

**Revelation Reflections (6): "Philadelphia: Faith that was Kept" -- a sermon by Gary R. Hindman, FPCUC. Scripture: Revelation 3:1-7.**

*Text: "You have kept my word and have not denied my name." --Revelation 3:8b*

Philadelphia was the newest of the seven cities of Revelation. It was founded in 140 BC by Attalus II, Philadelphus of Pergamum so named because of his great love for his brother, Eumenes. An American will immediately associate this name with one of our own great cities, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, also known as the "City of Brotherly Love."

The town in Revelation was situated where there were three Roman provinces merging. It was out on the edge of civilization, on a frontier where Greek culture and learning came up against alien and often barbaric people and values. Moreover, the city was built on the edge of a giant volcanic plain. Everywhere one looked one could see evidence of great eruptions, lava and ash and extinct volcanoes.

The land was rich and fertile, and especially good for growing grapes and so, like our own Napa and Sonoma Valleys, the area was famous for its wines. But it was also an earthquake area and the ground below the city was unstable. In 17 AD a giant quake leveled Philadelphia, Sardis and 9 other cities and for years following there were tremors and aftershocks. Buildings and houses had great cracks and broken pieces of stone and mortar and people were so fearful of falling masonry that many reverted to living outside the city walls in low, earthquake-safe huts. The town was eventually rebuilt by Tiberius Caesar and for a time, the grateful town changed its name to Caesarea, but eventually, it took back its old name.

Philadelphia also had a great capacity for taking in and appropriating the gods of other cultures--so much so, in fact, that it was often called "Little Athens" after the great Greek city which was home to the Olympian gods. Often the community bestowed honors on its town leaders. Sometimes the pillar of a temple was given to honor such persons. So walking through Philadelphia one could see pillars with family names strewn about much like it would be to walk through Bellevue Cemetery and see the grave stones that trace the names and families of deceased members of our community.

In the passage for today the Risen Christ takes the history, geography and customs of Philadelphia, and weaves them into a testimony of undiluted praise for this was the church which "kept the faith." They kept faith then and down to this day. Though modern Turkey is mostly Muslim, Philadelphia is a Christian town with a Christian Bishop.

Having shared this background I want to relate three parallels between Philadelphia and life today.

FIRST, THE PHILADELPHIANS FOUND THEMSELVES AT THE DOOR OF OPPORTUNITY. "Behold," says the Risen Christ, "I set before you an open door, and no one is able to shut."

Philadelphia was founded on the outskirts of Greek civilization. It was placed there to spread Greek learning and culture. For the same reasons, it was also a great place for spreading the Gospel. Therefore, Christ says, "I set before you an open door."

A while back I overheard one man say to another, "It's too bad there are no new frontiers anymore." I think he was referring to new frontiers on earth and the fact that we have already explored most of the land. But what about what's under the earth, in the sea, or in space? Or, what about improving what we already have? Just this past week the government opened a new area for oil exploration in Alaska. It will take great toil and effort and the yield may not be all that great. Why not use that kind of effort to seek renewable sources of safe energy—there is a vast, nearly unexplored "frontier" for this kind of research and exploration!

I read recently of a woman who invented a biosphere that can be set up in the desert to grow all sorts of tropical plants with a minimum of water. It may prove revolutionary. That same night I turned my telescope to the constellation "Leo" and observed a new sighting of an exploding star, a "quasar". Both of these are examples in my mind of exciting frontiers.

Then there is the door of experience, the door of knowledge, the door of wisdom. We do not possess a tablespoon of the world's knowledge; we do not possess even an eye-drop of the resources of the Spirit of the Living God! Ours is a God of possibility who "sets before you an open door". Moreover, God makes things happen. "He opens and no one shuts; he shuts and no one opens."

Jesus sometimes called himself a door. "I am the door of the sheep-fold," he said. (John 10:7, 10) And when the shepherd lays in front of the entrance of the sheepfold none may pass except by him. He is thus the door to God and through him we enter into a world of hope, expectation, possibility and assurance.

Like ancient Philadelphia, we live in a vast frontier. All around us are people who do not know and who desperately need to hear a saving word of encouragement and faith. There are boundless ways to share our love, concern and service.

Right here in Upland we live is a vast frontier for telling others about Jesus Christ, for loving them to Christ, for bringing them to church, for reaching out to someone in need through the strength of your own faith and conviction

They were given a door of opportunity. **SECOND, THEY WERE FACED WITH AN HOUR OF TRIAL.** The "hour of trial" is the literal translation of Revelation 3:10. Some translators speak of a "time of trial", others use the phrase "tribulation."

Some cults and Christian groups have a hey-day with this term "tribulation" and make dire predictions about the end of times. They lace their theology with gory details and often supply us with specific dates and times. But the rest of Scripture is

quite vague about the end of times and Jesus himself discouraged vain speculations saying that no one knows the end, no prophet, no philosopher, not even Christ himself--only the Father knows such things.

We do not know when the hour of testing will occur or when the end of times will happen, we just know that some day, in God's time, it will happen. But the warning to Philadelphia is clear and important for all to hear: "Hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown."

The end has not yet come and has been longer in coming than many of the New Testament era might have thought, but through the ages, there have been many times of testing. We have endured famine, flood, pestilence and plague. We have had specific challenges, too. The confrontation with Islam was such a time, and ironically, could raise its ugly head again; the trial and ordeal between Catholic and Protestant Christians during Reformation times was such an era; and surely today there is a great confrontation developing between the values of Christ and the power of materialism.

This latter battle is a strange ordeal. We are not like Feudal armies wearing highly visible banners so that everyone knows to what side the warring factions belong. It's a mixed-up world. Right and wrong are not always clearly understood. Things move quickly and there are so many inputs to the equation of modern life that we are confused. In the poetic words of the poet T.S. Elliot we're stuffed but we are hollow. All we know is that things are not what they used to be; there is an erosion of basic values and like the foundations in Philadelphia, things are shaking.

In our fear and insecurity we run from the city and its community out into the wilderness where we think we will be safe.

Several years ago a man I know was implicated in a series of real estate scandals. How involved he was I do not know. But I do know that the foundations of his life began to shake violently. But instead of running away he looked inward and to God. He took a serious moral inventory of himself. For days and days he would be found in our sanctuary in prayer and meditation. He must have made some kind of vow with God for he emerged from his problem a changed man. He rededicated his life to Christ and to the work of the church and he and his family became a pillar of church and community.

There is an opportunity--the open door; and there's trial--the shaking of the foundations; FINALLY, THERE' A PROMISE.

I do not have a specific answer for how you should handle your "hour of trial" when the foundations begin to quake and fall to pieces. But I see in today's lesson a general formula which is this: Do not run from your problem. Keep his word of patient endurance like those of Philadelphia; hold fast to what you have--your faith, your values, your commitments made in love-and dwell secure in the Lord Jesus Christ.

To the one who conquers, the Risen Christ has made a bold promise: "I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall you go out of it." And of that person he says, "I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God...and my own new name (verse 12).

In a town that had changed its name in honor of Caesar and in a town that was known for its many temples, the Risen Christ offers a majestic promise to his people. In Christ's temple built of souls, the Christian follower will be the essential support. He or she will bear the signature of God, be a citizen of God's great community, and be claimed by the Lord Jesus himself. The promise for Philadelphia is a promise for us all: it is a promise that we will be known, and loved and accepted and belong.

In summation, seize the door of opportunity as it comes your way; hold fast to what you believe, even in the hour of trial and know that in the end victory belongs to Christ and is shared with all those who love and follow him.

"Those who have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."  
Amen!

LET US PAY: How thankful we are God, that you offer hope and promise in this world. Forgive us for shallow commitment, like the fickle crowd on Palm Sunday long ago; and bless us to focus on Jesus and his life-giving hope and promise, now and throughout this Holy Week, amen.