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Scripture: A Message to the Church - Ephesus

Anyone watch Netflix? I have a confession to make. I have been obsessed with a television show lately. It is called, Shetland? Has anyone heard of Shetland? It is a crime drama that takes place amidst the stunning landscape of the Shetland Islands located about 160 Km NE of the Scottish mainland. My roots are Scottish so there is something about this show that just calls out to me, even though I can barely understand what they are saying most of the time. Oh, it is English they are speaking but with the strong, Scottish brogue it reminds me a lot of my grandfather.

The show revolves around Shetland Police Detective Jimmy Perez and his attempt to solve the latest murder that occurs on this tiny island. Each episode we follow Perez and his crack investigative team through the twists and turns to determine the identity of the killer. But, *things aren't always as they seem*. The suspect that appears to be the most likely to commit the crime at the beginning is exonerated and the least likely person is usually the one found guilty in the end. Have you watched shows like this? You find yourself coming to one conclusion and in the end things get flipped around and everything goes in a different direction and we are left surprised. *Things aren't always as they seem*.

Perhaps something like this has happened to you when you met a new coworker, neighbor or classmate. You make some snap judgements initially but the more you get to know that person, *things aren't always as they seem* and they end up being different than you thought and it surprises you. Sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

Or maybe you have read a certain situation one way and it ends up going completely opposite to the way you had imagined. When I was 16, I began to take

notice of a young lady that had started to hang around my social circle at the time. She seemed to take an interest in me as well. We got along great. Soon, I found myself looking for opportunities to see her. When I knew she would be at an event I was going to, I would take extra time and effort to ensure my hair was feathered perfectly, my Levi jeans were clean and pressed, my shirt unbuttoned enough to reveal my gold chain and my well-worn Kodiak work boots unlaced appropriately. It was the late 70's, after all.

Alas, on that fateful night when I was going to throw caution to the wind and ask her to go with me, I discovered it was not me she was interested in at all. She was using me to get to my buddy. Can you image? *Things aren't always as they seem*. Fortunately, just a year later, I discovered a woman that appreciated me for me. It was Carolyn and the rest as they say, is history.

It was 1st century Roman fabulist, Phaedrus who wrote, *"Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives many. The intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden."*

Today we begin a new message series at North Park and it is one that finds ourselves in the pages of the Book of Revelation. It is the very last book of the bible and some of you are thinking, finally! As Christians, we almost have this morbid sense of fascination with Revelation but I would suggest to you that it is one of the most misunderstood books of the bible.

Revelation is written in a style of literature called Apocalyptic. Just like we have different genres of literature today such as comedy, drama, fantasy, science fiction and horror, the bible also includes many different types of literary genres.

There are historical books, (Kings, Chronicles) wisdom books (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), letters (Galatians, Ephesians), prophecy (Isaiah, Jeremiah) and there is apocalyptic literature, found mostly in the Old Testament book of Daniel and New Testament book of Revelation.

Notice how the book of Revelation starts. Look at the opening line of,

Revelation 1:1

The revelation from Jesus Christ.

Literally the title of this biblical book could be, “The Apocalypse”. Revelation and apocalypse are synonymous. Unfortunately, in our culture today, this word apocalypse has come to mean, doom and gloom like something terrible is going to happen.

We talk about storms and natural disasters as being of apocalyptic proportions. They are devastating. But that is not at all what the people of the first century, the time when this book was written, would have thought, when they heard the word Apocalypse. *Things aren't always as they seem.*

They would have thought of something more inviting. Something that would impact the way that they live. Apocalypse in the Greek, the common language of the New Testament, simply meant, the unveiling. It was used when talking about lifting the cover off of a box or pulling back a curtain in a theatre. It meant opening up or maybe more dramatically, “breaking through”.

So, with that in mind, let's look again at the way the book of Revelation begins,

Revelation 1:1

The revelation from Jesus Christ

...which means this book of the bible is all about the lifting of the cover, the pulling back of the curtain and the breaking through of Jesus.

Revelation is all about Jesus. In no other book of the bible do we see Jesus as clearly and as compellingly as we do here. No other book of all of human literature crystallizes what it means to belong to and follow Jesus as the book of Revelation.

The purpose of Revelation is to open up more. There is more to this present moment than meets the eye. There is more to the flow of history than we can possibly know than just through our intellect and emotions. One last thing to say before we jump in. A distinctive of Apocalyptic literature is that it contains a lot of imagery, symbolism and numerology. The book of Revelation is chock full of images and pictures that are used specifically to get a point across in vivid detail.

Imagery can be hard for some of us, though. Perhaps especially for those of us who are more linear, black and white thinkers. But to read Revelation requires us to use our imagination to get a greater picture of what is going on because remember, *things are not always as they seem.*

So with all of that preamble, let's jump into the context of Revelation. Scholars believe that it was written by the Apostle John, Jesus' beloved disciple, around the year 96 AD. John is now in his mid-eighties and he is in exile on the Prison Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

Why was John on Patmos? The Roman government had rock quarries located there where criminals and troublemakers were sentenced to do hard labour. Let me explain. Throughout the first century, after Jesus' death and resurrection, life as a Christian in the Roman controlled world was difficult. In around 67 AD, the emperor Nero was literally feeding Christians to lions. The Apostles Peter and Paul were crucified at around this time for their faith but in 92 AD things got even worse. The Roman emperor who ruled the land at that time was Domitian. He was a paranoid man who lived in fear of being overthrown. So to make up for his insecurity he demanded that all his subjects throughout the entire Roman Empire worship him as their Lord and God. For Roman citizens, that was no big deal. They tended to worship many gods anyway so one more was no problem but it was for someone like John. He couldn't live with this edict. He was a follower of Jesus and there was only one true God to him and it wasn't Domitian.

Now the authorities could have sentenced John to death like they did so many other Christians at the time but John was a prominent leader in the Christian movement and killing him would have

made him a martyr. Insecure Domitian knew that nothing renews the spirit of a movement more than having a martyr! He was fearful of the Christians, so instead John was arrested and banished to Patmos in hopes that he would simply die quietly of old age. While John was incarcerated, he heard that the persecution grew worse for Christians and the Christian church. It was the church that he knew and loved. The church where he had served as a pastor. Many Christians were being harassed and losing their homes and businesses and many were murdered. This unsettled atmosphere leaked into the church as they were also dealing with internal issues of false teaching, heresy and immorality.

This sets the context for where we pick up the scripture that we want to focus on for the rest of our time.

Revelation 1:10-11, John writes this,

It was the Lord's Day, and I was worshipping in the Spirit. Suddenly, I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast. ¹¹ It said, "Write in a book everything you see, and send it to the seven churches in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea."

John was worshipping the Lord one day, much like we are doing here today. He was maybe reciting some scripture, perhaps singing a worship song or two and no doubt praying for the plight of his brothers and sisters in the faith. Jesus responds by giving him a revelation, an apocalypse. It is like Jesus pulls back a curtain and gives John a powerful vision of who he is and in Revelation 1:19-20, he tells John,

Revelation 1:19-20

"Write down what you have seen—both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen. ²⁰ This is the meaning of the mystery of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and the seven gold lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

Notice this rich imagery. Jesus reveals himself to John in a vision. He is standing in the midst of seven lampstands, holding seven stars. Numbers are

important in Revelation. The number seven represents wholeness or completeness in the bible. The lampstands represent these seven churches of this day, *Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea*. Why these seven? There were certainly many more churches in this society.

Well, it was in addressing these seven, remember seven represents completeness, that Jesus is actually speaking to all churches. These churches in Revelation represent all churches, including us today. What John is writing has to do with us as well. The stars that Jesus is holding in his right hand represent the seven angels of these churches, the messengers who inform the key people in each church. Jesus is telling, John, *I want you to write a message from me to these churches specifically, and to my followers everywhere. Tell them, this is what I see*. Then Jesus begins to recite his message.

Revelation 2:1, he begins with the church at Ephesus. Jesus says,

"Write this letter to the angel of the church in Ephesus. This is the message from the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the seven gold lampstands:"

It is noteworthy that Jesus starts with the church at Ephesus. A practical reason was that the city of Ephesus was the closest in geographic proximity to Patmos where John is writing. He knew that this letter would get to this church the quickest along the mail route of the day but there was another reason. Ephesus was the most influential of the seven cities that Jesus is addressing and the church at Ephesus was the most influential of all the churches.

Let me give you some details. Ephesus was the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire with a population of 225 000 people. That is about the size of the St. Catherines/ Niagara region today. It was a cosmopolitan, world class city with a major financial district. Ephesus had many banks that held large monetary deposits. It was the most important seaport on the western coast of Asia which brought many different ethnicities to the city. Ephesus was also proud to be the home of the worship of the mother goddess Artemis, as the Greeks called her. The Romans referred to her as Diana. She was a

fertility goddess, the very embodiment of sexuality and lust as depicted by her statue with many exposed breasts. The Temple of Diana in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The temple was built on a platform about the size of two football fields. It had 100 stone columns made of marble, each 55 feet high. This massive edifice cast quite a shadow over the city.

In the midst of this bustling, multicultural city of trade, finance, politics and religious plurality and idolatry emerged one of the most influential churches in the history of Christianity. The church of Ephesus was planted during a brief visit by the Apostle Paul and his coworkers, Priscilla and Aquilla. You can refer to the story in Acts 18.

Paul recognized the importance of Ephesus and returned to spend two and a half years there. This was the longest time he spent in any one place. He eventually had to flee the city because his preaching about Jesus began to disrupt the economy of the city. Does anyone know why? Well, one of the biggest industries in Ephesus was the making and selling of miniature statues of Diana/Artemis.

As more people came to faith in Jesus through Paul's preaching, they stopped buying the statues or idols. As the sales dropped, the owners of these businesses were enraged and a riot broke out, forcing Paul to leave the city. You can read about it in Acts 19. Paul left the church to his protégé, Timothy, who was eventually martyred by the Romans. Then the Apostle John, the writer of Revelation, took over as pastor of this church. It is thought that he wrote the Gospel of John during his time as pastor of the church at Ephesus.

Oh, and one more tidbit. One of the long time members of the church at Ephesus was Mary, the mother of Jesus. Can you imagine having Christmas Eve services with the mother of Jesus sitting in the front row?! You better get the details right! At the time of the writing of this book of Revelation, the church at Ephesus was the very centre of the Christian movement.

What could Jesus possibly have to say to this esteemed Church?

Revelation 2:2-3

"I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting.

Jesus gives his report on the condition of this renowned congregation. *I know all the things you do!* He begins with such glowing words of praise. What a church! This was the kind of place where leaders from all the other churches would come to attend leadership conferences and workshops to learn all of their principles for how to be a successful church.

This was a church that was buzzing with activity. They had all kinds of programs and ministries going on. The church building was open seven days a week with children's programs, youth programs and adult discipleship electives. They probably even had a "Going Deeper Guide" like us, jammed with excellent options to learn more about Jesus. All the members were actively involved serving and volunteering, doing what they could do to advance the Kingdom of God. Jesus continues in,

Revelation 2:2

I have seen your hard work.

These are diligent and conscientious people, pushing themselves for the cause of Christ. The congregation at Ephesus is willing to pay the price of loyalty and commitment. But there is more. Jesus goes on to say that he knows about their *patient endurance*. He is affirming that he knows that they have faced persecution and opposition for their beliefs. They resisted the pressure of not bowing to Domitian as Lord. They refused to participate in the idol worship of Diana/Artemis. They had been rejected by friends, lost business customers because of their beliefs and through it all, they are remained steadfast and committed. "Well done", Jesus says. I know your endurance. He's not done with the accolades. He goes on to say,

Revelation 2:2-3

*I know you don't tolerate evil people.
You have examined the claims of those who
say they are apostles but are not.
You have discovered they are liars.
You have patiently suffered for me without
quitting.*

Jesus knows that this church, his church was dedicated to living lives of purity. They didn't compromise their beliefs in the areas of morality and ethics regardless of the way the culture around them was shifting. They guarded the church against false doctrine and defended their faith. They were a discerning people who measured everything they heard and read against the teachings of Jesus. They didn't give in to the temptation to water down the gospel to make it more palatable to outsiders. They held firm to their beliefs.

These are some pretty incredible words of encouragement to this church from Jesus. If Jesus were to come here today and stand amongst us, and share these same sentiments with this church, let's be honest. We would take it, wouldn't we? Active. Hard working. Committed. Patient. Discerning. That is what anyone would want to see on a report card, right? Teachers, am I right? Parents? If your children brought home a report card with those words, that's not bad.

Unfortunately, Jesus didn't stop there in this message to the church at Ephesus. You are active, hard-working, committed, patient and discerning *but*,

Revelation 2:4

"But I have this complaint against you.

Oh oh... Given Jesus' words of commendation earlier, what could possibly be wrong? Remember, *things aren't always as they seem*. Jesus drops the bomb,

Revelation 2:4

*"But I have this complaint against you. You
don't love me or each other as you did at
first!"*

The one who holds the stars in his right hand, who walks among his churches and knows the true

condition of our hearts and souls, sees through all the activity, all the hard work, all the patience, all the discernment and tells the church that they are flawed at their very core.

*But I have this complaint against you. You
don't love me or each other as you did at
first!*

First love. What's first love? Does anyone know? We have just had Valentine's Day so this might serve as a bit of a Litmus test. First love is fresh and alive and tangible, isn't it?

If you celebrated Valentine's this year by purchasing gifts, chocolate, roses, or a piece of jewelry or you went out for dinner or you planned something special to remember the love you share with someone, you remembered first love. Or maybe you didn't spend money but went for a walk or made a special dinner at home. You made sure that you had intentional time to remember the love you share with one another, you are remembering first love. But, if you are married or have a significant other and you woke up on Friday, Feb 15 and suddenly had an ominous feeling like you may have forgotten something, you did. You have forgotten first love and a day in our calendar year that focuses on just that thing.

Or maybe you are like me and feel you don't need a Hallmark holiday to remember because you treat your special someone like every day is Valentine's Day. Well then, just disregard everything I have said. Let me ask you, do you remember, "first love"? Do you remember the feeling of falling in love? When that person was all that you could think of and thoughts of them consumed your day. Whatever you were doing, you just wanted to end so that you could be with them. Drawing hearts on your school note books or on your hand with your initials in the centre.

First love causes you to do silly, crazy things. I remember when Carolyn and I were falling in love. It was wonderful. We used to surprise each other with special gifts and tokens of appreciation. We would write love letters. I even went through a phase when I would write poetry to her.

I found a homemade Valentine's Day card I gave her in high school. Inside I wrote this, *Roses are Red. Carolyn's Eye are Brown. Today is Valentine's Day, So Please don't frown. (Cause I love you)* I didn't say it was good poetry! We would study together. Being with her even made grade 12 calculus seem exhilarating.

First love. Do you remember? Some of you are in the midst of it even now. I see you smiling. I am not just talking about a romantic love but maybe for you it is a deep and abiding friendship with someone.

For others, you are in a relationship that maybe has grown a little stale. The excitement and thrill has past and you have settled into a routine or maybe better stated, a rut. You have forgotten your first love. Do you remember your first love with Jesus? The time when you truly discovered how much he loves you. When he broke through into your life and gripped your heart and your relationship with him was so alive and you just wanted to spend time with him. Praying and reading his word. Do you remember when you just couldn't sing the worship songs to him loud enough, your heart was just bursting with praise and love? Do you remember when you encountered his presence in nature and you just felt so at peace. Do you remember when he saved you from an addiction or a low point in your life and gave you hope that a new day was possible?

Do you remember? Maybe some of you are there right now, but for others, you have forgotten your first love with Jesus and you find yourselves just going through the motions in your faith. Oh, on the outside, everything looks good. *But things aren't always as they seem.* You are active in the church, hard-working, committed, patient and discerning but you have become so busy doing the work of the Lord, that you have forgotten the Lord of the work. You have forgotten your first love, Jesus.

This is Jesus' charge to the church at Ephesus, a church that based on outward appearances were a model to follow, but Jesus sees beyond the exterior to the heart of the matter, *You don't love me or each other as you did at first!* You have forgotten first love. So what are they to do? What are we to do when we find ourselves in that situation?

Jesus actually gives some instruction of what to do when we have forgotten our first love. Look at,

Revelation 2:5

Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first.

In his excellent book, *Discipleship on the Edge*, Christian Pastor, Darrell Johnson says that in these two short sentences, Jesus is encouraging the Ephesian church and us to do three things to rediscover our first love. The first thing to do;

1. **Remember-** *Look how far you have fallen.* We are to recognize our condition and if we can't see it ourselves, listen to the voices of those around you. What are they seeing in your life? Notice Jesus doesn't say beat yourself up about it or develop a guilt complex. He calls us simply to recognize where you were and where you are now and admit it.
2. **Repent-** *Turn back to me.* That is what the word repent means, to turn around. To head in the opposition direction from where you were going. Stop and make a U-turn and shift your focus back on Jesus.

That probably means that some actions in your life will need to change. You will need to reorient your day timer and your daily habits to make space to restore intimacy with Jesus.

3. **Re-do-** *do the works you did at first.* Go back and do the things that you did when you first fell in love. Do you know that when married couples come to me for advice on how to restore the "first love" in their marriage, one thing I ask them to do is reminiscence about how they first met? I ask them about their first date and the qualities that drew them to each other in the first place and then I assign them homework. Go and do that again. Court one another again, rediscover their first love by spending time talking and listening to each other. Go back to cherishing each other's hopes and dreams. Be each other's greatest cheerleader. Write love notes to one another or even sappy

poems. Carve out time for date nights. Somewhere along the line, they had forgotten how to do that. So they need to be reminded to re-do what they did in the beginning.

That is what we need to do in our relationship with Jesus to restore first love. It may be as simple as ensuring that every week, you put in your schedule a time to come and worship him in community here. Then determine that nothing, nothing will get in the way of that time because it's Jesus. The who saved you and loved you in spite of everything.

Remember, Repent, Re-do- That is the key to revitalizing your first love in your relationship with Jesus and with others, your spouse, your friend, your church community. Does this strike a chord with any of you? This is such an important area, this complaint Jesus has against the church at Ephesus that he goes on to speak this dire warning to them and to us.

Revelation 2:5

If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.

How many of you have ever been a part of a church that has been fractured? Split? One that has dissolved and eventually had to close the doors. Has anyone lived through that discouraging scenario? It is not pretty.

Carolyn and I enjoyed a getaway to Toronto last weekend. We have discovered that we need time away to nurture our first love. We went to a play, "Come From Away" and just walked and talked a lot. There was no poetry recited.

On the Saturday, we walked 19 km according to my step counter. We walked from an ice carving festival in Yorkville all the way down to a light show in the distillery district. Along the way, we passed many older, large, beautiful churches. Upon closer inspection, some were just shells of their former selves. Oh, they still looked good on the outside but it was like the light had gone out in them.

I would suggest to you that in most of these cases when churches die out, it is because they have forgotten their first love, Jesus and as a result, forgotten how to love each other and their neighbours. The lampstand has been taken away. See, without our first love for Jesus and others, *Things aren't always as they seem*

Activity and hard work becomes lifeless routine. Commitment becomes joyless drudgery. Patience becomes wishy washy tolerance. Discernment becomes narrow minded legalism. That was the danger that Jesus is pointing out to the Ephesian church and to us.

So where does this message meet you today? Right now. Right where you sit. Where does this message meet North Park church? Have you/we forgotten our first love, Jesus? If we have, it does impact the way that we love others. But we do have hope. This letter to the Ephesian church does end with a wonderful promise from Jesus. To those who do overcome. To those who do remember, repent and re-do. Look what it says in,

Revelation 2:7

"Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches. To everyone who is victorious I will give fruit from the tree of life in the paradise of God."

The fruit from the tree of life in the paradise of God, represents all the goodness of life that Jesus longs to share with those who love him. Jesus is here with us even now, can you feel him and sense him? He is moving among us, among the lampstands, his church and he is calling us into a relationship of love and commitment with him. As he stands before each one of us even now, what is he saying to you and maybe as important, how will you respond?

Will you pull back the curtain and let him break through into your life in a new and fresh way as you seek to discover or rediscover his first love and what it means to your life?

Amen? Amen.

Let's pray.

Points to Ponder

A Message to the Church

Things are not always as they seem

Letter to Ephesus–Forgot first Love–Revelation 2

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Describe a situation that you have encountered where *things are not always as they seem*. What was it that led you to believe one thing and what happened to change your opinion?
2. Share some of the things that you have been taught about the content of the book of Revelation in the past? What have you been led to believe about Revelation?
3. Talk about some of the different genres of literature. What is your favourite genre? Why? Discuss the features of Apocalyptic literature as found in Revelation. See if you can find some examples throughout the book.
4. Does the city of London today have any commonalities with the 1st century city of Ephesus? Describe the similarities.
5. In what ways are the attributes of Hard Work, Commitment, Patience and Discernment evident in your life? In what ways are they evident in life and ministry at North Park Church?
6. Discuss this idea of “forgetting your first love”. What are some signs of a life that has forgotten their first love with another person (spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend, friend)? What are some signs of a life that has forgotten their first love with Jesus?
7. Discuss some ways to re-establish your first love with Jesus.