

"Hope in Ephesus"

Scripture Passages:

- 1) **James 1:2-4**
- 2) **Romans 5:1-5**
- 3) **Revelation 2:1-7**

Update: Over the last several weeks I have tried to lay some ground work for our study of John's Revelation. John was the pastor to seven churches in Western Turkey, but found himself in prison on the island of Patmos. John was concerned for the churches because the culture, their circumstances, their experiences, the choices they were making, their business was sucking the hope right out of the congregations.

John understood the serious nature of that situation. John understood that a hopeless people would have an exceedingly poor witness in the world. He understood that a hopeless people would be a dim light. So John wrote to restore hope. That theme is no doubt pertinent for every generation, but I think it is particularly pertinent for us as we are living in a period of significant shifting.

Last week we focused on John's image for the church as a golden lampstand. Lampstands are a place where light is gathered and then strengthened and focused for maximum impact. That is a wonderful image for the church. The church is a place where followers of Jesus gather, so that their light can be strengthened and focused. The stronger the light, the greater the impact!

Of course the church is not alone in this task. As John's image points out the golden lampstands are an extension of Christ's power. And each lampstand is connected to God through a Holy messenger that keeps bringing the Word of God to the church. As a church, as First Presbyterian Church of Paw Paw, we are a golden lampstand. We are being called to embrace and live into that role.

Ephesus: Today we begin learning from the specific messages that John wrote to those seven congregations. While each letter is directed to a specific congregation, the individual letters were intended to be read by all seven congregations. In other words, John knew that the different churches could learn from each other, as well as support each other on the journey.

The first letter was to the church in Ephesus. This congregation was probably started by Paul. Paul lived in Ephesus for two years to help the church get off the ground. Paul's pastoral resident, Timothy, took over after Paul moved on. John's letter was written sometime after those early beginnings.

Ephesus was an important port city. Ephesus had many critical trade routes leaving from its gates. It was a huge city of commerce. It is thought that the

population at the time of John's writing might have been around a quarter million people. Ephesus was such an important city that three separate Roman emperors built temples in Ephesus promoting emperor worship. Also Ephesus was home to one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the temple of Diana or Artemis. Diana's temple was larger than a football field and filled with incredible artwork. Diana's temple was a common pilgrimage sight. Ephesus was one of the Roman Empire's wealthiest cities. It was in that cultural and religious environment that the Christian Church sought to be a light, a witness, a lampstand for Christ. Listen as John writes to the church. **Read Revelation 2:1-7.**

Letter Background: Each letter has a common format. They begin by describing one of Christ's attributes listed earlier. I think this is significant because it highlights the essential need for churches to work together. No church is able to exude all the characteristics of Christ. We need each other to show Christ more fully to the world. So churches are never in competition with one another. We may live like we are, but from Christ's perspective that is not the case. Next each letter typically lists some positive attributes of the congregation, followed by something the congregation needs to work on. The letters end with a call to open ourselves to the voice of the Spirit. In other words as congregations we want to give ourselves to listening for God's Word to us.

Endurance: So what is to be learned from the strengths and weaknesses of these seven congregations?

John praises the church in Ephesus for their patient endurance, for their ability to not grow weary. This is quite remarkable considering their situation. They lived at the center of pagan worship. They lived at the center of commerce and all its temptations. The persecution must have been intense and yet they endured, their faith did not waiver.

How is our endurance level? While we don't face persecution per se, I think we do face isolation and sometimes ridicule. It wasn't all that long ago that community life revolved around church. That is not the case any longer. As our culture has promoted relativism and individualism Christianity has become increasingly marginalized. Christianity has become viewed as an intolerant, judgmental system of belief. So how are we doing at enduring? Are we finding new ways to share our belief, ways that hold true to the Gospel while speaking to the view that we are intolerant and judgmental? Are we finding ways to point people to the saving work of Jesus Christ that addresses the criticism of the time? Are we continuing to be a strong witness, a bright light, or has our own passion for following Christ been worn down? How is your endurance? How is our endurance?

Endurance in Action: I wish John would have given us some examples of how the Ephesians were living out their endurance. How have you experienced

someone or a group of people living out their endurance?

So many of the great journey stories from literature are stories of tremendous endurance, stories that can instill hope in us as we think about our own journey. Where else have we seen endurance lived out?

I got to watch endurance lived out in a beautiful way just a few weeks ago when I had the gift of attending Bill Buhl's last day on the bench, for drug court. What a powerful experience. I was in tears most of the time. Bill's courtroom was packed, filled with people presently going through drug court, as well as people who had graduated from drug court. It was also filled with family members of people who had gone through drug court. Through the morning person after person shared how grateful they were for Bill and the court sticking with them, and giving them another chance to succeed.

Drug court seems like a beautiful example of endurance, of sticking with people through the messiness of life. Drug court exemplifies a powerful balance between accountability and grace. As I sat through drug court, I felt like I was in worship because it was story after story of hopefulness, it was story after story of light. And it all took place because of great endurance. Bill as the judge, the court system, and law enforcement had tremendous endurance dealing with messy situations, while the people themselves had to develop endurance to battle their addictions. The church needs to have that kind of endurance, endurance with our faith, and endurance in dealing with our human brokenness.

The Challenge: Interestingly, I think the topic of human brokenness is exactly the place where John challenges the church in Ephesus. He wrote that they had abandoned their love. This could be the love of God, but I think more likely it is the love of each other.

The Ephesians were filled with endurance for their faith in God, as that faith was attacked every day from a million different directions, but they had little endurance for each other. It is not hard to imagine how that impacts the light of the lampstand. If people in the congregation do not love each other well, who in their right mind would want to come and participate with them? The Ephesian's light had become dim because they did not love well. Their tempers were short. They lacked patience with each other's idiosyncrasies. They couldn't agree on their mission. It was a community on the rocks. That will quickly erode hope won't it?

Conclusion: As we gather at the communion table today, let us consider our own lives as individuals and as a community. How is our endurance? Are we passionate and energized for this journey of faith? Or have we allowed our endurance to be worn down? That will definitely dim the light of our lampstand.

And what of our love for each other? How do people experience us as a congregation? Do people leave here thinking, "Wow those people really like each

other, and enjoy being in community together.” Or do people leave here thinking, “Those people don’t treat each other well, and obviously don’t like being in the same room with one another.” How well do we love each other? The stronger our love for each other the stronger our light in the world.

Endurance and love are important factors for restoring hope and living as a light in the world. How might John speak to us of endurance and love? Let us wrestle with that as we gather together at the table. Let us be a people filled with endurance and love. Amen.