

Not True

Sermon for the Day of Prayer and Repentance

Sermon Text: Revelation 3:1-6



“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. ‘I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. ⁴ Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before His angels. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

The company was called Wirecard and they promised the Germans entrance into a whole new dimension of the digital banking world. Thousands of shareholders got in on this rising star of the German stock index. The stock was like a rocket – great new reports about the success of this company kept coming in so that new shareholders jumped on board and millions poured into the coffers. Until at some point, a journalist asked the question: “is any of this even true?” Research raised the first doubts and people wondered: “Are the books embellished, perhaps? And are they true?” After countless audits and legal hearings, two things were clear. The first was that the money was gone. The second was that the CEO left with the money. As far as I know, they still haven’t found him. He’s probably lying on some sunny beach and enjoying the riches that he acquired through deceit. The CEO of Wirecard has once again shown that the business of lies and deception pays off. But as you also may experience again and again, lies catch up to you at some point. In our Bible text for today, we see that the business of lies is nothing new. John writes about the church in Sardis and observes that it was popular far and wide. It was like a rocket or a bright star among the many other churches. But John dared to scratch at the surface and came to the devastating result like the journalist of Wirecard: “It’s all a pretense!” he says. The congregation is alive in name only. In reality, it’s dead. Brightly lit up on the outside, happy, dancing, jubilant, but without any real reason for joy and, above all, without substance. What made Sardis so good and special on the outside? It was a famous city. The capital city of a province and on an important trade route, Sardis also had important and profitable businesses. The congregation had as good a reputation as the city. What was called lively, good, and exciting in the church and Christian life of that time, we no longer know today. But I take the liberty of translating this into our time: It was a congregation where everything ran smoothly. Congregational growth could be seen, they were able to support themselves financially, they had at least one or two diaconal projects, they also gathered money for the poor people in other countries... but now comes something shocking. This church, despite all outward appearances, was spiritually dead on the inside. Normally, death is final, but if you call someone or even an entire congregation spiritually dead, it is an extremely harsh judgment... good on the outside, rotten on the inside... maybe it’s worth looking at this thing a little closer especially because the letter to Sardis is not only written to the congregation in Sardis, but to the whole church. We should also ask ourselves the question: What does it even mean to be living but dead inside? When I read my Bible, I see again and again that the principle of deception is a favorite tool of Satan. Do you think Adam and Eve would have let Satan tempt them with open eyes and ears? Surely not. Imagine if Satan had appeared as a hideous figure together with horns and a pitchfork. And imagine if he had said: “Adam and Eve! I have a proposition for you. I would like to play a prank on God and bring sin into the world... along with that, I would like to bring suffering into the world a million times over – from headaches, toothaches, ingrown toenails, and hemorrhoids to more world wars. You could start all of that with me if you just eat this apple... do you want to do this with me?” If Satan had said this, Adam and Eve certainly wouldn’t have gone along with it! And that’s why, as you know, Satan didn’t talk like that. Instead, the fruit looked good and Satan also promised that Adam and Eve would be like God. And the example of deception repeats itself over and over again. In the parable of the prodigal son, the son leaves the father because he truly thinks that it would be better for him away from his father. And the pharisees perfected this deception further. In fact, they faked pretty much everything: faith, piety, and

following God can be well acted. Yes, one can even believe in the deception. This is how Satan tempted the church in Sardis, this is how he tempts all of Christianity to this day... and this is how he could tempt you and me too. There is the terrible possibility that we might be fully convinced that we are doing the right thing; we might be convinced that we are the happiest people; we might be convinced that we are the best people and yet be deceived – therefore, spiritually dead. Now, we could think for a long time about where we could have gotten so led astray. Each one for himself. But perhaps it's worth taking another look at the church in Sardis so that we see where it went wrong and why John had to pass such a harsh judgment there. What was missing in the church in Sardis?

Perhaps the church of Sardis fared similarly to the political city of Sardis. According to historical reports, the city of Sardis was on a high cliff, an ideal natural fortress. Almost impenetrable. A Persian general observed this city in detail for a long time and found the weak spot. There was a steep cliff face where there were no watchmen at all and exactly in this spot was a crevice where one could infiltrate the interior of the city. That's what the Persians did, and they were able to quickly and easily conquer the city in this manner. The funny thing was that it didn't happen just once to Sardis but it happened over and over again. Why didn't the people learn from history? Why didn't it occur to them to finally guard this weak spot? Perhaps it was the same in the Christian congregation in Sardis as for the political community. Perhaps it is still similar today... namely that there is only one weak spot. Is there perhaps a commandment that we constantly break, that we fail at again and again? Can it be that the people in Sardis kept only 9 Commandment and not all 10? And what does John say to this? Does he say something like: "Wake up! Better yourselves... become people that don't just keep 9 Commandments, but people that keep all 10! Keep them very carefully, then nothing will happen to you and above all, you will be perfect... you are already pretty close to being perfect, but one thing is still missing..." No, John did not speak like that. He says, wake up and then follows it with the important: "Repent!" Yes, and that's where the weak spot is to be found. Perhaps the weak point with us too... because as with Adam and Eve, and like so often again, we don't see when Satan tempts us. In other words, we don't even know. We live blindly throughout the day and don't even notice how often we sin. We are like the city of Sardis. We stand as firm in life as the city of Sardis on the cliff... there is just one weak point. Which is that we are of the opinion that we don't need repentance and that we don't need to recognize our sins. That is precisely where Satan deceives us the most because he knows very well that if we repent, we would find God. That's why he says to us that we don't need any of that. He tells us that we can get through life well without such repentance. We can also be pretty good Christians and never recognize our sins. To lead a Christian lifestyle and to model Christian morality can be done without repentance. One could even say that repentance is harmful at this point because it even harms the external image. But that's a fatal deception because if we no longer need repentance, then we also no longer need God. Perhaps the people of Sardis have been Christians long before yesterday, perhaps they understood at the beginning this path of repentance and the joyful news of forgiveness. But Satan misled them so that they now thought that they are more advanced in the faith and therefore they can present a clean slate without forgiveness. Repentance, according to their opinion, was only for beginners! And right here is where Satan made them blind and deaf. Most of us have now been Christians for a little while. Many have already been Christians since their childhood. We have already known about sin, repentance, and forgiveness for a while now. But even if we are Christians for a hundred years, we should always be told that we are actually still at the very start before God and belong at His feet needing to pray for forgiveness. It is important that someone tells us that we are spiritually dead without God. The prophets, Jesus Christ, as well as John want to do this again and again. They want to expose where we are playing a game with God and with ourselves so that we can be spiritually alive and not spiritually dead. The interesting thing, according to what John says, is that the dead can come back to life. It is not over for them forever. They should and can live again!

I would like to tell a little story from the mission related to all this. This story not only shows us how the dead can become alive again, but it also shows us how we humans are all spiritually dead and therefore need the life giving faith in Christ. This story is about a woman who, unlike the Christians in Sardis, did not have the reputation of being alive but rather that she was dead. The story goes like this: Nomtandazo belonged to the Kalahari bush men. These people were nomads and because of that, it was normal practice among them to leave behind the old and sick to die. For the old people, it was like this – they built them a little hut and left them without sustenance to live in the wilderness and die in peace. It had to be that way because if they had cared for the old and sick, the whole tribe would be affected. My father-in-law reported in the early years of his missionary service about this very old woman, Nomtandazo, who lived for a very long time in one of these death huts. She lived for years on roots and water that she gathered in the mornings from the

dew. She was very old and fragile and waited for death. From her hut, she could see the living who would always walk by and sometimes even her own people walked by and they wondered at how Nomtandazo was still living. When my father-in-law approached her, she said: "go away from me, I belong to the dead!" My father-in-law said that he wanted to give her living water and he told her about living faith in Christ. And this woman who was condemned to death was alive again. My father-in-law said that he'd never seen a dying person beam so brightly! She considered herself dead and yet she found new life. She received the white robe of righteousness through baptism. She became a child of God. I am certain that Nomtandazo's joy was real. Amen.