



LETTERS OF LENT

Pergamum | Wk. 4

March 17, 2024

[Worship Music Playlist](#)

Prelude – Hallelujah, What a Name! (Man of Sorrows) by Traditional 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** and *into the relationships that make the church indeed a faith family through Jesus*.

We'd also like to invite you to trust in God with us amid the ups and downs of life and witness to that trust because of the life we have received. **Will you pray with me?**

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 22:22-31

Here's the story I'll tell my friends when they come to worship, and punctuate it with Hallelujahs: Shout Hallelujah, you God-worshippers; give glory, you sons of Jacob; adore him, you daughters of Israel. He has never let you down, never looked the other way when you were being kicked around. He has never wandered off to do his own thing; he has been right there, listening. Here in this great gathering for worship I have discovered this praise-life. And I'll do what I promised right here in front of the God-worshippers. Down-and-outers sit at God's table and eat their fill. Everyone on the hunt for God is here, praising him. "Live it up, from head to toe. Don't ever quit!" From the four corners of the earth people are coming to their senses, are running back to God. Long-lost families are falling on their faces before him. God has taken charge; from now on, he has the last word. All the power-mongers are before him—worshipping! All the poor and powerless, too—worshipping! Along with those who never got it together—worshipping! Our children and their children will get in on this As the word is passed along from parent to child. Babies not yet conceived will hear the good news— that God does what he says.

Song #1 – Behold by Mission House

Song #2 – I Set My Hope on Jesus by Getty/Papa

Dismiss Kids

CALL BACK & ANNOUNCEMENTS | Family Meal, Loyalty

You should have received an email from me about ten days ago (if you didn't, fill out one of the black cards and drop it in the box, and I'll be sure you get all future emails). One thing that email mentioned is a faith family meal which we will be having on April 7th following the Gathering. We'll have a chance to discuss the subject of that email and other things happening in our faith family. Most importantly, we can enjoy a meal together! More details will come in the following days.

Today, we continue our movement towards Easter through the letters of Lent. These words of Jesus were spoken to faith families much like our faith family, ones whose lives together were contingent on Jesus's life given to them. And people whose loyalty to Jesus' person and purpose was often a point of tension in daily living.

Will you join me in opening our ears to hear what the Spirit says to the church of Pergamum and Christ City Church today? Pray with me as _____ comes to read our text this morning.

PRE-SERMON READING | Revelation 2:12-17

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum, write: 'These things says the ONE who has the sharp two-edged sword. 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

SERMON |

The respected Rabbi Abraham Heschel, talking about the values of his community, values whose foundations Jesus shared, modeled, and typified, said,

'We maintain that just as it is important for a person to select a particular objective for his/her own life, such as a career [vocation or calling], it is important for her/him to live in the awareness of a meaning which transcends all particular objectives, the loyalty to which is ultimately even more important than the success or failure in the pursuit of his/her particular objective.'¹

Living loyally (acting rightly in honor of and in the intent of the One's authority to whom our lives are lived) in the "awareness of a meaning which transcends all particular objectives" is the standard—both temporarily and eternally—for a life lived well. Not the measure of what we produce, achieve, gain, or even lose. That is the presumption of our faith from our faith's very beginnings. Our faith's story says from its first pages that being involved in the mystery of God is the beginning and end (goal) of living. Whatever our particular objective might be, it's the Word of God that speaks life and shapes life; it is the power and authority of life. This Word cuts through and out the decay of life (bringing health), satisfies the hunger of life, and writes (reveals) the truth of life. And yet, words are the issue of faith. Specifically, words in the spoken and visible forms of power, authority, or influence that we fail to discern and discard. It is words and the ways of life built on the words that confront,

the church in Pergamum...where Satan's throne is. (2:12-13)

I'm sure, like me, you imagine the place where Satan sits enthroned as a place of debauchery and sleaze—a dark place oozing with evils. Yet Pergamum, by all accounts, was a magnificent city—the crown of a civilized society, a palace of healing, a bastion of law and order. "Beyond all other cities in Asia Minor," contends archeologist Sir William Ramsey, Pergamum "gives the traveler the impression of a royal city, the home of authority..."²

At the time of Jesus' address, Pergamum had been a capital city for nearly 400 years. The city's "name in Greek (*Pergamon*) means 'citadel,'"³ and within this hilltop stronghold was "the finest flower of Hellenic civilization...a library of more than 200,000 volumes." Capping and conveying the city's political, physical, and intellectual heights was the throne of Zeus. You can still find the reconstructed remains of the throne of Zeus in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin. At the base of this throne was a famous frieze (a band of sculpted decoration) which "depicts the gods of Greece in victorious combat against the giants of earth, alongside the victory of Attalus I (the first ruler in Asia) over the [barbarian] Galatians." In other words, civilization began here at Pergamum!

In addition to its authoritative origins, Pergamum was also "a center of worship for...Asklepios," the "Soter" or "Savior." Asklepios, the god of healing, and his temple were the closest things to a hospital in ancient times. He drew people from across the province seeking his salvation.

¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Insecurity Of Freedom: essays on human existence*, 64.

² William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 96.

³The following quotes in this section are referenced from Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, 78-80.

As the self-proclaimed birthplace of civilization, intellectual life over primitive life, and the home to the healer (Savior) of humanity, and the official center in Asia for the imperial cult of Rome, where divinity and humanity became one and where the authority and power to make the world in our image found its force and face, it is no wonder Jesus calls Pergamum the “throne of Satan”!

Pergamum was not a city of sleaze and filth and chaos. It was the crown of a civilized society, a palace of healing, a defender of law and order. And that’s the tricky part. The modernization of this ancient place, coupled with an integrated and holistic vision for a healthy and whole life of religion, politics, and economics, played on every human’s aspiration. Where the words of the way to life were written in the structures of power and authority, shaping every aspect of daily living and evidently working for the prospering of the entire province. It’s here, on the throne of Satan, that Jesus is described as,

...the ONE who has the sharp two-edged sword. (2:12)

The reference links back to the vision of Jesus from chapter 1,

In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword... (1:16)

The Sword in the Mouth has two references in the first century. The sword represented the literal and figurative power and means of life and death for its citizens. He who wielded the sword was in the power seat. In opposition to what is seen and heard in this city, Jesus is actually the one ruling, with authority over all matters of life and death. The sword of the mouth also refers to the means of God’s healing; God’s words bring into reality his purposes for flourishing.⁴

By describing himself as the one “who has the sharp two-edged sword,” Jesus says he is the One who heals and saves, not Asklepios (or any modern technological or medical discovery). He is the One who judges, not Rome (or any political party, social movement, or economic system). He is the one who rescues humanity from itself, not Zeus or Grecian intellect (not religion or knowledge). He is the one—who is our refuge, not the citadel city, the assumed throne of Satan.

No matter what is seen (what the words that shape culture say life should be like, say is life’s satisfaction), he who holds power over the unseen is actually on the throne. To these, Jesus says,

...you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas *my faithful witness*, who was killed among you... (2:13)

Despite the apparent adverse conditions, “They had not denied their faith by yielding to the pressure to burn incense to the emperor and declaring ‘Caesar is Lord.’” Nor had they bowed at the feet of Hellenistic intellectual and cultural triumph over humanity, nor sought the divine and mystical serpent Savior to heal them. They had held fast to Jesus, even when it cost one of their own his life.

Notice what Antipas is called in verse 13, “my faithful witness.” It is the same title given to Jesus in chapter 1,

...Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. (1:5)

⁴ See notes at the end of the document for more details.

In his loyalty to the character, confession, and practices of Jesus, Antipas is called a partner in the work of Jesus. Partnering as witnesses in the continuous work of Jesus alive, even in the least favorable context, is what the faith family of Pergamum is doing right. In their life together, they are witnessing (speaking and living out) what the word of God is at work doing.

Speaking the name and living in step with Jesus' character and practices amid whatever context we find ourselves is how we, too, partner with Jesus as witnesses in the work. Not by running from the place where Satan lives but by holding fast to the character, confession, and practices of Jesus, who is the one whose word is the sword of power and authority right where we are, even if it is costly to do so. Still, even in their resolute loyalty, the faith family of Pergamum was still open to the seduction of words—especially words from within their own community.

But I have a few things against you: *you have some there* who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also *you have some* who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. (2:14-15)

It is difficult to imagine people holding fast, standing firm, amid so much overt evil force, could ever be in danger of losing all they've stood for simply by lack of discernment of what's happening within their community. What Jesus has against them (the 'few things,' being a few people) is not some new form of evil, unique to their time and place. Ephesus (as we've seen) and Thyatira (as we will see) are up against the same issue. No, the problem is not uncommon, and neither is there misstep. Rather than confronting the co-mingling of "ways" within their own family, the syncretism of life with Jesus and life as a Pergamumian, as the Ephesians did—albeit without love—they ignore or are unaware of the subtle seduction occurring in their midst, and the motivation behind the voices among them.

The reference to Balaam, who taught Balak," tells us what happened among the Pergamum faithful. You can find the story in [Numbers 22-25](#) and [31](#). It occurs as God's people turned from forty years of wilderness wanderings towards the promised land. The story is incredible and includes a talking donkey and sword-wielding angel, along with a king (Balak) and diviner (Balaam).

The story goes that as God's people made their way towards the land God had set aside for them to dwell in, a land in which they were meant to prosper for the blessing of the entire world, a part of that blessing was overcoming kingdoms in opposition to God's kingdom⁵. One of those oppositional kingdoms was governed by Balak, king of Moab. When he saw the Israelites marching through his territory, he was worried he'd end up dethroned like the kings before him. He knew something was at work beyond what could be seen with this company of former slaves, so he called upon Balaam, a prophet for hire. Balak offered Balaam honor, wealth, and whatever else his kingdom could offer if he cursed the Israelites and kept them from seizing his throne of power and authority. Balaam, for all his avarice, nevertheless could not say anything the LORD God had not told him to say regarding Israel. Ironically enough, this man often spoke with God and recognized his place

⁵ If you want to know more about that, see Michael Heiser's *"The Unseen Realm: rediscovering the supernatural worldview of the Bible,"* or [let's grab coffee!](#)

under God's authority. Three times, he is paid to curse, and three times, he blesses, not from his heart but because he was subject to God's words, not Balak's desires or even his own. Balaam's final "blessing" ended up being a curse against Balak's kingdom and his allies, and so "Balaam rose and went back to his place. And Balak also went his way." (Num. 24:25).

But that's not the end of the story. Israel ended up making Balak's kingdom their place of dwelling, just as Balaam predicted, yet instead of blessing the land and the people by removing the signs and practices and people keeping the old way alive, several joined in with them! But not because the Moabites overcame them with force but because they seduced them. They subtly preyed upon the Israelites' aspirations for a whole and prosperous life and invited them into their way of getting that life. It didn't hurt that the Moabite way also included an overindulgence in fulfilling the flesh's desires—getting what you want by the means you want to get it!

The plan was wickedly genius! If Balak's Moabites couldn't defeat the Israelites straight on, and his diviner could not overpower the Spirit watching over and going before them, then these enemies of God would get God's people to entrap themselves! And listen, the scriptures tell us that this was indeed a plan and not just a circumstance of human nature. Numbers 31 tells us that it was "upon Balaam's advice" that the leadership of Moab (Balak) figured out how to cause "the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD" and thus provoke the consequences of their rebellion. In this case, a plague that came among the congregation of the LORD.

The opposition planned to get the people on the wrong side of their God. Why? Because the opposition knew they could not touch them with their power and authority.

Now, once again, on the enemy's territory, the people of God were threatening to overcome, and the enemy put an old plan back into action. **Get a few to mix together and mix up the way to life, and the many will suffer, and the movement/takeover/reclamation/restoration/witness and work will be stopped.** Unless the Pergamum followers of Jesus call out the compromise and call each other back into the way they've held so fast, then many will end up on the wrong side of the kingdom skirmish:

Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. (2:16)

Balaam's advice, which some among the church of Pergamum are following via the forces visibly and invisibly ruling the city, was simply that what you want and what the city/world/culture wants **is the same thing**, so why not work together for it? *We are not asking you to abandon Jesus; just inviting you to get what you want and how you want to do it. God wouldn't deny you the very thing he promised you, and here it is, right before you, take it, it's yours! There is no need to make such a fuss about the way when we are all trying to get to the same place.*

The enemy continues to speak this same lie. The problem is that getting what we want how we want it eventually proves where our loyalty lies: to the master whom we love and the one whom we hate. Eventually, we find ourselves on the side of the kingdom struggle we never wanted to be on.

We get too caught up in the back half of v. 14 and the reference to literal idol worship. But that is a reference to the story in Numbers and not to the Nicolaitans' actions. **We know that this group wanted everything Jesus**

offered; they were insiders, believers, and people of faith. Yet, they saw no issue with getting the life Jesus provided through whatever means were at their disposal. Following their own desires and the culture's cues rather than the Spirit and word of God. They opposed loving admonishment within the community, a way of life limited by the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Paraphrasing Robert Mounce, "Balaam became a prototype of all corrupt teachers who [*encourage playing the game the world's way*]." ⁶ It's an issue we still face in Dallas, Texas, in 2024. Will we lovingly call one another to sit under the Word, who Jesus is, his life, ministry, death, and ruling resurrection? Will we let the Spirit wield the two-edged sword to pierce our hearts and do the surgery needed to discern which of our ways is more of a mix-together than the narrow path? Will we repent of our fear of admonishment of missing out on what we want because of the way of Jesus? Will we encourage one another in the words of Jesus to conquer and live loyally to the person and purposes of Jesus because,

To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.' (2:17)

"To the Jew, 'to eat of the hidden manna' meant enjoying the blessings of the messianic age. To a Christian, it meant entering the blessedness of the new world [a completely different world] that would emerge when the kingdom came," ⁷ as it did with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. A world and kingdom we wake up into each new morning since that first Easter Sunday.

In John's gospel (6:31-35), Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," and that eating this would mean death would no longer be your enemy. "If the hidden manna and the bread of life are the same," contends Barclay, "the hidden manna...stands for nothing less than Christ, the bread of life; and this is a promise that to those who are faithful he will give himself."⁸ We have all that we need for life and godliness. All that we need to have peace amid the tribulation. All that we need to know how to live life well, completely different in the One who is The Way, The Truth, The Life, the King who wields a mouth like a sword.

The white stone with a new name given to us is not only new in time (something experienced) but new in quality, never made before, and completely unique. Whoever you have come to know yourself to be through the name given to you by your parents (your history, your lineage, the things you've done and things done to you), whatever identity our culture and social constructs have formed for you to know yourself, are whited-out. You are purified and given access to the only relationship in which you can really know who you truly are.

Our scriptures are replete with stories of **new names that mark a new status and the relational responsibility of that new name, partners in God's witness and work**. Abram becomes *Abraham* when God chooses him to father a nation to bless the world (Gen. 17). Rebellious, conniving, mistrusting Jacob becomes *Israel* when he doesn't give up his wrestling with God until he receives the blessing of being a part of God's purpose for redemption (Gen. 32). Simon becomes *Peter* when Jesus chooses him (Jn. 1:42), the most human (and thus limited) of all the disciples, to continue Jesus' work in the world as He reigns in the heavens.

⁶ Mounce, 80-81.

⁷ Barclay, 105.

⁸ Ibid.

DISCUSSION & COMMUNION |

‘We maintain that just as it is important for a person to select a particular objective for his/her own life, such as a career [vocation or calling], it is important for her/him to live in the awareness of a meaning which transcends all particular objectives, the loyalty to which is ultimately even more important than the success or failure in the pursuit of his/her particular objective.’

- Jesus gives you all you need to participate and prosper in His kingdom to participate as witnesses in His work through your work. *Are you asking Jesus for something more than he has already given you or struggling to discover and use what is already yours?*

Song #3 – Altogether Good by Citizens/McCracken

Song #4 – Draw Me In by Traditional

BENEDICTION | Jude 24-25

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:

And now to him who can keep you on your feet, standing tall in his bright presence, fresh and celebrating—to our one God, our only Savior, through Jesus Christ, our Master, be glory, majesty, strength, and rule before all time, and now, and to the end of all time. Yes.

Further Notes | “The sharp two-edged sword”

Several passages of Isaiah help us see that “the sword of the mouth” also refers to the means of God’s healing, the power of God, and God’s words or Word to bring into reality his purposes. These messianic texts describe the time when God’s anointed would rescue, redeem, and rule, as found in Isaiah 11, 49, and 27. Let’s quickly look at each.

Isaiah 11:3-4 comes on the heels of the description of Jesse's shoot upon whom the Holy Spirit rests. This chosen One from whom a new world emerges is described this way,

And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness, he shall judge the poor, and decided with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with **the rod of his mouth**, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

(Is. 11:3-4)

The rod of the mouth is a tool/weapon used to exact equitable, compassionate, righteous judgment on those most vulnerable and exposed to the ills and evils of this world. An action that will bring peace, as the following verses depict wolves and lambs, leopards and goats, calves and lions, and cows and bear grazing together in perfect harmony.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fatted calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

(Is. 11:6-7)

What comes from the mouth of God’s anointed brings justice and peace. The second passage is Isaiah 49:1-9, 25-26, which is a promise of redemption—both justice and rescue, judgment and salvation—for the world. Listen to what the one with a sharp sword as a mouth does.

Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar.

The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name.

***He made my mouth like a sharp sword;** in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away.*

And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”

But I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God.”

*And now the Lord says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him—for I am honored in the eyes of
the Lord, and my God has become my strength—he says:*

*“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel, I will make you as **a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.**”*

Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers:

“Kings shall see and arise; princes and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

*Thus says the Lord: “In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and **give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’**” (v. 1-9)*

*For thus says the LORD: “Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be **rescued**, for **I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children**. I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD **your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.**” (v. 25-26)*

This is what the one with the sword in his mouth does; he rescues, heals, judges, rules, and frees. How? By overcoming the true enemy and adversary:

*In that day, the day of redemption, says Isaiah, the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the **fleeing serpent**, Leviathan the **twisting serpent**, and he will slay **the dragon** that is in the sea.*

(Is. 27:1)

By describing himself as the one “who has the sharp two-edged sword,” Jesus is saying that he is the One who heals and saves, not Asklepios (or any modern technological or medical discovery). He is the One who judges, not Rome or Augustus (or any political party, social movement, or economic system). He is the one who rescues humanity from itself, not Zeus or Grecian intellect (not religion or knowledge). As we’ve seen throughout the Revelation, he is the one who has the true power and authority over life and death and life forever.

The amazing thing is that salvation, rule, and authority are all exercised not with violence but with a Word. Eugene Peterson reminds us that,

*The writer of Hebrews told us that the ‘word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart’ (Heb. 4:12). In a similar way St. John uses the metaphor of the sword to demonstrate **what takes place when Christ speaks.***

These words conquer. Christ’s words are not limp. They cut through willful resistance [as Is. 27 depicts], divide good from evil [as Is. 11 describes], overcome rebellion, and establish righteousness [right relationship, a covenant as Isaiah 49 illustrates—a new name as Jesus will soon imagine].⁹

⁹ Peterson, 37-38.