

## **Sermon:**

### **The more things change the more they stay the same**

#### **Rev. 21:1-6**

In February, I had the great opportunity to accompany the Wisconsin Conference Bishop, pastors and laity on a trip of a lifetime to visit some of the sites of the Pauline Churches in Turkey and Greece and to study with them the scriptures of St. Paul and St. John with regard to the world in which they lived, worked and worshipped God and his Son, Jesus Christ.

At our first Devotional time that we took in the Trajan Temple on the Acropolis of Pergamum which is the highest point in the City of Pergamum, our Tour Guide asked the pastors among us when was the last time they gave a sermon on the book of Revelation? Interestingly, none of the Pastors could say exactly when they had done so.

The silence was understandable because Revelation is a very complex book full of symbolism and visions of things

not fully understood to us. On top of that, most United Methodist Pastors shy away from Revelation due to the twisting and misrepresentation of these Scripture by mostly fundamentalist pastors who are convinced there are cryptographic messages that only they know with regard to the “end days”, the “Apocalypse” and the “Tribulation”. Over and over these pastors have predicted the Apocalypse even in our memories only to be found “mistaken”. We all know that when Jesus was asked about the end times he simply explained that he didn’t know and that it was known only by the Father. Why we can’t be satisfied with that answer, I don’t know.

Others claim that St. John and St. Paul were talking about persecution and suffering. While there were some instances of that, it wasn’t the rule in the Roman Empire and it wasn’t the case in the Seven Churches that St. Paul Established in Asia Minor and in Greece. The Roman Empire was made up of many religious groups and they were very tolerant of all religions as long as proper respect was also held for the worship of the Emperor and this was a carry over from Greek practices with religion. They had temples to dozens of Gods and even put up an

alter to the “unknown God” just in case they were leaving someone out.

Our Leader, Peter Miano, who has written theology books on early Christianity, kept pressing us on what the real issues that St. John and St. Paul were chastising and cajoling the original Christian churches about.

The first thing we learned was that these cities were all very wealthy. They were well connected and they were very sophisticated in every way. These cities were Greek speaking and had been established more than 500 years before the time of Christ. They were Greek in every way and the Romans, who revered the Greeks, continued to encourage Greek culture.

There were dozens of Temples in each of these Cities from the old Greek Gods such as Apollo, Athena, Aphrodite, and Zeus, and more recent Gods such as Asclepius. Many were Jews like St. Paul. On top of this, the Romans began claiming their Emperors as Gods and set up prominent Temples in larger cities.

Theaters were popular and the subject matter was as much about the Gods as it was about humans. Theaters were a place where much of public life was carried out with large gatherings of people hearing the orators of the day including, at least in Athens, St. Paul. Philosophy and Theology were important subjects that every Greek or Roman Citizen had an interest in.

Pergamum was a major center for worship of the God, Asclepius. He was a son of the god, Apollo, and born to a mortal woman. He was the founder of Greek Medicine and practiced a wholistic medicine which treated both the body and mind using some magical elements such as holy springs and certain herbal drugs in the cures. These places were on the scale of the Mayo Clinic and the operating rooms were huge with very sanitary conditions such as polished marble floors, walls and ceilings. Fresh water was piped into the operating theaters and waste water and debris were washed away in sub floor sewers.

The medical tools that were developed and used there would be familiar to Surgeons and Dentists today. The Temple was actually a health spa, with beautiful parks,

sculptures, health foods and its own amphitheater for the entertainment of patients and others who could afford to be there.

Grateful patients who were cured of their illnesses would pay gratitude to the God by giving statues of the parts of their bodies that were cured.

Ephesus was the second largest city in the Roman Empire. It could not have existed except for the incredible engineering skill of the Romans. They build miles long aqueducts to bring in fresh water for everything from fountains and clothes washing to the baths, toilets. At the same time they built incredible sewer systems to take away the waste and keep down disease. You can see why the Emperor was treated like a god, since it was in part Roman Money that paid for all of the luxuries, including the Circuses, theaters, libraries, baths, toilets and brought in food and wine from around the empire.

You can see that there was little that Christianity could offer to people who seemed to have everything. St. Paul and St. John were struggling to make sure that their Christian followers didn't fall away or compromise their beliefs. This was the real problem. People were becoming conformed to the World instead of recognizing that Christ came to transcend the world and bring us so much more.

And aren't we living in much the same world today? As a kid I can remember that there was nothing else going on on a Sunday morning except church. By law businesses all had to be closed. High School Sports couldn't even be played on Wednesday night because that was "church night".

Now our children have a dozen places they can be on Sunday morning rather than Church. There are so many clubs and activities that they no longer have time for Wednesday Night Church activities. How many of you have gone out to Walmart to "do a little shopping" on Sunday or taken the kids out to eat at McDonalds instead of going to a Church Dinner? How many have even skipped Church because it was an important "Packer

Sunday"? We are all guilty. St. Paul and St. John are talking to us. We need to get our priorities straight.

Jesus Christ died for us and continues to live for us. God's Kingdom is here and now and is eternal. We have only to accept it and not run off looking for the next cheap thrill at the mall or the sports field. Now with cell phones, it is unlikely that we can even get our children's attention for an entire meal together. Where will it end?

I was always amazed by the spirituality of the African People until I realized that they didn't have a bank account, life insurance, a pension or perhaps didn't even know where their next meal would come from. They knew that they couldn't expect to live even a day without God. Like the Pauline Churches, we have become decadent and dependent upon the world.

Christ came to deliver us from the world, but we have to pay attention and pay homage to our God in Heaven. Don't lose eternal life with Jesus for what you might find at Walmart.