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Sermon Title: "The Fault in Our Stars"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Revelation 3

Revelation 3

The Message to Sardis

'And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

'I know your works; you have a name for being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is at the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. Yet you have still a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

The Message to Philadelphia

'And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens:

'I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make

them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

The Message to Laodicea

'And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation:

'I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.'

That's a tough verse, isn't it? "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline." We may understand it, we may even agree with it. When you get to be about 25 in life, you start to appreciate all those who rebuked you and disciplined you, pushed you hard, corrected and corrected and corrected some more. A teacher who wouldn't let you get by with a sloppy paper. The coach who made you do four extra laps and then two more for good measure. The grandparent who kept telling you to stand up straight, not to slouch, and look people in the eye. The music teacher who made you practice till your fingers hurt. And, of course, your parents, who wouldn't let you get away with anything!

Now we are older, now we understand, now we do the rebuking and disciplining. Now it all makes sense. Now we see the connection to love. But at the time, it was tough. And this is Jesus talking.

In the Book of Revelation, St. John has a vision, the very first verse says, "This is the revelation of Jesus Christ," (Revelation 1:1) who tells St. John, "Do not be afraid. I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the Living One. I was dead, and behold I am alive." Then Jesus proceeded to tell St. John to write down what he tells him. What follows are seven very interesting letters to seven very different churches, each one, like us, with strengths and weaknesses. And like every good coach, every good parent, every good teacher, Jesus says, "O.K., this is what you're doing right. And this is what you need to work on."

The last letter is to the church in Laodicea, known as "The Lukewarm Church." And Jesus is rather rough with them. He says, "You are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were either one or the other. But since you are neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." (Revelation 3:15-16) That sounds harsh, and that's what leads to today's key Scripture. "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in, and we will eat together." (Revelation 3:19-20)

That verse, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline," sounds like what our parents said just before they punished us, "This hurts me a lot more than it hurts you!" Is any sentence more infuriating? You're about to be grounded, spanked, sent to your room, humiliated, punished, and that big ogre adult dares to say, "This hurts me a lot more than it hurts you."

Then one day you become a parent, a coach, a teacher, a big ogre adult. You're about to ruin some kid's day, week, life, and you are amazed to discover, "Hey! This does hurt me a lot more than it hurts him!" Still, we don't like to think of God as just another "big ogre adult."

What leads to today's sermon is the movie "The Fault in Our Stars." Our granddaughter is visiting from India, and Alida and I took her to see that movie this week. It is a hugely popular movie, based on the wildly popular book by young adult author John Green, and it is amazing, tough, powerful, beautiful, smart, and astoundingly spiritual. I urge you to see it. And I'll try not to ruin it by telling you too much other than what you can read in any reviews.

"The Fault in Our Stars" is the story of two teenagers with cancer. They meet in a cancer support group at a church. Together, they wend their way

through sickness, sorrow, fear, betrayal, hope, doubt, anger, faith, God, religion, funerals, miracles, grief, pain. Death. And beyond.

The next time you see a teenager with earphones on his head carrying a backpack, talking into his iPhone, laughing idly with friends, seemingly on the way to nowhere to do nothing, with a mind full of nothing but Kardashians, superheroes, and teenage vampires, stop yourself. Don't think that way. Instead, know that millions and millions of teenagers are choosing to think through all the really big stuff of life and death, hope and sorrow, fear and anger, heaven and hell, God and oblivion. They're thinking it through, they're wondering and asking and pondering.

I've been a pastor for a zillion years, and we all know Alida is celebrating 25 years, so between us we have a zillion and 25 years as pastors. And we have seen it all. And I can tell you, this book, this movie understands.

Listening to the dialogue, every statement, every question, every outburst, every fear or doubt, every cliché, every word from adults, I have heard from some hospital bed, in some living room, at some funeral or cemetery, some visit or counseling session. And yet, through it all, just like in real life, everyone tries to hang on, to do his best, to believe ... in something, someone, somewhere.

Is it perfect Christianity, perfect religion, perfect faith? No. It is halting and skeptical and sarcastic and half steps here and there, baby steps here and there, followed by gigantic Kierkegaardian "leaps of faith." They're just kids in the midst of death, hardly starting out on life! Heck, my Christianity isn't perfected yet. My Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" is often followed by stumbling and bumbling in the dark.

But there is power and opportunity in "The Fault in Our Stars." They ponder the universe and infinity and oblivion, they try to imagine heaven and the afterlife. They want to figure out God and Jesus. And they want to know where they fit into it all. In other words, the whole movie, the whole book is our business. Greenfield Hill Church business, Christianity's business.

Interestingly, one of the first scenes takes place in a church hall, where the church runs a support group for teens with cancer. It's run by an earnest, annoying, over-cheery, guitar-playing, happy-sappy youth group leader. He rolls out a big rug in the middle of the room, and on the rug is a full-sized Jesus with the Sacred Heart of Jesus emblazoned prominently, as he joyfully announces to the room of cancer-stricken teens, "We are right here in the heart of Jesus — literally." I cringed. I whispered to my granddaughter, "I don't think religion is going to look too good in this movie." "Wait," she told

me. "Just wait." It turns out that the earnest, annoying, over-cheery, guitar-playing, happy-sappy Christian cancer support group so boastfully "in the heart of Jesus — literally" is the launching pad for the journey ahead, a journey of deep love, of deep life, of deep faith. "In the heart of Jesus — literally."

And as the story unfolds, the struggle is real, the love is real, the pain is real, the cancer is real, the hope, *our* hope, is real. Believe me, the book has a lot of fans. I found one Pinterest site where there are 1,081 pins of quotes from "The Fault in Our Stars." Let me give you just a few, all over the spectrum.

"You don't give death the power to do its killing."

"Some infinities are bigger than others."

"All salvation is temporary. I bought them a minute. Maybe that minute bought them an hour."

"Love is keeping the promise that you didn't understand when you made it."

"Pain demands to be felt."

"I miss the future. That's probably true even if you live to 90."

"I fear oblivion."

"Sometimes the Universe wants to be noticed."

"The real heroes are people noticing things. The guy who invented the smallpox vaccine didn't actually invent anything. He just noticed that people with cowpox didn't get smallpox."

"You don't get to choose if you get hurt in this world. But you do get to choose who hurts you. I like my choice. I hope you like yours."

All right, enough with John Green, back to the here and now with us. Life is full of hurt, isn't it? Evil. Injustice. Bad things happening to good people. Things that just aren't right or fair. And all of that flies in the face of our great faith. The Bible is pretty clear: "God is love." "God is good." God is in control. God is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient.

O.K., how many questions does that raise in your head? God is in control. God is good. God is omnipotent ... then what about ... and how come ... then where was God when ... then why ... and fill in the blanks. September 11. The Holocaust. Car accidents. Cancer. Iraq. Hurricanes, cyclones. North Korea. Or the 50th anniversary this week of the murder of the young civil rights workers in Mississippi. Our good, in-control God who is everywhere ... was doing what, exactly? Those are our questions, aren't they? Oh, we might not say them so bluntly, so sarcastically; we might not even say them out loud. We might just think them and feel bad for thinking them. But, like the kids in the movie, we do wonder. *Is the fault in our stars? Is everything just blind luck, or fate? Is God absent? Or worse, doing these things?*

The fictional kids with cancer in the movie are just living up on the screen, for two hours, the world you and I live all our lives. It can seem like "the fault is in our stars," "that we are just a shout in the void, that oblivion is inevitable, that we are all doomed," just as the boy says to the girl in the movie. But he also says in front of that little cynical speech and after that little cynical speech, the boy says to the girl, with life in the balance, death just around the corner, oblivion and void and doom just waiting, he says over and over again, just like Jesus, for emphasis, "I'm in love with you. *I'm in love with you.*" Void, oblivion, doom notwithstanding, we still love.

Maybe that corny, irritating, kitschy carpet emblazoned with the heart of Jesus is actually true. Maybe we are "in the heart of Jesus — literally." Our Scripture today, from Revelation, we shouldn't overlook the ending. Yes, Jesus is fed up with the lukewarm church. Yes, he tells us he "rebukes and corrects us" for our own good and sounds like a super-annoyed parent. Yes, but he also says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. So ... open the door, let me in."

When I was growing up in that little church in Queens, we were taught that Jesus was referring to the door to our hearts. Jesus is standing there, knocking on the door to our hearts, hoping we'll invite him into our hearts. There was a big painting of Jesus, knocking on a big wooden door, and that represented us, our Sunday School teachers taught us. The Catholics have always made a big deal out of the "Sacred Heart of Jesus." That's why there are a lot of Sacred Heart Churches. That's why we have a Sacred Heart University a few miles from here. The idea that Jesus's heart is sacred and holy and given for us is central to Catholic faith.

Protestants may choose to emphasize our own hearts, Jesus knocking on the door of our hearts. Our hearts are sacred and holy to God and worth every sacrifice. This may be a key area where Catholics and Protestants are both right. Our hearts are meant for each other. Our hearts are where love is given and received. Maybe we are "in the heart of Jesus — literally." And, God is in our hearts. And maybe together, your heart and God's heart together, maybe together we have a chance to overcome all the hurts of life.

That's the final promise of today's Scripture. You may remember at the very end Jesus says, "To those who overcome, I will give you the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and I get to sit with God on God's throne." (Revelation 3:21) "*To those who overcome.*"

When I was writing the biography of my dear friend from India, Azariah, he allowed me to read his diaries from the early days of his ministry, back when things were really tough and dangerous, and lonely, and very uncertain.

In his diary he kept little scraps of paper that he tore from magazines and books and newspapers that inspired him, kept him going. One of my favorites is copied from a magazine called *Overcomers*:

When you are forgotten or neglected or purposefully set at naught, and you smile inwardly, glorying in the insult or the oversight - this is victory.

*When your good is evil spoken of,
When your wishes are crossed
your tastes offended
your advice disregarded
your opinions ridiculed
and you take it all in patient and loving silence
this is victory.*

*When you are content with any food, any raiment,
any climate, any society, any solitude, any interruption -
this is victory.*

*When you bear any discord, any annoyance,
any irregularity, any unpunctuality - of which
you are not the cause - this is victory.*

*When you can stand face to face with folly,
extravagance, spiritual insensibility,
contradiction of sinners, persecution, and
endure it all as Jesus endured it - this is victory.*

*When you never refer to yourself in conversation,
nor to record your good works,
nor to seek after commendation*

*When you care truly, love to be unknown -
this is victory.* (Rowe, David Johnson. *Consider Jesus*. First Edition, 1994 p.69)

That's what Jesus was saying in Revelation. That's what John Green is saying in "The Fault in Our Stars." That's why I close with two more quotes from "The Fault in Our Stars." I think if Azariah were alive today, still keeping a diary, he would have cut these out and saved them.

"I'm on a roller coaster, only going up." How's that for optimism!

And this final one, from one star-crossed lover to the other: "You gave me forever within the numbered days, and I can't tell you how thankful I am for our little infinity."

That's our human life, isn't it — "forever within our numbered days." You put that together with his earlier quote, "Some infinities are bigger than others," and you've really got the promise of Christian faith.

This infinity, this forever we live, with all its ups and downs, this forever has numbered days. But the biggest infinity, the next forever, has days without number and for "those who overcome" that eternal joyful love is certain.

That is in our stars.