

Rev. 3:7-13

Mission Festival (Scandinavia) in Danube, Renville MN (Nov. 12, 2023)

⁷ *"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.*

⁸ *I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.*

⁹ *I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars-- I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.*

¹⁰ *Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.*

¹¹ *I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.*

¹² *The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.*

¹³ *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev. 3:7-13 NIV)*

This Also is the Church's Mission: Hold On!

There was a Disney movie a few years ago called, "Up!" And there was an old man who didn't want to give up his house, his properties, his memories to the relentless onslaught of urban development. So he just stayed put. This plot of ground was his treasure, and he was going to hold on to it no matter what.

THIS ALSO IS THE CHURCH'S MISSION: HOLD ON! It feels a bit strange for me to say that – here, at a Mission Festival service. After all, we usually focus on things like "the fields are ripe for harvest" or "preach the gospel to all creation" – and rightly so (don't misunderstand me)! But I was invited here to focus on the kingdom among our sister churches in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland... and I couldn't help but think of this section from the Word of God that the glorified Jesus spoke to his congregation in Philadelphia, as found in Revelation 3. As Jesus encouraged them, he comes and encourages us and our brothers and sisters in Scandinavia:

HOLD ON!

- 1. In the Face of All the Evil Around You**
- 2. With Your Face Turned Toward the Joys Set Before You**

1. In the Face of All the Evil Around You

I am privileged to serve you not only at our college in New Ulm, but also on our synod's One Europe Team. On this Team, I serve as the Scandinavia Contact Man. For that reason, I travel quite regularly overseas to visit our brothers and sisters in the faith. Last summer I made a longer visit to Finland,

Sweden, and Norway. Just a month or so ago I was in Sweden: first, a quick visit with Pastor Peter Oman in Stockholm, and then about 80 S of the Artic Circle to visit Pastor Stephan Hedkvist and his wife Gunilla, in the small town of Pitea, Sweden. Often, I teach and preach, or arrange for some financial support. I regularly send them letters on behalf of our synod.

These small gatherings are Christians who greatly need our support. Some of you might say, "Scandinavia? Really? But Grampa Olaf and Great Aunt Tilde came from Sweden, from Norway! I thought those were not only Christian countries... but mostly Lutheran!!???" Sadly, that was true once. But a recent poll done by people who study religion tells a different picture: on the list of Top 50 Non-Religious Countries of the World, #1 = Sweden; #3 = Denmark; #4 = Norway; #7= Finland. On paper, practically everyone is Lutheran because they are born into and registered as a tax-paying supporter of the state church. The reality? Virtually no one goes to church. These countries are completely secular, materialistic, and godless. In fact, an even more recent survey showed that Finland was the bright spot, with about 35% of the people survey actually believing that there is a god. One time, during a presentation, I showed the Swedish people pictures of my life in New Ulm with a Lutheran grade school, high school, and college nearby, she couldn't believe it. "You mean your kids go to a grade school with 300 other kids who all believe the same thing?" "Yes." And with tears welling up in her eyes as she thought about the godless education her kids were receiving, she said softly, "That must be heaven."

Evil does not have to be violence and terrorism and death threats; nor immorality and drugs either. Those things are evil, to be sure. But sometimes evil looks so nice, existing in beautiful places. The problem is the sinful human heart that is rock-hard with unbelief upon birth – a heart that will continue to be rock-hard and dead unless God intervenes. Jesus knew all the evil that was around him in the world. But he targeted the real problem when he said, "Out of the heart comes evil thoughts..."

In this letter to Philadelphia, Jesus warns us too about being sucked into and led astray by an evil that results in eternal death. What is that? There was a culture in Philadelphia where people fostered the idea that if *they* felt they were religious enough, then that ought to be good enough for God. John writes about *Jews* who claimed they were *Jews*, but in God's eyes they were actually part of *the synagogue of Satan*. Much like Scandinavia, where people think if they get baptized Lutheran and support the state church with taxes, they're good with God.

And are we beyond that temptation, that mindset – that, somehow, if we are loosely attached outwardly to some church, we'll be ok in the Great Judgment of the Last Day, that we are prepared to stand before the Judge on the day we die? Jesus, here in Revelation, doesn't even entertain that kind of thinking. He simply says, "Repent." If not, there is only eternal death.

But you, dear friends, have come to know and believe in Christ. In his grace he called you from death to life. He washed you in baptism and made you his own. He watches over your life and provides for all your needs. He reminds you of his cross, where your sins were atoned for. And with his Word, with his Supper, he brings to your heart the forgiveness of sins; he washes them all away. What amazing grace!

To us he also says, HOLD ON. This is your mission too. HOLD ON to him in faith; this is what our God desires more than anything.

But more than a command, is it not also our privilege – we, who are living in a society that is (for now) less hostile to Christianity – to help our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world HOLD ON? Of course. We can certainly pray that the Lord Jesus give them strength to HOLD ON. By your offerings you can help support their work, and you do support my work of encouraging them to HOLD ON.

2. *With Your Face Turned Toward the Joys Set Before You*

Now, it is true that there are times when it isn't wise to HOLD ON. I've heard of the way that monkeys – for pets – are trapped in parts of the Far East. Trappers put special food into a narrow-necked bottle tied to a rope. Monkeys are so notoriously greedy that once they slip their paw inside and grab the goods, they won't let go of the prize... and so they are caught.

The evil world around us – and sometimes we even hear it from close friends and family members – constantly advises us: "It's not worth it! Holding on, "clinging to" Bibles and religion. How dumb is that?"

We may face this kind of pressure, but I can tell you that the small groups of faithful believers -- as was the case with the small group in Philadelphia – face this kind of pressure much, much more than we do. For them, but also certainly for us, the majestic, glorious Lord Jesus appears in this Word to lovingly remind us: "HOLD ON! Yes! The glory and joy of eternity that I have prepared for you will be so, so worth it!"

There will be the joy on knowing that WHOEVER TRUSTS IN ME WILL NEVER BE PUT TO SHAME. Jesus promised the Philadelphians that he would force the unbelievers to admit that Jesus was Lord and to admit that this small, seemingly insignificant group of people were, in fact, sons and daughters of the King. So also, it will be with us. One day it will be revealed to all the world that we are the children of God, and every knee will be forced to bow and admit that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus also promises that he will make his believers A PILLAR IN THE TEMPLE OF MY GOD. NEVER AGAIN WILL THEY LEAVE IT. About 80 yrs. before John wrote these words, the city of Philadelphia had suffered through a large earthquake that left much of the town in ruins. But there were pillars still standing. In fact, in many places from the ancient world we can see well-built pillars still standing. Jesus promises here in a different way what he promised earlier while on earth: I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH, AND THE GATES OF HELL WILL NOT PREVAIL AGAINST IT. In his grace he has made us living pillars, and we will spend eternity in his temple, in the endless joy of being in God's presence.

Finally, your Savior promises: I WILL WRITE ON HIM THE NAME OF MY GOD AND THE NAME OF THE CITY OF MY GOD, THE NEW JERUSALEM... I WILL ALSO WRITE ON HIM MY NEW NAME.

The citizens of Philadelphia had actually tried to change the name of their city twice during the first century A.D. But the name "Philadelphia" – "Brotherly love" prevailed.

What will your name be in heaven? What will mine? Will I be “Keith” for all eternity? Perhaps, perhaps not. What we do know from Scripture is that when God gives name changes, they are a sign of, a witness to, his great blessings. Abram became Abraham. Jacob became Israel. Simon became Peter.

At your baptism God put his own name on you; he adopted you into his family. And because he did, the DOOR IS OPEN for you too – to being a citizen of the eternal city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. That is where believers are headed; that is where believers really belong.

When I travel to Scandinavia on your behalf, that is, to represent our synod, very frequently I bring this same word of encouragement: HOLD ON! The Scandinavian churches are struggling to exist in a cold, cold world – a northern world that is comfortable, secure, and sees no need for God, really. The post-COVID world has especially been hard as those small congregations have grown smaller still. There's even talk that in Norway one of the churches will soon need to be sold.

But I encourage them: HOLD ON! THIS, TOO, IS THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH. And the One who won these eternal joys for you says: I AM COMING SOON. HOLD ON TO WHAT YOU HAVE SO THAT NO ONE WILL TAKE YOUR CROWN. Amen.