connections, or just the strange way my brain works? I'm guessing the latter, though sometimes the two work side by side …

What is certain is that many of the issues we struggle with today are strikingly similar to those faced by the early church. Some churches faced powers hostile to the way of Jesus. Others were tempted by the comforts those powers could provide.

Our church of focus today, Smyrna, faced the fear of suffering, imprisonment, and possible death. The letter is framed by death from beginning to end. It opens with words from Christ, describing himself as "the first and the last, who was dead and came to life." It closes with a promise that those who remain faithful will not be harmed by "the second death."

In between comes the message: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. … Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Curiously, those influenced by Revelation's letter to Smyrna also left us the earliest surviving picture of Christians gathering to remember their dead, much as we do on All Saints Sunday.

During uncertain times, we may especially miss someone whose counsel, love, or example helped us find our footing. If that's you, know that I'm right there with you. Four years ago, I lost one of my closest friends and confidants as well as my pastoral mentor of 42 years. I can still feel the holes left by their absence. This year, Melanie lost her father, and we lost a 35-year-old family friend whom we had known since birth.

The letter to Smyrna invites us to acknowledge those holes, but also to ask: ***What might those we have lost still offer us for the life ahead?***

II. "The synagogue of Satan"

Before answering that question, I want to acknowledge a troubling phrase in this letter. John of Patmos, who presents these letters as being from the risen Christ himself, speaks of "*the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not,*" calling them a "*synagogue of Satan*." We need to

handle these words carefully, recognizing that Christians have used language like this against Jews in terrible ways over the centuries.

Part of the difficulty is that we assume that Christians and Jews were clearly separated back in the first century. The Jesus movement arose within Judaism, and for decades the boundaries between Jews who followed Jesus and those who did not remained contested and often blurry. The Revelation itself never even uses the word "Christian."

What seems to underlie this angry language is the predicament Jesus-followers faced when they found themselves accused of being Christians before the Roman authorities. Once accused, they could be required to demonstrate their loyalty by offering sacrifice before the emperor's image and the Roman gods and by renouncing Christ. Those who persisted could be executed.

Notice the language of accusation in the letter to the church in Smyrna. John speaks of the slanderous people. Satan means, among other things, "accuser" or "adversary." In the very next verse, John speaks of the devil – *diabolos* – which means "slanderer," as the one throwing some of them into prison.

So, some of the very people being accused responded by identifying their accusers with *The Accuser*.

Perhaps we can understand why people living under that kind of threat might become deeply angry toward those they believed had placed them in danger. Understanding the anger, however, is not the same thing as endorsing the language.

Fear can make us betray our beliefs. It can also make us demonize the people we believe are threatening us.

One of the most famous Christians to emerge from Smyrna did neither.

III. Polycarp

His name was Polycarp, and he eventually became Bishop of Smyrna. He may even have been among those who first heard Revelation's letter read aloud. We don't know. But I wonder what it would do to a person to live for decades with words like these: "*Do not fear what you are about to suffer. … Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*."

The account of Polycarp's death, preserved by his own community, gives us a glimpse.

When Polycarp learned that people were seeking his arrest, his friends persuaded him to leave the city. He wasn't interested in becoming a martyr. In fact, the community that tells his story explicitly discourages Christians from volunteering for martyrdom.

Eventually the authorities found him.

When they arrived, Polycarp came downstairs to meet them and did something unexpected. He arranged for his captors to have as much food and drink as they wanted. He asked only that they give him an hour or so to pray.

He stood and prayed for two hours – for people he had known throughout his life and for the church throughout the world. Seeing his faith and concern for others, the authorities who had come to arrest him were astonished and openly wondered why such a godly old man had to be arrested.

I find these details almost as moving as anything that happened afterward. With his life in danger, Polycarp still had room in his heart to feed the people who threatened it, and pray for those who would be left behind.

On the way into the city, officials tried to persuade him to save himself by acknowledging Caesar as lord and offering sacrifice. Later, in the stadium, the governor pressed him further: Consider your age. Swear the oath. Renounce Christ, and you can go free.

Polycarp answered, "*Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?*"

The governor threatened him with wild beasts, then with fire. Polycarp didn't yield.

Whatever fear he may have felt, it did not get to decide whom he would serve or how he would treat the people standing before him.

Polycarp was sentenced to be burned alive. As the fire was being prepared, he offered not a prayer of vengeance, but one of thanksgiving: "*I bless you, because you have deemed me worthy of this day and hour, to receive a share among the number of the martyrs, in the cup of your Christ, for resurrection to eternal life.*"

When his community later told the story of his death, they described him as having been "*crowned with the crown of immortality.*"

That language is hard to miss. Whether or not they had the letter to Smyrna in mind, their words echo the promise their church had received generations earlier. "*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."*

IV. Remembrance and Formation

When Polycarp's body was finally burned, the Christians of Smyrna gathered up his bones, regarding them as "more precious than jewels" and more valuable than gold. Then, they placed them in a suitable location and announced their intention to gather there each year to mark the anniversary of his martyrdom.

Their explanation for gathering is important. They wanted not only to remember those who had already died for their faith, but also to train and prepare those who might someday be called to face a similar fate.

They were not seeking martyrdom, but they were strengthening one another to remain faithful should faithfulness someday cost them their lives.

Roughly a century later, Christians in Smyrna were still gathering on the anniversary of Polycarp's martyrdom. His story was still being told. His anniversary was still being kept. And another generation was still learning what faithfulness might require. It was their version of our All Saints' Day.

On that very day, a group of Christians, including a church leader named Pionius and several of his companions, were arrested. They, too, would be required to choose whether to offer sacrifice to the emperor or remain faithful. Pionius would eventually be sentenced to die by fire.

I know many people, including some of you here, who want to believe eternal life and a world beyond this one, but are uncomfortable embracing this belief, because they worry that it will lead to people disengaging from life. Like they'll spend their days pining for a day when they enter a better world even as our present one burns.

I respect this concern. Certainly, there are people whose belief in an afterlife leads them to disengage from this world. Yet if that possibility makes you wary of belief in eternal life, consider that disbelief offers no guarantee against disengagement either. Believing this is the only life we have can inspire people to treasure it and fight fiercely for the world we share—but it can also lead to passivity, self-protection, or simply making the most of one's own brief time here. The deeper question is not whether we believe in an afterlife, but what our belief—or unbelief – forms us to become. Consider the church in Smyrna. Their conviction that death did not have the final word did not draw them away from this world. It gave them courage to engage it more fully – to remain faithful, love courageously, and refuse to surrender their deepest convictions even when doing so became dangerous.

In a few moments, we will remember the saints who have passed from among us this year—members of this church and others connected to us by bonds of love.

As their names are spoken, perhaps the question is not only, "What have we lost?" but "What have they entrusted to us?"

Though my pastoral mentor, Bruce Van Blair, has been gone now for four years, I continue to find that when faced with a difficult challenge in my ministry, I not only ask, "What would Jesus do?" but "What would Bruce do?" It's not that Bruce trumps Jesus. He simply showed me, in flesh and blood, something of what following Jesus could look like. And in the months since our 35-year-old friend, Hannah, died, I am still inspired by how she took up stand-up comedy, casting a humorous light on her trials and travails, even as she was passing through them.

The letter to the church of Smyrna begins with the One "who was dead" and yet "came to life." All Saints Sunday invites us to acknowledge the reality of death and of our grief, yet it may also inspire us to live with courage and hope.

Death is real. It is not final.

And because it is not final, fear need not decide who we become.