

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark Peters and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. It's good to be back and to see your faces again; thank you for praying for me and my family while I was visiting with our International Workers in Senegal and Northern Iraq. Each Sunday, over the next month or so, I plan to share with you a number of stories that capture what I saw and experienced.

I want to begin with the obvious question—*why go to Senegal or Northern Iraq?* Our North Shore church belongs to a family of churches known as the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada; we are one of more than 400 such churches in Canada.

A former president of the Alliance is quoted as saying, “The Alliance isn't everywhere in the world yet, but it's in our list.”¹ Our vision, from the very beginning has been to go to least reached peoples. Over the course of two weeks in Senegal and Iraq, this vision took deeper root in my heart—we want to go where the name of Christ is not known, where people have not heard.

A part of the reason that we need to pioneer churches among least reached peoples is that most other denominations and Christian organizations are not doing this. It is estimated that at present, between 90-95% of the missionary work being done on foreign fields is focused on either strengthening existing indigenous churches or in relief and development work. There's nothing wrong with either of these ventures, in fact, the Alliance is been involved in both, but, our core calling is providing **access to Jesus**. We want least reached peoples to have access to Jesus.

It is this vision that has taken the Alliance to Senegal. Senegal is a country of 13 million people, and half of this population is made up of those who identify as the Wolof and Fulani people. There are many different African nations represented in Senegal, and, there are quite a few different African churches, but none that are reaching out to the Wolof or Fulani. They are considered least reached peoples because among these 6.5 million people, only 200 Christians are known.

Gary and Sharon have been International Workers with the Alliance in Africa for over 30 years, and just last year they were redeployed to Dakar to reach out to Wolof and Fulani people. On one of the days we met with a handful of Fulani Christians and we had the opportunity to hear their stories firsthand.

One of the men, who I'm going to refer to as Martin, converted from Islam to Christianity 4 or 5 years ago. And a part of what makes his story remarkable is how he first heard the good news concerning Jesus. Martin was sleeping one night, and Jesus appeared to him in a dream. It's no surprise that Martin knew who Jesus was, all Moslems do—Jesus is spoken about in the Koran, but He is described a holy man, a prophet, but nothing more.

When Jesus appeared to Martin, he was overwhelmed by the light of His presence; the vision he encountered seemed at odds with what the Koran said about Him. When Martin woke up from this dream, he was disturbed and afraid; he didn't tell anyone about his encounter and felt no good would come of it.

¹ Peter Nanfelt.

It wasn't long before Jesus visited him again, and once again, Martin was deeply disturbed; he began to question the Koran's teaching about Jesus—from what he had seen and heard, Jesus seemed to be something much more. A third time Jesus visited Martin, this time in a vision that took place in the middle of the day. Martin was in his bedroom when Jesus appeared and began to speak to him. He called out to his wife in fear, asking “*Do you see that man in the corner of the room?*” Jesus had appeared for his eyes only; his wife couldn't see.

This third appearing of Jesus spurred Martin to action. He heard about a pastor in a neighbouring village and began to visit him in order to hear more about Jesus. Over a period of months Martin met with this pastor, and he began to tell his wife and children what he was doing; they were unsettled by Martin's pursuit and feared where it might lead. Where Martin lives, there is a huge cost to following Christ—when you leave Islam, you often lose everything: your marriage, your family, your friends, your standing in the community, your job, etc.

When the village found out that Martin had become a Christian, his wife and children experienced such social pressure that they begged him to forsake Christ and return to Islam. After meeting Jesus, Martin knew he couldn't turn his back on Him, but he didn't want his wife and children to suffer on his behalf, and so he moved to a neighbouring city and started over. He found work, joined a small Christian fellowship and began to grow in Christ; each month he sent home the money he made in order to provide for his family.

Every so often one of his children would come to see him and plead with him to forsake Christ and return home; each time Martin would tell them about the difference Jesus was making in his life. After

three years of separation, convinced of the change they saw in his life, and convinced that he would not let go of Jesus, the family asked Martin to come home. Since his return home, 3 of his children have become Christians, and with a twinkle in his eye, Martin told us that his wife is warming up to the idea of Jesus.

God is at work in Dakar among the Fulani people; Jesus Himself is the great evangelist, visiting people in dreams and visions and calling people to respond to Him. A church is just beginning and Fulani Bible translation is nearly complete. In the weeks to come I will be saying more about the Alliance work in Senegal and Iraq, but at this time I want to turn our attention to the Book of Revelation. Let me encourage you to turn with me to Revelation 2:1-7.

Over the past two weeks, both Paul and Mardi have set the stage for how to read and understand John's *Revelation*. The first 4 verses of chapter 1 indicate that this book belongs to three different genres of literature: apocalypse, prophecy, and letter.

The word “**apocalypse**” simply means “revelation,” and while this word has come to be associated with the end of the world, for John it meant something more. In the Spirit, John was “transported” to heaven where he was able to see God, and God's work in the world, from heaven's perspective.

As **prophecy**, John stands in the tradition of the great Old Testament prophets; in fact, *Revelation* is saturated with Old Testament quotations and allusions. As **letter**, *Revelation* was written to seven churches scattered throughout Asia Minor.

Revelation is filled with numbers, colours, images, and beasts, all of which contribute to the theological meaning of the book. And while there is disagreement over how these different images are to be interpreted, the main themes are widely agreed upon. *Revelation* called the 1st century church to persevere; persecution was coming and things were going to get a lot worse before they got better.

Revelation answers a question that many people have asked throughout history, a question that is relevant for all of us today—**who is Lord over the world?** When the righteous suffer and the wicked flourish, people of faith begin to wonder if evil hasn't gotten the upper hand. One of the central images in *Revelation* is the throne of God. Despite evidence to the contrary, *Revelation* declares that God is ruling over creation, and one day He will overthrow evil and rule without rival.² In the mean time we are invited to trust, pray, and depend on His provision so that we might remain faithful to Christ in the midst of opposition.

Our text this morning is the first of seven messages, directed to seven different churches in Asia Minor.³ Each message follows a similar pattern:

- it begins with an address to the angel of the church in a given city;

- Jesus is then described, borrowing words or images taken from Rev. 1:13-18;
- Jesus then speaks a word of praise about the church in question: *I know your deeds*;
- this word of praise is followed by a word of correction—*but I have this against you*;
- then the church is invited to pay attention to what the Spirit has said;
- the message concludes with a promised reward that will take effect when Jesus returns.⁴

I'm going to read Revelation 2:1-7 and then use the six-fold pattern to draw meaning from the text; let me invite you to follow along as I read. *“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.*

4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. 5 Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove

² Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 8-9.

³ Why are only seven churches addressed? We know that there were many other churches that could have been mentioned—Colossae, Thessalonica, and Antioch to name a few. In the Bible, the number 7 is often used symbolically, indicating completeness or perfection. The 7 churches mentioned in Revelation are to be understood as representative of all churches; in addressing these 7, all churches are included.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The NIV Application: The Book of Revelation*, 105.

your lampstand from its place. 6 But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

a. Our text opens in the following way, “To **the angel** of the church in Ephesus write”. Human beings have five primary senses through which we experience the world around us—we see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. But *Revelation* reminds us that there is more going on than we can see with our eyes, or touch with our fingers—the unseen spirit-world is every bit as real. We believe in a God who is unseen; is it really so hard to believe that He has appointed supernatural beings—angels—to serve and watch over the church that He loves? Even now, there are angels all around.

But lest we get carried away, let us remember that angels, like us, are created beings, and as such, the Bible never encourages us to look for them or to worship them. In fact, were we to encounter an angel firsthand, they would be the first to say, “*Look to Jesus! Trust Jesus! Worship Jesus!*”

“To the angel of the church **in Ephesus** write”. The ancient city of Ephesus had a lot in common with present day Vancouver—it was a city where ocean, sky, and mountains met. It was a city rich in art, culture, and beauty; a city of commerce and wealth. At the time Revelation was written, Ephesus was the 4th largest city in the Roman Empire, with a population of a quarter million people.

Ephesus was home to a stadium that held a capacity crowd of 24,000 people; the Temple of Artemis was twice the size of a football field and had 100 marble columns, each 55 feet high.

The church in Ephesus had been founded by the apostle Paul, soon after was pastored by Paul’s protege, Timothy, who was later followed by John himself. In fact, church history tells us that John pastored the church in Ephesus while he was writing the Gospel that bears his name. Ephesus was a church that John knew firsthand.

b. After the opening address, vs. 1 describes Jesus in the following way, “*These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.*”

This language comes directly from Revelation 1:13, and 16; the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven golden lampstands are the seven churches.⁵ I want you to notice two things. First, Jesus *holds* the seven angels—this word describes His authority; the angels are His servants and they live to do His bidding.

Second, Jesus walks *among* His churches, which is to say, He is present, engaged, and on top of what’s happening in our lives. Last week Pastor Mardi said that Jesus is in the middle of everything; she got it exactly right. Jesus isn’t far off and removed. He’s not looking down from above or on the outside looking in. He sees and knows what we’re facing because He is present *among* us; this is why we can trust Him.

⁵ Jesus Himself offers this interpretation in Revelation 1:20.

c. After this brief description, Jesus speaks three words of praise for the Ephesian church; the first and third commendation are straight forward, but the second needs some explanation.

- their hard work
- for not tolerating wicked people; and for
- their perseverance in the face of persecution.

In commending the Ephesians for not tolerating wicked people, Jesus targets a specific group of people. This is not a general statement about those who do not know Jesus, instead, the “wicked” are defined as those who claim to represent Jesus (apostles) but have twisted the gospel and misrepresent Jesus to the world. The Ephesian church is commended for their commitment to preserving the truth.

This remains an important word for the church in North America today because many claim to represent Jesus, but they have turned away from the truth.

- There are those who teach that Jesus’ plan for your life is to make you happy, healthy, and wealthy—as long as you have enough faith. They are false apostles, with a false gospel.
- There are those who call themselves Christians, but have abandoned the very Scriptures that point to Jesus. In their desire to be relevant, they have completely capitulated to cultural values. They are false apostles, with a false gospel.

When a church ignores the authority of God’s Word, it’s only a matter of time until they drift away from God. Let us be the kind of church—and people—who are committed to the truth of God’s Word, now matter how unpopular it becomes.

d. After praising the Ephesian church, Jesus speaks a word of correction—vs. 4: “*Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.*”

Hard working? Check. Committed to the cause of Jesus? Check. Clinging to the truth? Check. But somewhere along the way, their love began to diminish. Vs. 5: “*Consider the heights from which you have fallen!*”

illus: Do you remember what “first love” feels like? The first time I met my wife was on a blind date; we had been set up by the former pastor of this church. The first time I saw her, my heart skipped a beat; by the end of the date, I was completely smitten. At the time I was living in Calgary and Naomi was living in North Van, but the distance couldn’t stand in the way of our love—we wrote letters back and forth, and talked on the phone for hours.

Every month one of us would fly to the other person’s city and we would cram a month’s worth of activity and conversation into a 3 day period. I began to celebrate her “half birthday” as an excuse to buy her a gift; on International Nurse’s Day (May 12th) I sent a card and had flowers delivered. Time seemed to stand still when we were together; I hung on her every word—I couldn’t get enough.

Darrell John writes, “First love is love that always has time for the beloved. Attentive, eager, seeking to please, extravagant.”⁶

Here’s the question: how does “first love” begin to fade? One author writes, “Little changes, like small steps all along the way, bring you

⁶ Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship On The Edge*, 58.

to a different place. One day you wake up and things are not the same anymore.”⁷ As a husband, or wife, it’s not about manufacturing a feeling, it’s about remembering “first love” and returning to the posture that was once the norm—attentive, eager, seeking to please, extravagant.

Do you remember when you first came to know Jesus? Or a time when you felt especially close to Him? Were you overwhelmed by His mercy, forgiveness, and love? Were you eager to listen, hungry for His Word, delighting to worship and obey Him. Do you remember a time when your love for Jesus was reflected by a deep love for His people? A passion to be with other Christians, to serve, to love, to be served, and to be loved.

You may be working hard for the church, committed to the Scriptures, and persevering through persecution, but Jesus wants to know—*do you love Me, and My people, as you once did?*

Vs. 5, “*Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.*” Here, Jesus offers three actions steps to return to “first love”: remember, repent, and return.

- **Remember:** “First love is love that always has time for the beloved. Attentive, eager, seeking to please, extravagant.” Jesus is worthy of this kind of love. It’s more doing what’s right, or working hard for Him; it’s our heart He’s after, and He won’t settle for anything less.
- **Repent:** the word means to stop, turn around, and go in the opposite direction. Repentance is more than saying, “*I’m sorry,*”

it requires a change in behaviour. “Little changes, like small steps all along the way, bring you to a different place.” What is standing in the way of love for God? What changes need to be made in order to return to love?

- **Return:** vs. 5 says, “Repent and *do the things you did at first.*” A husband and wife can rekindle love by returning to what they did at first—hanging on every word, spending time together, celebrating one another, and joyfully serving one another. What used to mark our life with Jesus that has faded with time? If your heart for God has grown cold, return to the things you did at first.

e. The message to Ephesus has a two part conclusion, beginning with a call to listen. “*Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*” It is one thing to hear Jesus speak, it is another thing to listen and respond. What is Jesus saying to you this morning? What is He saying, by the Spirit, to our church this morning? Will His words go in one ear and out the other, or will we listen and respond?

f. Christ’s message to the Ephesian church concludes with a promise in vs. 7: “*To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*”

A more literal translation of vs. 7 reads, “To the one who **conquers**,” this is military language. We live in a flesh-and-blood world, and yet the unseen spiritual realm surrounds us on every side. On the surface, our difficulties appear to be the cause of “natural” phenomenons: cranky family members, insecure supervisors, or self-absorbed friends. But Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that our battle is not against

⁷ Stephen Lawhead, *Taliesin*, 30.

flesh and blood “*but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*”

We are locked in a heavenly battle and many of us are completely unaware. “*To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*” This is a promise concerning the life to come—eternity waits for those who trust in Jesus. Throughout the book of Revelation, Jesus is described the One who conquers. He is the One who has battled sin, death, and the devil for us—He has won the victory, triumphing over death through His own death on the cross. In *Revelation*, we conquers not through the use of force, but by remaining faithful to Jesus until the very end.

Conclusion: The One who calls us to return to love, is the One who has loved us with an everlasting love. Ephesians 1:5 says that *in love* [God] *predestined us for adoption as sons and daughters*. Ephesians 2:4-5 says, “*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions*”.

Worship

Prayer Ministry

Q&A following the service in the Upper Room

Benediction: 1 John 4:19 says, “*We love Him because He first loved us.*” May the Holy Spirit fill you today, so that you overflow with the love of the Father.