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Peace, Sun Prairie
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Wednesday, Lent 2

Revelation 2:8-11

FEAR UNTO DEATH vs. COURAGE UNTO LIFE

Have you ever been afraid to die –truly afraid? In the twilight moments of the day has the fear of death ever gripped you?

Or maybe death is not the monster in your mind, but life is – everything that comes before death –all the potential sorrow, pain, toil, and disgrace. It's not so much a fear of dying that aches you, but a fear of living.

The Christians of the congregation in the ancient city of Smyrna were already wracked with distress, injustice, and poverty. It wasn't just the normal sufferings of life. It was suffering specifically for being a Christians.

Smyrna was a proud, patriotic city of the Roman Empire. An outlook on life that didn't have the glory Rome as the center of its purpose for being just didn't fit in to the social or political scene. Smyrna had been dubbed the crown of the Roman Empire.

So the Christ-centered faith, thought and life were strange there - viewed as being incompilant with the greater good of the empire, intolerant of the broader, more enlighten picture. They were suspect of being the ones really holding the empire back from reaching its full potential.

Eventually, prejudice turned into action. Roman police confiscated the possessions of some Christians at Smyrna. Some homes were condemned. They were evicted. Some, especially leaders, were exiled as John was to the island of Patmos. Some were even arrested, jailed and tortured. The supposedly religious institutions of Judaism –those who rejected Jesus as their Savior -worked in

conjunction with the state to down-talk the Christians, spread rumors about them and use litigation against them.

Christ announced to the congregation in Smyrna that they should expect more of the same. Even death. Through the Apostle John He said: *I know your afflictions and your poverty –yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 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.*

Dear friends in modern day Sun Prairie, you know how hard it is to let it be known you are a Christian, especially at work where religious symbols or religious talk may be prohibited. What if an active, open persecution against Peace congregation began here in Sun Prairie? It might begin with Peace losing its tax exempt status or the town making zoning laws nearly impossible for us to exist.

As a Christian, it's a lot harder to remain inconspicuous if you are also a member of a congregation. Even harder to hide if you attend worship faithfully. You know how it hurts to hear people say negative things about your church. It seems you never hear people saying negative things about other churches here in town. Only Peace gets the bad rap. That tells you we must be doing something right and satan is not happy with what's going on at Peace. But it still hurts. Insults and unfair remarks about Peace are insults and unfair remarks about you.

Perhaps even more threatening is living in the shadow of a gigantic university town, a bastion of secular humanism that views Christianity skeptically and blames the Christian faith for holding back the enlightened cause of freedom.

Imagine if satan fanned only a few things into flame a full-scale persecution would burst out on us. What if some of us even died from the difficult circumstances we were put under for our faith?

Christ Himself is our comfort. When He sent this message to the congregation at Smyrna, He described Himself this way: *“These*

are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” If we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, who better to guide us on that path, even to carry us through that path safely to the other side than our Hero Christ who’s already been there and back? How much safer could we be?

The all-powerful Christ is not far away and detached. He is here. He knows you are poor but He has made you rich: rich in grace, in wisdom, in the resurrection, in His holiness, in eternal mansions. He knows your suffering. He promised the Christians at Smyrna that it would last only for ten days. Since Revelation is a vision, we don’t know exactly what ten days means. But one thing we do know for sure, it means He promises to bring our suffering to a definite end. It won’t last forever.

Getting a flu shot is painful. But afterwards, for the long term, you might be so glad you had one. In a similar way Christ is saying, “What’s going to happen to you as a Christian here on earth is going to hurt. It’s going to hurt bad. I know how much it hurts. But afterwards you are going to be so glad you went through it. The only alternative is to forsake me. Instead, keep trusting me, keep relying on me. I have it all under my control and taken care of. Death may still feel like a threat to you, but the second death, the eternal death, the deadness of existing without God’s kindness in hell is no threat to you. I have paid for your sins in full. Smyrna might be the crown of the Roman empire. But I will give you another crown.” We read here in Revelation 2, *“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”*

We overcome only by relying on Christ who overcame everything for us both death and life. If you’ve ever been afraid of death or of life, only set your eyes on Christ. It is He who calms our fear unto death and changes it to courage unto life.