

**THIRD MIDWEEK LENTEN DEVOTION    February 23, 2005**  
**St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI**

**WE FACE TESTS    Revelation 2:8-17**

How many of us like to take tests? Some people do. Many people don't. Many people panic when they have to take a test. When we were in school, tests were just a normal routine. After you get out into the work force, the tests are different. When you retire you have different tests. A test is not always where you have to answer questions on a sheet of paper or verbally. We have tests of our principles, values and morals. We are tested in how we will react to certain situations, challenges, illnesses and other incidents that might happen in our lives. We are tested by the devil to see what we will choose when he places certain temptations before us. When you are tempted to drown your sorrows and anxieties in a bottle, will you get drunk or won't you? When you are filled with anger and hurt, will you lash out at others and say things, you later regret or will you handle your anger in a more thoughtful and open way as you talk it out with others.

In our Passion history reading for today we heard how Peter handled the test that was placed before him. Would he confess that he knew Jesus and was one of his disciples or would he not? We know that three times Peter failed. However, we also know that Peter was overcome with guilt and shame for what he had done. We also know that our Savior Jesus forgave and forgot that sin and reinstated Peter as one of his apostles after our Savior's resurrection from the dead. We also saw another person put to the test, Jesus. He was tested and questioned before the high priests. Jesus, however, did not fail his test. The Bible tells us that "he was in all points tempted as we are, yet he was without sin." (Hebrews 4:15b) Jesus got an A+ on the tests he faced. And his A+ is placed on our report card..

As we continue our study of Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, our focus today is on our Savior's words to two different churches – the church in Smyrna and Pergamum. As we look at both of these congregations we want to look at **I) The Struggles that the People Faced**. As we look carefully we see Jesus say to the people in Pergamum **II) You Need to Change your Way of Thinking**. As our Savior concludes his words to both congregations **III) He Sets Before Them Wonderful Promises**.

**THE STRUGGLES THAT THE PEOPLE FACED**

Life is never easy for anyone. At times you and I may look at someone and say, "Oh, they have it made." They don't. No one does. Every one of us has to struggle with different problems, different weaknesses and temptations that we face in life. The Christians in the city of Smyrna, which today is modern Izmir, Turkey, had many things

going against them. Jesus says they were extremely poor and they were being oppressed for their faith and trust in Jesus. They were being slandered by those who claimed to be Jews, but Jesus said were really of the synagogue of Satan. On top of this, a number of them were going to be thrown into prison for a short time for their faith. The believers in Pergamum faced different challenges. Jesus calls the city the place where Satan lives. Why? It is possible our Lord calls it Satan's dwelling place because of the many temples to heathen gods that were located in Pergamum. There were temples to Zeus, the chief of the Greek gods, Athena, the goddess of wisdom and women's crafts, Aesculapius, the god of healing and Dionysius, the god of wine. Pergamum was also the provincial capital for the Romans in this part of Asia Minor and so there were temples there to the Roman Emperor. I guess, today you could say it would be like living in a city where adult book stores, strip joints and bars dominated the main street and even the side streets of town. These people did not look with favor on the Christians. In fact, we are told that Antipas, was murdered for his faith. Life was not easy for these first century Christians in the cities of Smyrna and Pergamum.

Life is not getting easier for Christians in 21<sup>st</sup> century United States of America. We now live in a culture where the murder of the unborn is accepted as normal and a right. We are now facing the legalization and legitimatizing of same sex marriages. Living together as husband and wife outside of marriage is often assumed and expected before a couple actually gets married. Road rage, revenge and getting even are becoming more common place and accepted as a way to deal with your anger and frustrations. These are temptations that we as God's people face regularly. If we don't go along with these things, we aren't being put in jail or murdered yet, but we are ridiculed by the media and the unbelievers in our society as not being in tune with the times. Even so-called Christian leaders and pastors are coming out and promoting the blessings of same sex unions. The Bible, the Word of God, is being thrown aside as outmoded and not in touch with reality.

## **YOU NEED TO CHANGE YOUR WAY OF THINKING**

It is easy to fall into these traps. If everyone around you is doing it, it's hard to swim against the current of your culture. That's what happened to some of the members of the church in Pergamum. Jesus says, "I have this against you,; You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans." (Rev. 2:14-15) There were those who got caught up in worshiping at the different idol temples and eating food that had been offered to these idols in worship. They also had gotten trapped into sexual sins. Again some of this was part of the worship of the idols at the temples in Pergamum. In addition our Lord mentions holding to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. We don't know much about what this group taught, but Bible scholars think that it may have been the teaching that since we are forgiven, we can live as sinful and immoral lives as we want. Jesus says to these people, "Repent therefore! Otherwise I will soon come to you and

fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” (Rev. 2:16) Our Lord calls these people to change their thinking and turn away from these practices, views, opinions and thoughts.

You and I can be tempted to think and act the same way. It is so easy for us to think and say, “Well, Jesus died for me. I’m forgiven.” And then go out and openly sin and think nothing of it. Paul says to that type of thinking, “What then shall we say? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Romans 6:1-2) We have been called to change our thinking and our actions, to repent. We can also be drawn into the evil practices of our culture as were members of the church in Pergamum. We start talking, acting and living like all the unbelievers who are all around us. We welcome them into our homes on a daily basis on our TV screens. We listen to their preaching and teaching which is often very appealing, humorous and before long we adopt the same attitudes and behaviors as those people that we have welcomed into our homes through the television and computer.

## **HE SETS BEFORE US WONDERFUL PROMISES**

The struggle we face is not easy. However, our Savior sets before us some wonderful promises to encourage us in our battle so that we don’t lose heart and give up. Jesus says to the people of Smyrna, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev. 2:10) and “he who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.” (Rev 2:11b) Our Lord promises us the crown of everlasting life in heaven. He also assures us that the second death, that is, hell, will not be able to harm us. To the people in Pergamum Jesus promises, “To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.” (Rev 2:17) What is this hidden manna? Remember God gave the children of Israel manna in the wilderness to feed them and keep them alive for their 40 years of wandering. John in his Gospel writes, of the manna that God gave to his people through Moses and then he writes of the true bread of heaven which gives us everlasting life. That is Jesus Christ. This hidden manna gives us everlasting life. Jesus then refers to the white stone that will be given to those who overcome. White stones were used by juries in Greek times to indicate that someone was declared innocent. The new name that is written on that stone may be thought of as the new people that we will be in glory. No longer will we be infected with sin and its consequences. We will be holy and we will live in glory and bliss forever.

These promises that our Savior set before the believers in Smyrna and Pergamum, he also sets before you and me. As we remain faithful and work with the Lord’s help to overcome the temptations and tests, we can look forward to the rewards that Jesus Christ has won for us. Each of us certainly does face tests. We struggle. But God forgives and strengthens and he promises us that when our battle is over, we finally overcome and we will receive the crown of life.

Amen.

