For someone from the Pittsburgh area who is a rabid Pittsburgh Steelers fan it is probably difficult if nigh unto impossible to find something good out of Philadelphia. But Jesus’ most positive letter to the Seven Churches is the one He addresses to the ancient church in Western Asia Minor, what is in Turkey today. My view of Philadelphia, PA by contrast was encapsulated recently by a news story where a not-too-bright thief from Philadelphia robbed a guitar store of two guitars. He parked directly in front of the store, right in front of the security cameras, to begin the robbery. He foolishly decided to return that same night, parked in the same place, in front of the same security cameras which had previously recorded his license plate, and stole three more guitars. And being from Philadelphia he was utterly dumbfounded to discover he was immediately apprehended by the police. The story concludes with him shouting out, “Go Eagles!” I rest my case.

But the Philadelphia to which Jesus writes is a different Philadelphia. It is the FAITHFUL CHURCH. Of the seven letters Jesus writes to the seven churches it is the most positive and with this letter I conclude today. Philadelphia means “City of Brotherly Love” and so the positive regard Jesus has for the church in ancient Philadelphia comes from the love that they have for one another. They have not lost their first love, like most of the other churches have. They have not lost their love for HIM. They have not lost their love for one another. They may be small but they are spiritually alive; they are spiritually alive because Jesus Christ rests at the very center of who they are and what they do. It is no secret what Jesus can do; for a church; for a person; for a community. HE can turn a person’s life around when they invite HIM into the portals of their heart; HE can turn a church around when it invites HIM to return and to be its first love once again; HE can revive a city; HE can turn a town like Washington, PA around and move it from a city of opioid addiction to being addicted to the love of Jesus. He can take us and make us into the “City of Brotherly Love” today. Palm Sunday is Jesus riding to the very gates of a city, seeking to enter in, seeking to become its first love once again, seeking to be invited into the Temple, into the churches, into the very heart of the very center of the lives of people and churches and cities. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” declares Jesus today. Will we open the portals of our heart and invite HIM in?????

Throughout Lent through these Seven Letters I have invited us to examine our own lives and our own church. Have we forgotten our first love as the church at Ephesus did? Are we the compromising church, compromising our morality and our witness, like the church at Pergamum? Are we corrupt like the church at Thyatira, going after the gods of this world, instead of the One True and Living God reaveled in Jesus? Are we spiritually dead like the church at Sardis? Are we lukewarm in our Christianity like Laodicea? These are tough challenging letters from a Savior who seeks the unvarnished truth. It is why so few mainline pastors are willing to preach on the book of Revelation; and in truth, it is why the idea has sat unused in my sermon
notebook for more than 20 years. Lent is a great time to ask tough questions about our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is our preparation for Holy Week and Easter. Do we or do we not have Jesus as our first love, not our last? Is He or is He not the Lord whom we follow daily in life???

Now I have been your pastor for more than ten years now; so I know you and you know me. And I won’t pretend we’re perfect; I won’t pretend I’m perfect. I won’t pretend we don’t always need to ask ourselves tough questions, to amend our lives, to re-prioritize our time, to rediscover Jesus Christ as our first love once again. But I must tell you that my experience of you as individuals and as a congregation is that you are more like the church at Philadelphia than you are like the other six churches. We may have a beautiful church building on the outside but when you come inside you meet people who are genuine, who love the Lord, and who love one another. The more you are here and the more you experience who The Church of the Covenant is, the more you might say with me, we seek to be the Faithful Church that our Lord and Savior invites us to be.

And I think the Lord Jesus Christ comes today on Palm Sunday to invite us to be MORE than we are. I think HE comes today to challenge us in outreach and mission and service and in ways that take this love we have for HIM and this love we have for one another and to move that powerful love out from this place and in power for our community. Jesus has gathered with His angels on a hill overlooking Washington, PA. The Messianic chant, “Blessed is HE who comes in the name of the Lord” is sounded; the trumpets resound; the people gather. There is the scent of eternal victory in the air. The children are excited. The long-hoped-for, long-prayed-for Messiah has come. Jesus is marching to the very gates of the city of Washington. He has come to claim us as His own. He has come to claim us as the first love of our hearts. He has come knocking and seeking and asking –WILL YOU OPEN THE DOOR? WILL YOU INVITE ME IN? I AM HERE TODAY IN POWER SEEKING TO ENTER INTO THE PORTALS OF YOUR HEART, THE DOORS OF YOUR CHURCH, THE GATES OF YOUR CITY. I have come that you might have life and life abundantly! I have come that you, the church, our city, might never be the same ever again.

HE declares to the church at Philadelphia and HE declares to us today –“Behold, I set before you an open door, which no one can shut!!!!” (Revelation 3: 8) An open door in scripture is always a biblical sign of spiritual opportunity. The door is OPEN today on Palm Sunday. “Lift up ye heads ye mighty gates –that the LORD of glory might come in!!!!” But it is not open forever. “Behold, I am coming quickly!” shouts Jesus. (v. 11) Quickly we must open the door. Quickly we must invite Him in. Quickly we must seize this open door of spiritual opportunity which HE Jesus sets before us. Do not miss the moment of our “visitation” as they did that first Palm Sunday. Do not fail to seize the moment and seize the day. For Palm Sunday quickly turns from triumph to the sadness of Good Friday. The moment is here, the moment lingers but for a time, and then the moment is gone. This is your moment. It is Jesus knocking on the door of your heart. Will you open the door and let Him in? Will you receive Him as your first love once again? Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!