

Lukewarm about God? 2nd Weekend after Easter

SERMON BACKGROUND STUDY

April 21 & 22, 2007

Jeremiah 29:10-14 (NRSV)

¹⁰For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Revelation 3:14-22 (NRSV)

¹⁴“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation:

¹⁵“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. ²⁰Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. ²¹To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²²Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

Hot? Cold? Lukewarm?

How would you characterize your own relationship with God?

Today's passage from Revelation hits my heart hard every time I read it. You see, I know that I spent much of my adult life as a Laodicean Christian. I went to church much of the time, sang in choir a lot, even taught Sunday School now and then, but I was lukewarm. I would have told someone that I believed in Jesus and even been able to spout some smart-sounding theology, but I was really indifferent to the whole thing. I could take care of my own needs quite well . . . or so I thought. Sadly, I didn't realize all this at the time. It is only by looking back from my new life in Christ that I can see my tepid faith for what it was.

So . . . when I read that Jesus wants to spit these wealthy lukewarm Laodiceans out of his mouth, I take a big gulp and thank God that he grabbed me rather than tossed me.

Which is it?

It is no surprise to us that Jesus would prefer the Laodiceans be hot for God, on fire and totally committed, trusting God in all things, and working to build for his kingdom. Surely, the creator of all things, the God of love, ought to be the focus of such passion and desire.

But preferring the Laodiceans be cold? Why would Jesus prefer people not know him at all, or even hate him, to simple indifference? We just finished a lengthy series on the Gospel of John. As we saw repeatedly, in that gospel when it comes to the question of Jesus there is no middle-ground, no “we'll see,” no fence straddling . . . no room for indifference. One believes or one does not. One path leads to the light, the other remains in the darkness. One way leads to life, the other to death. And it is Jesus, who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

In John's gospel and in this message to the Laodiceans, the term “lukewarm Christian,” is an oxymoron, it makes no sense. How could someone have genuinely been born from above (John 3), have given their life over to Jesus Christ, and yet be indifferent about the whole thing. At least Jesus knows where he stands with a person who is either hot or cold.

I know that many who come to church are like I once was – present but apathetic, not allowing God into any part of their life beside Sunday morning. A little worship here and there suits them just fine. But Jesus stands at the door, knocking, waiting for us to open it, not just peek though the crack.

God never gives up – neither should we

I don't know whether you'd call the Jews exiled to Babylonia hot, cold, or lukewarm. Shattered and lost would probably be more accurate. They had been moved over a thousand miles with no prospects of returning to Jerusalem. They believed that they were being punished for their abandonment of God. In essence, they were headed to prison to serve out a life sentence.

Yet, this letter from Jeremiah bears a message from God that even though the generation sent into exile will not return, their children will come back to Jerusalem. This passage is grounded upon a faithful God who never gives up on promises made. And God promises the people a "future with hope" (v.11).

Now, we might think that God would simply reach out and accomplish all this. God shouldn't need help – "I know the plans I have for you" (v. 11). Yet, these very plans will be shaped and affected by the people. When they call upon God and pray to him . . . *then* God will hear them (v. 12). The people will find God, and God will find them, but they are to seek God with their heart (v. 13).

There is deep mystery here that speaks to the profound love that God has for us. You and I, weak and confused though we may be, influence the plans and the actions of God. It is true that our faith is a gift from God so that no one can boast about it (Ephesians 2:8-9), yet we are to search for God. We are to pray. We are to open the door. As Anthony Saldarini puts it in his commentary on Jeremiah, "None of that may be quite logical, but it is that peculiar biblical claim about human freedom and divine initiative, or, if you will, divine freedom

Jeremiah's Letter

As the unrelenting pressure of the Babylonian empire fell ever harder on Jerusalem and the Jews nearly 600 years before Jesus, Nebuchadnezzar began to send increasing number of Jews into exile. A large wave left for Babylonia in 597BC, ten years before the final destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Today's passage from the book of Jeremiah is part of a letter from Jeremiah (who is still in Jerusalem at the time of its writing) to Jews who had already been exiled.

The message from God that Jeremiah delivers in the letter is grounded in future hope, though not immediate. The Jews have been exiled to a distant land. They are to go ahead and build homes and raise their families. They are even to pray that Babylon prospers, for then they will prosper as well. It will be decades before God brings them home.

However, the message also carries a warning. The people are not to trust lying "prophets and diviners" amongst them. Their visions and dreams are not to be trusted. We aren't told the specifics, but there were false prophets in Israel and there are false prophets even in exile in Babylon. Based on the conflicts between Jeremiah and some of the false prophets, it seems most likely that the deceivers were promising a quick end to the exile.

and human will. . . . God's will and freedom do not run rampant over human words and deeds – good or bad – nor does human intentionality so control what happens that God is unable to effect the divine purposes. What 'happens' occurs within that tension. So we count on God to be God and we pray to God in order to bring that about."

Pray and search

Nearly a decade ago, I was lost. So lost that I did something I think I had never done before. I got on my knees and prayed. I prayed that God would pull me close, would give me direction and purpose. In a word, rescue me.

And God did. Over a period of a few months, God began to move me out of my lukewarmness and brought Patti to me. By the grace of God, I abandoned my indifference toward God and embraced the life-fulfilling passion that comes from an ever-growing relationship with our Lord.

People sometimes come to me to talk about that time in my life, for they themselves are lukewarm and lost. My advice to them is always the same: pray and do. Pray and then do the things you would do if you felt the passion you want to feel. Attend worship each week. Join a Sunday School or a Bible study. Find a place to serve on a regular basis. There is infinite variety in how this plays out in our lives, but the basics are now and have always been the same. . . . *Pray and do.*

The Seven Churches of Revelation

Revelation is a biblical book that people seem to be fascinated by or to simply avoid. Some read it as if it is a movie script waiting to play out. Others see no message in it that could be relevant to their lives. However, in truth, Revelation is writing of extraordinary power and profound meaning for us all. It is “God-breathed” just as much as the other 65 books of the Bible. Indeed, some of the most moving and best-known scenes in all of Scripture are found in Revelation. The victorious Lamb of God at the center of our Rose Window is taken from Revelation 5, 14, and 21.

After the opening vision of Christ in the first chapter, John’s vision turns to seven letters from Christ to actual churches in western Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), one of which is today’s letter to the church at Laodicea.

Each of the seven Christian communities (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) gets a different message from Jesus. A good exercise is to read each one and ask yourself which letter would be written to your own church. The specifics of the letters aren’t always easy to understand, but the thrust of each is clear. The Christians in Smyrna are encouraged in their suffering and poverty. They are rich in what matters. The Philadelphians are encouraged in their patient endurance. Jesus’ words to these churches, when laid against the warnings given to the wealthy Laodiceans, reminds us that for 2,000 years, the way of Christ has been marked by suffering, not prosperity.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, APRIL 22-28

Sunday, Luke 2:50-52; Acts 1:1-11 These sections link Luke’s Gospel and his second volume, the book of Acts. Why would Luke use the story of Jesus’ ascension in this way, closing one book and opening the other? What do you think the disciples are still waiting for?

Monday, Acts 1:12-26 Why is it so important to replace Judas? Isn’t eleven men enough to get the job done? Certainly seems like an odd way to replace Judas. Casting of lots was used by the Jews for other purposes. What was it meant to accomplish?

Tuesday, Acts 2:1-13 Pentecost was an important Jewish festival, so the city is packed with Jews from all over the empire. What is the nature of the “tongues” that the disciples speak? Why is Pentecost Sunday such an important day in the Christian calendar?

Wednesday, Acts 2:14-41 How would you summarize Peter’s speech for someone? What accounts for his eloquence and his courage? What is the effect of the word preached by Peter? How many Jews come to faith in Jesus?

Thursday, Acts 2:42-47; 4:31-37 These two brief paragraphs paint a picture of the early community life among these followers of Jesus? Do you think Luke is being realistic in his portrait? What would account for their life together? How much like this is our life among the people of God?

Friday, Acts 3 Why do you think Peter is able to do miracles? What purpose would they serve? Do you think there are people now who are able to do miracles as Peter did them? How does this speech compare to his speech on Pentecost?

Saturday, Acts 4:1-31 Why does the Jewish leadership seize Peter and John? Who is the reason for the power of Peter’s testimony? What is the significance of Peter’s being called “unschooled?” According to Peter, who is the only person by whom we must be saved?

Sermon Notes

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

A Special Bible Academy Workshop – May 5 and 12

Higher Choices – Tools to Connect with God

Begin now to build a successful life that honors God, and takes you on a wonderful journey of loving, laughing, growing, creating, and experiencing all of God's blessings. Higher Choices™ are the wisest, best choices for you to be consistent with God's will for you and the life God's enabling you to co-create. Learn practical tools for self-discovery and action. We'll discuss priorities and time management, vision, authenticity, balance, simplicity, mental and physical fitness, prayer, and more.

Taught by Laura Zuber. Lunch provided.

To register on-line go to www.standrewacademy.org

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Hot? Cold? Lukewarm? . . . If the letter to the Laodiceans doesn't get you thinking, then not much will. In which of these three categories would you place yourself? In which category would your friends place you? Your family? Co-workers? If your faith were hot, how would anyone know?

I shared briefly the story of my own journey from being an indifferent Christian to a passionate Christian. What is your story? Are you willing to share it with others? Do you?

What does our relationship with God have to do with finding purpose and hope in life? How does it help us to end up somewhere on purpose? How would you explain this to someone who says there are lots of people who have purposeful, hopeful lives but don't have any relationship with God, namely the LORD God revealed in Jesus Christ?

The Laodiceans are a wealthy bunch. Lukewarm, but wealthy. Jesus says that they think they are rich, but they couldn't be more wrong: "You say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (v. 17). What role might their financial independence play in their being lukewarm? This is yet another of Jesus' many warnings to the rich. Why do you think Jesus has so much to say about the dangers of wealth? How can money get in the way of our faith? I guess we could simply give it all away and perhaps we should. What else can we do?