



MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

www.mzluth.org

March 16, 2022

Pastor Randy Ott

Lenten Midweek 3

First Lesson: [Numbers 22:1-20](#)

Second Lesson/Sermon Text: [Revelation 2:12-17](#)

Gospel Lesson: [John 6:26-33](#)

Pergamum: Idolatry is the Deadliest Sin

Welcome to worship today at Morrison Zion Lutheran Church. We exist to glorify God. We have set out to do this by gathering around the Gospel so that we may grow in the Gospel and go to others with this Gospel.

Now is the day of God's favor. Now is the day of salvation. Amen.

In Christ, dear fellow redeemed:

If you belong to a local church at a time in history where pluralism is rampant, where people say it doesn't matter what god you worship as long as you are worshipping some god, if you live in a time when people are saying whatever you do is okay, just do whatever pleases you the best and that's what you should be doing, what would God come and say to you? If you really want to know, pay close attention to the letter to the church of Pergamum. Although that description sounds a lot like 21st Century America, it also sounds like 1st Century Pergamum.

Pergamum was kind of an interesting city when you start reading the history of it. It's in Turkey. There is a city that still exists at the same place yet today. It was high up on a hill, on a mountain. In fact in one part of the stone face of the mountain they had carved out on the side of the mountain a temple to Zeus, one of the chief gods. But that wasn't the only temple they had. They had all kinds of other temples. They had temples to Athena, Dionysus, and they had a temple to the god of medicine, Asclepius. The temple to the god Asclepius was symbolized by a serpent.

So when Jesus comes and has John write this letter to the church in Pergamum, he says "I know where you live, where Satan dwells." He talks about **where Satan has his throne**. It could be a reference to the serpent god because Scripture often speaks of the devil as that ancient serpent. It could refer to all these different false gods. But it's clear that Pergamum was a very religious place. It even had a temple to an unknown god.

It was also a very sophisticated place. It thought of itself highly as being incredibly wise and advanced. It's where papyrus was invented; that's where what they wrote on was actually first developed and used. It's said that in Pergamum they had 20,000 books there. They had great pride in their wisdom. They stayed there until Mark Antony crated them off to Egypt, to the library at Alexandria. So if they are taking it to the library in Alexandria, these guys must have been the hoity-toity of the early 1st Century Roman world.

When Jesus writes to them, notice first of all Jesus identifies Himself to the people that were living in a place that prized their wisdom and all their different gods. He says, ***"These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword."*** Jesus identifies Himself and who He is and what He is about with the one who has a sharp, double-edged sword at the introduction to the seven letters to these seven historic churches that were around modern day Turkey. He is the one who has the double-edged sword coming out of His mouth that is walking among the lampstands, which are the churches, and the messengers He holds in His hands, the angels He holds in His hands, which are the pastors of those churches. So He sends this letter, the one who has the double-edged sword, to the angel, or the pastor of this church to share this because this is what God is concerned about for them at that time. "I know you live where Satan lives. I know you have all this wisdom that is surrounding you but look at how they are using their wisdom. You Christians there in Pergamum, you are saying that the only way to be right for all of eternity is through Jesus Christ. That doesn't set right with the people that worship all these other gods. You won't join in their festivals. You won't join in with their temple prostitutes. You won't come and have a good time with all of them, so you're kind of saying what they are doing is wrong and they don't like it. You're intolerant. You're unloving." They reacted with anger and they reacted with murder because here is what He says to commend the church of Pergamum. ***"Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city..."*** That's all we know of Antipas. But like the other Christians there in Pergamum, many of them stood firm when they were being attacked for being unloving or intolerant. They stood on the Gospel of Jesus; that Jesus is the only way to heaven, that all these other gods are nothing, and that the Lord is the only true God. And it led to some of them being put to death and being attacked.

That doesn't sound at all like the world we live in today, does it? Where if you say that Jesus is the only way to heaven, you're unloving? And if you say that certain things are sins, you're unloving, you're intolerant, you're judgmental, and you think you're better than everyone else?

I suppose the little Pharisee inside of each one of us would really like me to go on about how terrible people are out there and how the world around us is going to hell in a hand basket, but did you notice that's not what Jesus does? He acknowledges all those

truths. "This is where Satan lives, where Satan has his throne and all that stuff. I know where you're living. I know what you're going through." But He doesn't talk about how terrible they are. He says ***"Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality."*** Balak wanted Balaam to curse the Israelites when he came in. You heard that in the First Lesson. God would not let him do it. When Balaam when back there, he would open his mouth because Balak wanted him to curse it and Balaam would utter a blessing on the Israelites. God would not let him speak anything but a blessing on the Israelites. Balak wasn't happy. But eventually, what we're told here is that Balaam taught him to entice the Israelites. "I can't speak a curse on them but here is what you could do. You could lead them away to worship false gods, to blend in more with the society around them by sexual immorality, like the practice of the Nicolaitans."

The Nicolaitans were real good. They'd fit in great today. They seem to be the people that said it's much easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. Let's just do whatever we want and then God will forgive us anyhow. They said do whatever you want whether God calls it sin or not. He says "I have that against you, too, because you are doing that." Go back and read through [Numbers 22-25](#) sometime today and see how God views this.

We seem to think God is okay with sin. We seem to think that if God has said something is sin and we've decided it's not, God knows we're smarter than He is. Go back and read it and see what happens when there is a curse that comes on the Israelites because they committed all this sexual immorality and were doing all these things. Going to the temples and the temple prostitutes of these false gods, so much so that one Israelite, as the elders are sitting there at the gate, brings a Midianite woman back right in front of them, takes her to his tent, and they go in and drive a spear through the back of the man and through the stomach of the woman. I wonder what they were doing. Then the Israelites put to death those who were doing this and then God's anger was still. But we seem to think today that God just thinks sin is fun.

If you can read Scripture and tell me sin is no big deal, then you don't understand what Jesus went through to pay for your sins. We seem to think it's no big deal that God left heaven and became one of us and went through everything we go through so that He could be perfect in our place and then die in our place. So the question I have for you is where have we become Nicolaitans? Where have we caved into Balak and Balaam? What are the things that God says are sin and we say "They aren't that bad anymore"?

In the world around us, I think we see a lot of things where the god of this day and age is self. If it's something I feel is okay and it's good for me, then it's fine. All this self-actualization and I decide what is best for me and so much so that now I was born male but really I'm a female or whatever else you decide to choose, we've made ourselves our

own gods, where we decide what is right and what is wrong. I can kind of see that at times. I think God has been pretty straight forward in things that He tells us are blessings for us, things that He tells us He wants us to do, and yet we at times say "No, no, that's not really what He meant." I think God is pretty straight forward when He says, "...let us not give **up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching** ([Hebrews 10:24-25](#))."

God tells us it is a blessing in our life if we gather together around His Word and Sacraments to be strengthened by Him and to strengthen and encourage one another. Yet we seem to have the feeling that if people decide for decades not to come to worship, that's okay. They'll come back eventually. I don't think that's what God says. In fact, I'm pretty sure that when He says "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another... ([Colossians 3:16](#))," He is calling every believer to teach and admonish one another. But we have evidently decided that this isn't sin anymore and that if we encourage people to stay close to Jesus through worshipping, WE are the problem. I don't buy it. I think that's caving in to Balak, Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

The only guide we have for our life is God's Word. He tells us of blessings and curses. In fact, He says the same thing to the people in Pergamum. He says, "I have this against you, so repent therefore! Otherwise I will come soon to fight against them with the sword of my mouth." The double-edged sword of the Word of God can attack or it can defend. It can attack by showing us our sin and what our sin deserves. The Law speaks judgment on us. It can attack us. Or it can come and defend us and show us how, through faith in Christ, our sins are taken away completely and absolutely and God's love for us is unfailing. What God is saying to Pergamum is (I think) what He says to every local church of every era. "If you're going to let your ideas come before mine, repent or I'm going to come with my sword." So either He is going to come to defend or to attack. Which do you want it to be?

If you want the comfort of the Gospel and defending it, then stay close to Jesus and repent whenever you see yourself (and we all do it), we all put ourselves ahead of God at one time or another. Don't make excuses. Don't rationalize it. Just throw it at the cross of Christ and know that in Christ you are forgiven.

God also speaks of that in His letter to Pergamum. Look at what He says. **"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious..."** The one who stays connected to Jesus in repentance and not excuse making, **"I will give some of the hidden manna."** What is the hidden manna? It is the heavenly food. It's not the manna that was in the wilderness. It's the manna that is Jesus Christ. It is His live and death in our place. It's the manna that leads to an eternity of this incredible time with God forever. It is what He gives us in the Sacrament. It's

what He gives us in the Gospel message in the Word. When we have that, He gives ***that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.*** I believe the white stone refers to the practice and trials of that time. Black stone meant guilty; white stone meant not guilty. If you stay connected to Jesus Christ, repent and stop making excuses in defending sin and thinking you're smarter than God, He tells you by giving you the white stone. You are declared not guilty through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Christians are the only ones that know what that white stone is about because that new name is "Christian," little Christ, who puts the Father's will ahead of our own and seeks to always live to the glory of God because God has taken away our sins through the life and death of Jesus Christ. Amen.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ([Philippians 4:7](#).) Amen.