

**Come, Eat from the Tree of Life!**  
**Revelation 4: 1 – 11; Revelation 2: 1 – 7**  
**Letter to the Church of Ephesus**

It was Shakespeare who said, “All the world’s a stage...”  
John of Patmos would have agreed.  
The visions he records in the last book of the bible, Revelations,  
form a great theatrical work.  
It can be broken down into a drama with seven acts, each composed of seven scenes.  
At the beginning is a prologue, at the end an epilogue,  
just as in Greek drama of the era.  
Imagine the great amphitheatres built of massive amounts of stone  
that are found in cities of the Roman empire like Ephesus.  
The theatre in Ephesus could hold 25,000 people.  
The seating was built in a semi-circle facing a raised stage  
with a backdrop or wall behind and an area behind that  
where actors could move or change costume.  
Two wings come out from either side and in front one can imagine  
the façade of a temple or palace.  
On the ground below the stage is a pagan altar for rituals involved in Emperor-worship.  
For in John’s time, the Emperor Domitian had proclaimed that  
the people of the Roman Empire should worship **him**.  
Like his fathers before him, Domitian proclaimed that he **was** a god and a son of god.

The play – John’s cosmic drama – opens with a vision of Christ.  
John hears a voice like a loud trumpet and turns to see who it is that is speaking.  
In front of him, John sees seven golden lamp stands –  
- imagine a Jewish menorah -  
and only after that makes out the figure of one like the Son of Man.  
John falls at his feet  
but Christ puts his hand on John and says,  
“Don’t be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one.  
I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever...”  
Then Christ asks John to take a message –  
words addressed to the churches, seven representing fullness, all the churches.  
We will come back to one of those messages in a moment.

Following the messages to the seven churches,  
the second act opens with a scene from heaven, a scene of worship.  
Imagine the drama of a divine throne room  
where the throne of God is surrounded by twenty-four elders,  
each seated upon a throne, each wearing a golden crown.  
Living creatures, human and animal, sing without ceasing to God.  
“Holy, holy, holy,  
the Lord God the Almighty,  
who was and is and is to come.”

The Emperor Domitian orders everyone under the control of the Roman Empire to bow down and worship him, to make sacrifices and offerings to him, to sing his praises.  
In this drama, in this divine throne room, John shows us the real source of life.  
Here we see God -  
who is more powerful, more awesome, more holy and righteous than a man like Domitian could even imagine!  
It's vital that, in speaking to small communities of Christians, hugely outnumbered by pagans of the Roman Empire John makes the truth unmistakably clear.  
Domitian and his soldiers may have killed Christians.  
They may be watching and waiting to trap others.  
But the vulnerability and suffering of Christian believers is not for nothing.  
The God they know in Jesus Christ is the sovereign Lord of all history!  
Take courage! Have faith! Put your hope in God!  
Join the elders, join creation to worship God  
whose justice and truth and eternal love will never end.  
That glimpse of heaven is what the churches need to see.

Let's go back to Act 1, scene 1.

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus, write..."

John has good things to say to this congregation that lives in Ephesus, a provincial capital, wealthy and prosperous.  
The people of Ephesus pride themselves in their huge library.  
Their port welcomes goods and slaves from all over the Empire.  
The sign carved into the marble sidewalk tells where to find women who welcome travellers into their beds.  
It is a very cosmopolitan city.  
The apostle Paul spent two years in Ephesus and many people responded, becoming believers.  
In fact, so many people became Christians that the silversmiths who made statues of Artemis, goddess of Ephesus, began to lose business.  
Paul had been going to speak in the theatre of Ephesus but the silversmiths started a riot and Paul barely escaped with his life.

Later John, who wrote Revelation, became pastor of the Ephesian church but he, too, was exiled to the island of Patmos.

From Patmos, John addresses the angel of the church of Ephesus.

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance.

I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers...

I know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name and that you have not grown weary."

There is much to acknowledge, much to praise.  
It is not easy to continue faithfully without a pastor  
yet they continue to work hard, to do good works,  
to use their minds in thinking about teachings.  
There are many strengths in this congregation.  
But John is concerned about the people.  
“I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”  
“...you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

Do you sense any similarities to our congregation?  
Do you see people working hard,  
    coming out to choir practice,  
    preparing lessons for children and youth,  
    organizing ways to help the community around us,  
    visiting the sick and shut-ins,  
    keeping up with pressures to earn an income and still find time to worship?  
Do you see an earnestness about us?  
Do you see us going through the motions of what we think we should be doing?  
Do you sense an emptiness at our heart?  
An emptiness that comes from hard work and tiredness  
because, somewhere along the line,  
we forgot it's all about love?  
That love is not about doing our duty,  
it's not about working hard to do the right thing,  
it's not about looking like a Christian.  
It's about being loved.  
It's about being precious and treasured.  
That is the reality that can fill our hearts  
and bring joy into the many things we do as the church.  
But that can be tough for congregations to believe.  
Inside we think we should be doing more, being better, getting bigger.  
We alternate between working very hard and giving up if things don't happen.  
What would happen to our congregation  
if we believed, in our heart of hearts, that we – all of us together - are beloved of God?  
What would happen to our congregation  
if we remembered the passion of our first love for Jesus?  
What would happen to our congregation  
if we crept back into the garden of Eden, to the scene of our creation,  
to the moment of falling in love,  
to the tree in the centre of the garden  
and heard God invite us to come, eat from the tree of **life**!  
What would happen if we stopped trying so hard  
long enough to hear the words: I love you.

Here's the paradox that begins John's drama:  
People who want to see Jesus Christ need to look at the churches.

The churches aren't perfect, the congregations aren't whole.  
Each congregation faces struggles, has strengths, has weaknesses.  
Yet, Jesus Christ walks here,  
in the midst of this imperfect, struggling, faithful yet weak church.  
Jesus Christ can be seen here,  
among the seven golden lamp stands that are the seven churches.

What wondrous love is this!  
And in the huge cosmic drama of the history of the world,  
the unfolding story of the redemption of all humanity,  
the churches play a significant role.  
Seated on the divine throne, surrounded by the worship of creation,  
God calls the seven churches – us – to help in the redemption of the world.  
In the midst of human empires, ruled by greed and love of power,  
God calls us to witness to another way:  
the way of the Lamb.  
Who we are as congregations matters.  
How we see ourselves fitting into this cosmic drama matters.  
It matters because God's justice, truth and love  
struggle for the soul of this world.  
We are called to be faithful witnesses to the Lamb,  
the love at the centre of the universe.

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