



# LETTERS OF LENT

## Listening to Jesus to Live | Wk. 1

February 25, 2024

### Worship Music Playlist

Prelude – My Heart Alone by Colorvault

## WELCOME (cards & community) |

Good morning, all! I'm so glad we can gather together this morning as the church. **To come together on this day made for us, a day where we awoke into the light of our Father's rest**—a day for us to rest in God with us, God for us. Today is a day to set our mind's attention and heart's affection upon Jesus, our Light, and Life so that we might *be the church*, spiritual companions in gospel community, following Jesus together in our ordinary roles and relationships. To be the church, that's the aim of our worship together, remembering whose and who we are in Jesus and the life he calls us into (makes us ready for). So, for those new with us, we are glad you're here, and **we'd like to invite you to church, *into the relationships that make the church indeed a faith family through Jesus.***

We'd also like to invite you to be like us, open and honest before God. Acknowledging our neediness and our struggles as we receive all that we need and more for life, praising God for his steadfast love and faithfulness, which is the source of our daily living. **Will you pray with me?**

## CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 40:11-17

As for you, O Lord, you will not restrain your mercy from me; your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me! For evils have encompassed me beyond number; my iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head; my heart fails me. Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me! Let those be put to shame and disappointed altogether who seek to snatch away my life; let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who delight in my hurt! Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, "Aha, Aha!" But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, "Great is the Lord!" As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God!

Song #1 – Your Great Name by Natalie Grant

Song #2 – Fall Afresh by Jeremy Riddle

Dismiss Kids

## CALL BACK & ANNOUNCEMENTS | Ben & Lent Resources

Many of you know Ben Mayer, but not everyone. And those who do know Ben may not know exactly what Ben has been/is going through. So, we wanted to share a way to find that out so that you can help in prayer and, if led, in giving. [\[GoFundMe SLIDE\]](#)

Speaking of ways to pray and act, we're officially underway on the Lenten journey, joining the global Church as we make our way to Easter morning. [\[Lent Rhythm & Resources SLIDE\]](#) For those new or interested, we have some recommended rhythms and resources to aid us along the way and help us participate in our chosen movement toward the cross, to the tomb, and into a life where the grave is emptied.

Speaking of an empty grave, our text today comes from the other side of Easter, yet calls our attention to the pilgrimage we find ourselves. So, turn to the book of Revelation, chapter 1, then pray with me as \_\_\_\_\_ comes to help us enter the text.

## PRE-SERMON READING | Revelation 1:9-20

I, John, with you all the way in the trial and the Kingdom and the passion of patience in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of God's Word, the witness of Jesus. It was Sunday and I was in the Spirit, praying. I heard a loud voice behind me, trumpet-clear and piercing: "Write what you see into a book. Send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea." I turned and saw the voice. I saw a gold menorah with seven branches, And in the center, the Son of Man, in a robe and gold breastplate, hair a blizzard of white, Eyes pouring fire-blaze, both feet furnace-fired bronze, His voice a roaring waterfall, right hand holding the Seven Stars, His mouth a sharp-biting sword, his face the sun unfiltered. I saw this and fainted dead at his feet. His right hand pulled me upright, his voice reassured me: "Don't fear: I am First, I am Last, I'm Alive. I died, but I came to life, and my life is now forever. See these keys in my hand? They open and lock Death's doors, they open and lock Hell's gates. Now write down everything you see: things that are, things about to be. The Seven Stars you saw in my right hand and the seven-branched gold menorah—do you want to know what's behind them? The Seven Stars are the Angels of the seven churches; the menorah's seven branches are the seven churches.

# SERMON |

He who sat upon the throne said, ‘Behold I make all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ And he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be their God and they shall be my inheritor. (Revelation 21:5-7)

That's how the Revelation ends: God's desire/need/purpose and plan satisfied... 'all things new' ...and our lives whole in and through and with him. What an ideal picture! An image that has propelled the hope of billions over millennia. And yet, as we were reminded in Advent:

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.<sup>1</sup>

The paradox of our faith is that we do not wait for the end, merely holding on and holding out for some distant future, but we live today in the end because that is where our faith, our life, begins...

“I make [not will make] all things new...It is finished...It is done!”

Jesus' rule and reign (“He who sat upon the throne...”), like his journey to and through the cross, is not only or firstly an ideal end, but “has come to this house” to our community, through His acts of restoration for us, for His finding us, welcoming us home, inviting us in, digging us up. Our lives are lived in response to what we've received. More specifically, “salvation” comes through a life lived in kind to his life given for us, given to us...our lives made right through his, and our lives lived loyally to (in honor of and aligned with the intent of) that life given for us. Remember what we said in preparation for today:

“The righteous person is not the one who observes a particular code of ethics but rather a person or community granted a special relationship of acceptance in the presence of God. That **relationship is maintained by acting in loyalty to the giver** of the unearned status.”<sup>2</sup>

We all have different reactions to the idea of *loyalty*, to acting rightly in honor of and in the intent of the One to whom we aligned. Our different reactions are evident, especially in the season of Lent, which presumes to call into question our loyalty or at least point out where we are lacking. Yet, the goal of the Lenten journey is not to sulk in our disloyalty nor excuse/justify it like the Pharisee in the temple. The aim of the Lenten season is not to overcome our sins nor to overwhelm our inadequacies of faith with acts of faith. No, the Lenten road is a journey meant to stir our thirst for life whole and holy and forever and to receive from the fount without

<sup>1</sup> T.S. Elliot, “Little Gidding,” *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 207.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: cultural studies in the gospel*, 345.

*payment.* To confess as the psalmist cried without shame, “As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me,” and find that through our neediness and openness to receive and respond in kind, we conquer. Not in our efforts and our plans, but in our being aware of and accepting where we are when the revelation of our disloyalty (unrighteousness) comes to light, being aware and accepting of what is done for us and given for us, as we respond in kind, with steadfast, and sacrificial love which we have received.

If we miss the aim of Lent, we’ll, well, end up [nowhere at the end, missing out on the start](#)...but that’s why we’ve [prepared for the journey](#). Our perspective is aligned, our eyes set on the end, the brightness through the sadness, the light through the darkness, so we can ***listen to Jesus to live through Jesus***—again, anew, and forever. That’s the aim of both Lent and the letters to the seven churches in the Revelation. Jesus, King, seen for all he is, speaking to those for whom he completed his work, made new (righteous), and to whom he continues to give himself...

Speaking of The Revelation, it is an apocalyptic (unveiling) story of the universe and its multi-realm reality framed in a pastoral letter. The author, John, was a pastor and apostle and closely connected to the seven named churches in this narrative of cosmic proportion. While the pastoral shepherding is penned by John the Beloved (later called “the divine” or “the theologian”), it is Jesus Christ the Chief Shepherd who addresses his flock directly.

The fact that the Revelation begins with Jesus’ pastoral words to seven unique congregations reminds us, “A believing community is the context for the life of faith” in the end. As the people of Jericho learned in [our final preparatory story](#), a community’s salvation comes because of the restoration of the lost (one sought, named, and whom Jesus gives himself for)...and the lost responding in kind. Such a revelation is still our expectation and hope for our community and world.

In this way, the fantastic story of the Revelation is prophetic, pastoral counsel. The phrase translated in the ESV, “The words of him who...” which introduces each new section, actually reads, “these things says the ONE...” and is an Old Testament formula used in the Prophets well over a hundred times to introduce a new, specific word from Yahweh himself. So, “this formula demands that chapters two and three be seen as a group of prophetic messages [words calling God’s people to righteousness/a life of loyalty to the One who makes right] rather than as mere letters.”<sup>3</sup> Here’s the “formula” or pattern of Jesus’ prophetic pastoral counsel:

## THE PATTERN

- Relationship Acknowledged
- Identity in Jesus
- Encouragement
- Admonishment
- Promise through Jesus

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<sup>3</sup> G.K. Beale, *The book of Revelation: a commentary on the Greek text*, 229.

The churches are not referred to in terms of their size, status, reputation, purity, or heroic feats, but rather their location and the “spirit” that indwells them. Each address begins by acknowledging the “angel” of that geographical assembly of ordinary believers. **An Acknowledgment that the divine and human are in a Relationship** and that relationship is in submission (loyalty) to Christ Jesus, guided by his rule, words, and actions. The church is never only physical nor only spiritual. While “the angel has the basic biblical function of ‘messenger’ to the church...the angels function as more than messengers here. In several places in the NT (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:10 [perhaps 4:9 if “angels” there are good rather than evil angels]; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 1:12) angels function as authoritative ‘witnesses’ overseeing the plan of God as it works out among his people. [The angels] are servants of God, working under the authority of the sower-king (remember [the wheat & weeds and the net parables](#) in Matthew 13), carrying out his orders to reform, challenge, and help these churches.

While the church is referenced geographically, it is identified through its relation to Jesus. Who Jesus is, **his Person defines the church.** “Every church,” contends Eugene Peterson, “is located in a specific place; all churches exist under the conditions of geography, politics, and economics; each church is visible. At the same time, every church gets its identity from Christ and what he does; churches exist only in derivation from Christ.”<sup>4</sup> We’ll notice that the description of Jesus’ person matches the description of Jesus in Chapter 1 and differs for each faith family. While Jesus wholly provides the church with her identity, no singular church depicts wholly the Jesus with whom they relate. Each congregational identity is partial; each church is defined by only a piece of the vision. No single congregation exhibits the wholeness of Christ. It is impossible to look at any one instance of the church and find an entire representation of Christ, although we very certainly can be led to that wholeness as we listen to what ‘the Spirit says to the churches...’

From the person of Jesus comes **a word of Encouragement**. Jesus knows each faith family, particularly in ways he can speak specifically to them. Jesus speaks to his people as one who lives among them. He knows them in their lives and affirms them not (as we will see) for their contributions to society or meeting their idealized potential but for their loyalty to His person and intent (purposes).

But the church, as we know, is not perfect. We are prone to wander, even—and perhaps most significantly—in the guise of faith. And so, **a word of Admonition** from Jesus is necessary so that our religious motions do not lose their Spirit-motivations. This is not condemnation; this is care. It’s the loving act of a friend to call the ones he loves out of a way of self-destruction and into a way of abundance.

What I love about our Lord, Savior, and Friend is that he does not leave us with a warning but with a **Promise**—even to those whom he could find no affirmation. Each prophetic utterance concludes with what Jesus gives: a promise to those who “conquer.” Jesus assumes they/we will achieve what he has set out for us to accomplish because He is the first and the last, and they are in him. These promises are not rewards but “the destiny which completes life begun in faith.”<sup>5</sup>

Let us see if you can see the pattern in the first prophetic utterance in Revelation 2. Read with me 2:1-7:

‘To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘These things says the ONE who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call

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<sup>4</sup> Peterson, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 52.

themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

In ancient times, Ephesus was described as ‘The first and greatest metropolis of Asia.’<sup>6</sup> Ephesus was the highway to Rome and the gateway to and from Asia, in modern-day Turkey. Ephesus was, therefore, an important city economically for the entire Eastern Roman Empire. Politically, it was a free city. Its wealth and influence allowed it to be self-governing; no Roman troops could garrison there, and it was a place where essential political and judicial cases were tried.

The prosperity of the city was matched by its ancient religiosity. It was the center of worship for Artemis, or Diana, as the Greeks called her. The temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, 425 feet long, 220 feet wide with 120 sixty-foot columns, thirty-six of which were gilded with pure gold. While the temple was gloriously crafted, Artemis herself was portrayed rather modestly as a squat, black, many-breasted figure “so ancient that no one knew where it had come from.”<sup>7</sup>

From this ancient root of religion sprung a city that was a “notorious center for superstition” and **the marketing of religious goods and services to cure every ill and reverse every misfortune**. Ephesus was a prosperous, influential, profoundly religious, spiritual, and culturally diverse city. Add to this description that it was the postal entrance for the correspondence to each of the following six faith families referenced in the Revelation, and it's no wonder the words of Jesus start with his brothers and sisters here.

We actually know quite a bit about the faith family in Ephesus. While on the surface, Ephesus would seem to have been “unpromising soil for the sowing of the seed of Christianity...yet it was there that Christianity had some of its greatest triumphs.”<sup>8</sup> Paul nearly turned the city upside down when faith in Jesus started to impact the economics of religion, as Acts 19 details. We know it was the city in which Paul stayed the longest (Acts 20) and the city which called Timothy its first overseer or elder (1 Tim 1:3). In Ephesus, we find the fruitful and faithful Aquilla, Priscilla, an Apollos (Acts 18). It was to the elders of Ephesus whom Paul so intimately and vulnerably addressed in his farewell remarks before his final imprisonment (Acts 20). John, the writer of our letter today, would later become the leading figure in the faith family of the city as he, legend has it, brought Mary, the mother of Jesus, there. It is in Ephesus that many believe Mary was buried. The Ephesian community of faith was solid, respectable, and faithful. As the book of Ephesians still is, the faith family of Ephesus was very much the ideal for the “church” then and now.

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<sup>6</sup> William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 65.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 66.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 67.

Now, as we said, each prophetic utterance or letter begins with a vision of the person of Jesus. In the words to the faith family of Ephesus, Jesus is described as “he who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.” (2:1)

As Jesus told us in 1:20, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. Here, Jesus is described as having every church in his hand. No spirit of any church exists outside of his person and purposes, no matter our opinion of said church. They are under his authority and judgment ('right hand')—accountable for doing things his way). As Jesus said, the lampstands are the seven churches themselves, and Jesus is not any one of them but rather “walking among” all of them. Their light comes from his light. His presence is the one thing that brings them together, and Jesus is the center. They orbit around him. This image should be both encouraging and challenging for how we view “the church,” other churches, and our faith family. If Jesus is the center, the One around whom we orbit, whose authority and judgment (his way being what we are accountable for) we are under, and the light of our existence whom we can only partially reflect, then what does that mean for the way we judge our church, other churches? What does this say about celebrity church culture? The way we compare and contrast and compete and condemn? Ephesus was the greatest of the named cities in the seven letters. They were a faithful faith family, and it would be easy for them—and others—to hold them as the standard. Yet Jesus reminds them that he is their standard and the only standard. Ephesus and Christ City are but one of many, not in contrast or comparison, but in orbital unity with others whom Jesus holds, knows, leads, and shines his light through.

Having acknowledged their identity as one of the churches through which Jesus gives life and works, Jesus now encourages the Ephesian believers in their particular life of faith (v. 2-3). Jesus knows their work, toil, and patient endurance to discern and courageously stand against those among them “who are evil,” having “tested those who call themselves apostles (specially sent messengers),” but who “are not,” finding “them to be false.” Such discernment is no easy task. It is no small endeavor to hold fast to the person words and practices of Jesus amid a city full of other options—especially religious and spiritual ones. To remain faithful to Jesus alone amid a culture that sells every religious good and service known to humanity is no small thing. It would be easy to get tired, become lax, and give in out of sheer fatigue or convenience. It would have been easier to be like the Nicolaitans, who thought there was no need to fight the flow of religious intermingling. Redeem it, they would say, or at least let grace cover it and take advantage of what the city and culture offer. There is no need to stand apart. Freedom in Jesus means we can participate fully as long as we keep Jesus somewhere in the conversation. So why not have it all in your life of faith?

Apparently, Jesus hated such works (v. 6) (the relational and daily results of such faith), for they were the works of the flesh and not the fruit of the Spirit as Paul so aptly described to the Galatians. Works born not out of loyal love for Jesus and others but out of culturally religious expectations for faith. The Ephesians saw through the shallowness of the Nicolaitan ethic and held fast to Jesus: who he really was, what he really taught, and the life he really called people to share with him.

Yet, as is often the case, constant battles harden even the softest hearts. “But I have this against you,” Jesus says, “you have abandoned the love you had at first.” (v.4)

“at first,” has two meanings. The Jesus followers in Ephesus had abandoned the love, the tenderhearted passion, and compassion that was the first fruit of their faith in Jesus. At one time, they were eager to help the weak in faith and needy, for they had been them not too long before! They were hungry to know God

intimately and thirsty for more of him in the lives of neighbors and friends. Yet a long faith always goes through valleys of shadows and boredom and can result in passion only for causes and not for relationships that are the heart of faith.

This brings us to the second meaning. The Ephesians had lost their first love: what they were willing to live for was not a relationship with Jesus through which they related to one another and the world, letting the life of Jesus be their model for relating and responding to one another and the world, but “dogma,” truth alone. They were protectors, not lovers. Fighters, not lovers. They were praying not for those who made life hard on them but praying against them.

They, like the psalmist of Psalm 139, were ready to oppose all they deemed wicked:

I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies. (Psalm 139:22)

But unlike the psalmist, they were not willing to pray:

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Examine me and know my disquieting thoughts. See if there be any grievous, harmful way in me, and lead me in the way ancient and everlasting. (Psalm 139:23-24)

To this hardness of heart, this unwillingness to be examined perhaps because they believed they were indeed the standard...or at least set the standard, Jesus warns them that to abandon the most primary reality of their faith—love—will mean that they will no longer have the place they think is theirs among the churches. What they value, take pride in, and hold as their standard for life in this world and their relationship with God will no longer be theirs. Instead of giving in to the hardening of heart, the unexamined life, Jesus says to remember and repent.

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the works you did at first. (v. 4)

Remember the grace they had received, and turn towards the love that drew them to Jesus, empowered their lives in Jesus, and changed their community through Jesus.

After the warning comes the exhortation to hear what the Spirit says to the churches, to listen and respond, and then the promise to “the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” (v. 7)

## REFLECTION |

'Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first...the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God' (2:4,7)

"The remembrance is useless," says Eugene Peterson, "if it moves into indifference or rebellion. Repentance is the resolve to return to those early truths [lost sheep, lost coin, tax collector, brothers, etc.], the first reality that we felt really secure upon...By returning to the first love, we are rewarded with the first food. The return to our origin includes a return to God, who not only loves us but feeds us. When we return to loving God and the world for which he died, we return to Eden..."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus' promise takes us back to the Garden of Eden in Genesis, where God and humanity dwelt in harmony (perfect paradise). What Jesus offers those whose loyalty is demonstrated in more than a resolve for truth but a way of life in truth that is love is a life lived in perfect harmony, union, walking through a day of labors with God himself—heaven on earth, as much as it can be.

### CONSIDER

- Can you remember your first love, what it was like to be loved and show the love of God at first?
- Are your actions of faith a loyal (in kind) response to that love, or for something else?
- How might Jesus be inviting you to return to that love today, in this journey of Lent?

## COMMUNION |

Almighty God, unto You our hearts are open, our desires known, and no secrets are hid; Make new and right the thoughts of our hearts and the response of our lives by the leading of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love You and all that is Yours. Being perfected by love, let us worthily magnify your Name; through Jesus our Lord in us and through us. Amen

Song #3 – Almighty God by All Sons and Daughters

Song #4 – O the Deep Deep Love of Jesus by Trad. / Paul Zach

## BENEDICTION | 1 John 2:7-12

As we rest in the day made for us, we prepare to enter into the work for which we are made  
[LIGHT THE CANDLE], remembering:

My dear friends, I'm not writing anything new here. This is the oldest commandment in the book, and you've known it from day one. It's always been implicit in the Message you've heard. On the other

<sup>9</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Hallelujah Banquet: how the end of what we were reveals who we can be*, 41-44.

hand, perhaps it is new, freshly minted as it is in both Christ and you—the darkness on its way out and the True Light already blazing! Anyone who claims to live in God's light and hates a brother or sister is still in the dark. It's the person who loves brother and sister who dwells in God's light and doesn't block the light from others. But whoever hates is still in the dark, stumbles around in the dark, doesn't know which end is up, blinded by the darkness. I remind you, my dear children: Your sins are forgiven in Jesus' name.