PENTECOST SEASON WORSHIP PLANNING GUIDE

YEAR C

Section Three of Ordinary Time

Proper 21 through Christ the King

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GOD'S WORD IS LIFE

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PREFACE

The final weeks of the Church Year do not build to a crescendo. They unravel.

The readings pull us toward endings—not just the calendar's, but our own. Kingdoms fall. Temples crack. The sky dims. Death speaks. The things we thought would hold do not. These aren't warm texts. They aren't tidy. They don't offer techniques for spiritual growth or success. They sound more like warning sirens than invitations.

But they are invitations. Not to understand or improve, but to let go. To stop propping up the systems, the institutions, the selves we hoped would save us. This part of the Church Year is where we learn—again—that the old world won't be fixed. It has to die. And that includes us.

This is where the theology of the cross finds its deepest footing. Not in the middle of spiritual confidence, but in the crumbling. Here, we're not offered upgrades or reform plans. We are given Christ. Not as an idea, not as a distant hope, but as the One who walks into the ruins first—and carries us with Him.

He does not explain suffering. He passes through it.
He does not tell us how to escape death. He dies.
He does not come to reward the faithful. He comes to remember the thief.

This section of the Church Year is not about answers. It's about the last Word—and that Word is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

So, we preach not to prop up what's collapsing, but to proclaim what cannot fall: That the Shepherd still gathers. That the King still reigns. That the tomb is still empty. That the cross still stands. Not a hair of your head will perish—not because you've held on so well, but because He has never let go.

That is the shape of the year's end. That is the shape of the Christian life. That is the shape of the cross.

The commentaries that follow—on the appointed lessons, the weekly sermons (each drawn from the Old Testament readings), the included Service of the Word, and the Bible studies on the

Psalms—are all grounded in this theology. They do not aim to explain away the darkness or decorate it with piety. They are meant to proclaim Christ into it. They are meant to speak mercy into the unraveling. They are meant to tell the truth.

Because the cross is not where God gives up. It's where He shows up.

Pastor Mark Anderson

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COMMENTARIES ON THE LESSONS\SERMONS

Proper 21

Jeremiah 32:1–3a, 6–15

Jeremiah buys a field while Babylon is laying siege to Jerusalem. That's not optimism. It's not an investment strategy. That's faith. Foolish-looking, promise-shaped, cross-formed faith.

The prophet is in prison. The city is falling. The smoke is already rising. And God tells him to go purchase land in a war zone, to draw up contracts, seal deeds, and store them in jars. Why? Because "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

This is not the language of the world. The world says: secure what you can, cut your losses, save yourself. But the theology of the cross says: plant your hope in what looks like loss. Trust the promise even when it is buried under siegeworks. That little field becomes a foreshadowing of resurrection. The deed is sealed and hidden away—just like the tomb, just like the Word.

Faith, under the cross, doesn't mean seeing the victory. It means trusting that God is still speaking when everything around you screams silence and death.

1 Timothy 6:6–19

There's no comfort in the theology of glory for the person who's losing. That's why we need this text.

Paul pulls the mask off our love of gain. The old Adam always wants a little more—just enough to feel safe, just enough to avoid depending on God. But that road is a trap. It doesn't lead to peace. It leads to ruin.

"Godliness with contentment is great gain," Paul says. Not because it pays off, but because it *frees you*. The one who knows Christ crucified doesn't need to cling to what rots and rusts. The baptized have already died once. Their treasure is safe with the Lord.

This is not about pretending to be above it all. It's about being honest. Money makes promises it can't keep. Security is an illusion. But the cross is real. The One who died for you is real.

So we are called—not to rise above—but to fall into grace. To let go of control, to give generously, to "take hold of the life that really is life." That life isn't found in accumulation. It's found in the arms of the crucified God, who gave everything and took nothing.

Luke 16:19–31

This parable is not about hellfire. It's about blindness. The kind that grows on the soul when you eat well every day while your neighbor starves on the steps.

Jesus paints a stark picture: a rich man dressed in luxury, with gates to keep Lazarus out. Lazarus is the cruciform figure here—sick, sore-covered, licked by dogs, discarded by the world. But God knows his name.

And that's the punch of the parable. The rich man goes unnamed. He had everything but a name in heaven. Lazarus had nothing but was carried by angels.

The theology of the cross doesn't flatter. It doesn't offer moral lessons. It tells the truth: God is not where the power is. God is with the beggar. With the broken. With the forgotten.

And here's the hard part—Jesus says the rich man had Moses and the prophets. He had enough. Just like we do. We have the Word. We have the promise. But do we hear it through the voice of the suffering?

The cross exposes every gate we build. And it calls us to step over them, down into the dust, where Christ waits at the threshold, wounded and alive.

SERMON: "HOPE IN A GRAVEYARD"

TEXT: Jeremiah 32:1–3a, 6–15

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our crucified and risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jeremiah is in prison. The Babylonian army is camped outside the gates. The siege towers are up. Supply lines are cut. It's only a matter of time now.

Inside the city, everything is collapsing—politics, confidence, religion. The king is angry. The people are frightened. The temple priests are disoriented. And Jeremiah—God's prophet—is behind bars, locked up for speaking the truth.

And then God speaks again.

"Buy the field," He says.

Right there. In the middle of a war zone. While the land is being torn apart and overrun. While no one in their right mind would invest a single coin in Judah's future. God tells Jeremiah to buy a field.

He doesn't just say, "Have hope." He says, sign the deed, pay the silver, and bury the contract in a jar for safekeeping.

Now let's be honest: that's absurd.

No army retreat has been ordered. No victory announced. No messianic miracle performed. All Jeremiah has to go on is *a Word*. A promise, spoken into the smoke and the rubble: "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

This is what faith looks like under the cross. Not confidence. Not clarity. Not triumph. But a Word buried in the dirt.

This moment in Jeremiah is a strange little story. It's legalistic, full of scrolls and witnesses, sealed documents, and ancient property rights. But don't miss the theology here. God is planting hope in a graveyard.

God does not say, "Wait till things improve, then we'll make it official."
He does not say, "Here's the five-step plan for victory."
He does not say, "Cheer up—things aren't that bad."

He commands, "Buy the field."
Invest in a future you cannot see. Trust a promise that looks like foolishness. Lean on the Word even when the walls are falling.

The old theologians called this *fides crucis*—faith under the cross. The kind of faith that doesn't pretend things are fine. And, Lord knows, we are masterful pretenders. The Gospel brings faith that can stare into the ruins and still believe that God is not done.

That's the kind of faith you are given in baptism. Not a faith that makes sense of suffering. But a faith that dares to speak God's promise in the middle of it.

That's the kind of hope Jesus plants when he goes to the cross—not after the pain is over, not once the skies are clear, but right in the middle of death. There on Calvary, the final deed is signed. The tomb becomes the jar. The Word is sealed up in silence. And then—three days later—God cracks it open.

So, what does this mean for you?

It means you can stop waiting for things to feel secure before trusting the promise.
It means you don't need to be rescued from the hard places to know God is still with you.
It means that faith doesn't always feel like victory. Sometimes it just feels like buying the field while the city burns.

Parents with prodigal children. Elders whose bodies are failing. Pastors who wonder if the Word is still heard. Congregations that feel tired and irrelevant. It is not your job to fix the siege. It is not your job to win the war.

It is your calling—*your baptismal identity*—to trust the Word anyway.
To plant gospel seeds where others see only ash.
To declare resurrection while standing in the cemetery.
To buy the field.

We wait with Jeremiah. Not in despair. But in cross-shaped hope.
Because the deed is sealed, the promise is sure. The land is still God's.
And Jesus Christ—crucified and risen—is the guarantee.

Amen.

PROPER 22 COMMENTARIES

Lamentations 1:1–6 / 3:19–26

God is not content to hover above the ruins of Jerusalem. He plants himself there. He speaks through the ruins. In the stark ache of Lamentations, where the city is personified as a widow and the streets remember joy no longer, God does not appear as rescuer—but as witness. This is not a text of resolution. It is a slow grief.

And yet, as the soul descends into memory and bitterness, the gospel begins—not with deliverance, but with *recall*: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope." Hope does not float above the rubble; it grows in it. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases—not because Jerusalem stood tall, but because God does not leave, even when everything else does.

This is how God works, not through the strength of what we build, but through the mercy that endures after it falls. Grace does not shout over the silence—it fills it. We are not saved by what remains of us, but by the faithfulness of the One who never left.

2 Timothy 1:1–14

Paul writes as a man who has nothing left to boast about—no victories, no open roads, no triumphs. Only chains. And yet, he speaks with authority—not the authority of success, but of Christ crucified. "Do not be ashamed," he says. And that's the whole scandal.

The gospel is not ashamed of our weakness. It is not embarrassed by our need. The world teaches us to project power. But Paul reminds Timothy—and us—that God works differently. The Spirit given is not one of fear or performance, but of power *hidden* in weakness, love born of loss, self-control forged in surrender.

We are not called to succeed. We are called to be held. "Guard the good treasure," Paul says. But what is this treasure? Not strength. Not certainty. It is a promise whispered through prison bars: *Christ has abolished death*. Not by avoiding it—but by passing through it. That's the way of the cross. Always through.

Luke 17:5–10

We say it all the time: "Lord, increase our faith!" But beneath that prayer, what we often mean is: Make me strong, confident, useful. Give me something I can show. But Jesus answers with a riddle and a rebuke. "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed…"—not much at all—you'd already have enough.

In other words, the problem isn't the size of our faith. It's the illusion that faith is something we build. Something we control.

And then Jesus tells a parable about a servant who does his work without asking for applause. It stings a little. But it's grace, not scolding. Jesus is freeing us from the exhausting religion of self-justification. The faith that saves is not flashy or measurable. It doesn't perform. It receives. It clings to a crucified God who comes not to reward the worthy, but to bear the unworthy on his shoulders.

Faith is not a ladder. It's a resting place. And the gospel comes not when we say, "Look at all I've done," but when we say, "We are unworthy servants." And in that moment—when all we have is nothing—Christ becomes everything.

SERMON: "GRACE IN THE RUINS"
TEXT: LAMENTATIONS 1:1–6, 3:19–26

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"How lonely sits the city that was once full of people."

That's how the text begins. No fanfare. No comfort. Just ruin, loneliness, abandonment. Jerusalem, the beloved city, the pride of the people, the place where God once placed his name—it now sits in silence, her streets emptied, her gates broken, her dignity scattered like trash in the gutter.

This is not a passage we read when we're feeling strong. This is the kind of text we avoid when things are going well—when the budget is balanced, the pews are full, and the kids are doing fine. But it's the kind of text that sits on your chest at 3 am, when you've been weeping for things you can't fix, when the diagnosis has come, when the job is gone, when the marriage has collapsed, when a funeral follows a birth by a few months, when everything you trusted—your body, your plans, your dreams—has turned to dust.

And here, in Lamentations, God speaks.
Not with solutions. Not with a lecture. Not with a miracle.
But with *witness*.

The poet doesn't clean up the mess. He walks through it.

"How like a widow she has become," he writes.

There's no spiritual bypass here. No "God has a plan" taped over the wreckage.
This is raw lament. This is holy grief.
This is what it looks like when the theology of glory gets bulldozed by reality.

And yet, in chapter 3, in the middle of ashes and bitterness and tears, we hear something else:

"But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness."

Now listen carefully: That is not the voice of someone who feels strong. That is not the voice of someone whose problems have been solved. That is the voice of someone who has been completely emptied and yet finds that God still holds them.

Because that's the surprise of the gospel, friends. Hope does not come *after* the ruins are cleared. It grows *in* them.

The gospel doesn't hover above the pain like a drone dropping advice. It walks through it like a Savior shouldering a cross.

Christ doesn't wait for us to climb out of our holes. He descends into them. He enters our grief. He takes it. He becomes it.

On the cross, Jesus became Jerusalem. Empty. Abandoned. Mocked. Destroyed.
The holy city in one man. He became the widow. The exile. The crushed.

And in doing so, He became the mercy that never ends.

You see, brothers and sisters, the steadfast love of the Lord does not mean the absence of sorrow. It means that sorrow does not get the last word. And this matters. Because some of you are walking through ruins right now. Not metaphorical ones. Real ones.

Your health.
Your marriage.
Your family.
Your faith.
Your will to get out of bed in the morning? It may be in pieces.

And I am not here to say, "God will fix it." I'm here to proclaim for you, *God is already in it.*

He is not waiting for you to pull yourself together. He is not testing you to see if you'll be strong. He is not measuring your resilience. He is holding you. He is *weeping* with you.
And He is speaking a word into the rubble that only He can speak:

"I will not leave you."

So let the city sit in silence for a while. Let the grief be real. But do not let go of the next line:

"The Lord is my portion," says my soul, therefore I will hope in him."

Because that's the gospel.

And because you have been baptized into this Christ, your name is already hidden in His. You belong to the One who went down into the grave and pulled you with Him through the water.

That promise doesn't depend on how strong you feel today. Your questions or your doubt doesn't undo it. It holds because He holds.

We wait. And we remember. And we hope because God in Jesus Christ is faithful.

Amen.

PROPER 23 COMMENTARIES

Jeremiah 29:1, 4–7

Exile is not a metaphor here. It's historical and emotional. The people of Judah are traumatized, disoriented, and angry. Their entire world has collapsed—and now God tells them not to fight it, but to *live* in it.

Psychologically, this is devastating. There's a reason exiled people fall into despair. Everything that gave their life structure—place, ritual, memory, community—has been torn away. And yet, God commands something deeply unsettling and deeply human: build, plant, marry, pray—for Babylon.

Why? Because life cannot wait for perfect conditions. Faith doesn't mean escaping hard reality. Faith provides the capacity to shoulder reality as it is, trusting the Word of God not as sentiment, but as an anchor.

The theologian of glory always waits for the ideal. But the theologian of the cross works within the ruins. We want certainty; God gives us responsibility. We want victory; God provides us with a shovel, a garden, and a prayer for our captors.

This is not optimism. It's mature realism. The cross-shaped life is not about denying pain—it's about staying put in the pain, doing what needs to be done, and trusting that God has planted the seed of resurrection beneath the ash.

2 Timothy 2:8–15

Paul is in chains. And yet he writes with clarity, focus, and a strange kind of joy. Why? Because he has discovered something that most of us resist: meaning is not destroyed by suffering. Meaning is revealed in it.

To say "the Word of God is not chained" while in prison is not just faith. It's a kind of defiant sanity. Paul has accepted that the road to life passes through death. That to follow Christ *is* to suffer—and to suffer as God alone works all things to His purpose.

In modern terms, this is the opposite of resentment. The opposite of nihilism. It's what happens when a person embraces the vocation laid before them, not because it feels good, but because it's *true*.

The theology of the cross doesn't promise ease. It never did. It names the reality: you will lose things. You will be misunderstood. You will feel the weight of the cross. But here's the promise: you are not lost. You are joined to Christ.

So, faith endures, bear its cost with open eyes. And trusts that what feels like dying is, in Christ, already the seed of rising.

Luke 17:11–19

All ten lepers were healed. Only one came back. That's not a statistic—it's a mirror.

Because when people get what they want—relief, escape, a fix—they often stop searching. They believe the crisis is over. But it's not. Healing is never the end of the story. Gratitude is.

And gratitude, in this story, requires something profoundly difficult: the humility to return. To admit that the healing wasn't earned. That you are not the center of the story. That you need mercy as much now as you did before.

Only one man saw this. And that man was already an outsider—a Samaritan. He'd lived on the edge long enough to know that life is not owed. That wholeness is not guaranteed. And so, he came back—not with entitlement, but with thanks.

The theology of the cross trains us to see this. It teaches that grace does not always show up where we expect, and that salvation often hides in interruptions. The healed man was saved not by being made clean, but by being repented into the source of mercy and receiving it with joy.

Spiritually and psychologically, that's the shift that marks true faith. Not a mind full of answers, but a heart that kneels. Because deep down, we know: we are not self-made. We are not in control. And the only sane response to mercy is worship.

SERMON: "FAITH THAT STAYS"

TEXT: JEREMIAH 29:1, 4–7

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our crucified and risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let's begin by naming something clearly: exile is not a metaphor here. It's not symbolic. It's not poetic. It is real.

The people of Judah are hundreds of miles from home, surrounded by foreign customs, false gods, a new language, and the very empire that shattered their lives. They didn't just lose their land. They lost their temple, their rhythms, their priests, their city. All the things that gave them shape and identity—*gone*.

Some of you know what that feels like, when life undoes you. When the thing you leaned on is gone—your health, your marriage, your job, your reputation. When you wake up in a strange place emotionally, spiritually, even physically, and you realize there's no going back—not anytime soon.

That's where the exiles are. And that's where the Word of the Lord comes.

Now, if we were writing the script, we'd want God to say something like: "Hold tight, I'm coming to rescue you. Just stay separate, stay angry, stay holy, and I'll sweep in and bring you home."

But God doesn't say that.

He says, "Build houses. Live in them. Plant gardens. Eat what they grow. Marry. Have kids. Pray for the city where I've sent you into exile. For in its welfare, you will find your own."

In other words: Stay. Put down roots. Work for the good of the place you hate. Pray for the people who carried you off. Learn to live in the land of your defeat.

That's not the answer they wanted. But it's the answer they needed. And it's the one we need too.

There's a way of thinking—let's be honest—that always looks for the ideal. It says, "Once I'm in the right place, with the right people, and the right plan—then I'll start living. Then I'll be the person I'm supposed to be."

But that's not faith. That's fantasy. The fact is, we never truly "arrive".

God doesn't wait for ideal conditions to get to work. He doesn't hand us a blueprint and say, "Let me know when it's all in order."

Because faith isn't about avoiding reality, faith is about shouldering it.

When your marriage is hard, when your job is draining, when the church isn't what it used to be—faith doesn't mean pretending it's all fine. It means staying in the mess and planting something that might not bloom for years. It means believing that even here—especially here—God is not absent. He's hidden, yes. But not gone.

We don't have to sugarcoat suffering. We don't have to pretend exile isn't exile. But we also don't get to wallow in it. Because the God who sent His people into Babylon is the same God who sent His Son into death. The same God who sends you into this very messy, often turbulent life.

And God does not abandon those He sends.

The cross tells us this: God is not where you expect Him. He's in the ash. In the foreign land. In the middle of things falling apart. And His promise is not to take you out, but to meet you in it.

He says, "I have plans for you." Not "plans to keep you comfortable." But "plans to give you a future and a hope"—right in the place where you feel most lost.

So, what does that mean for you?

It means: stop waiting for life to be ideal before you start living.
Build the house. Plant the garden. Pray for the place you're in—even if you didn't choose it.

It means: stop expecting God to save you *from* difficulty. In baptism, He has already joined you *in* it. He does not stand apart from the exile. He goes down into the waters with you—into death, into loss, into the place where everything once trusted is stripped away.

And still, He says: *You are mine.*

It means: shoulder your exile. Not with resentment. Not with fantasy. But with the gritty faith of the baptized—those marked by the cross, who pray not to escape the ruins but to endure them with grace.
To plant. To build. To stay.
To believe not because the conditions are good, but because God's promise is faithful.

And it means this: trust that even now, beneath the ruin, something green is taking root.
Not because you can see it. But because the water has been poured, the Word has been spoken, and Christ has been raised.

You have been baptized into that death. You will be raised with Him in that life. And the promise holds—even here.

Because His Word is the one thing exile cannot touch.
Amen.

PROPER 24 COMMENTARIES

Jeremiah 31:27–34

God doesn't just patch up the old covenant. He buries it. And then He writes a new one—not in stone, not on scrolls—but on the scarred, tired, breakable hearts of His people.

This is not a message for the strong. This is a promise for the broken. The old covenant was holy and good, but it condemned us. We could not keep it. And God knew it. So, He didn't send down more rules. He sent down *Himself*.

"I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." Not just a second chance, but a new creation. Not a better law, but a crucified Lord.

The theology of the cross says: your guilt is not the final word. God doesn't wait for you to get it together. He comes while the ink is still wet on your failures and writes something better: *mercy*.

And that means your heart is not only a place of struggle. It's a place where God lives. Where grace is etched in. Where Jesus has already said: *You are mine. I remember your sin no more.*

2 Timothy 3:14—4:5

Paul knows the end is near. These are his final instructions—not to preserve the church's status, or to win popularity, but to *endure and proclaim*.

"Preach the Word," he says. Not *your ideas*. Not culture's slogans. Not what people want to hear. The *Word*. The Word that judges and heals, kills and makes alive. The Word that points not to your best self, but to Christ crucified for sinners.

Why? Because people will walk away. They'll gather teachers who flatter them, who scratch the right itch. But the preacher doesn't scratch. He *stands and proclaims*.

The theology of the cross teaches us that the gospel is not a motivational speech. It is a Word of death and resurrection. It unmasks our idols. It tears down our pride. And then, in that empty place, it gives something nothing else can: *grace*.

This calling is hard. Paul doesn't deny it. But the faithful preacher, the faithful hearer, will stay with it. Not because it makes them strong—but because it makes them *new*. And in a world full of lies dressed as light, we need the *truth that bleeds*.

Luke 18:1–8

This is one of the few parables where Jesus tells us exactly why He's telling it: *so that we would always pray and not lose heart*.

Which tells you something. God *knows* we will lose heart. He knows the silence of unanswered prayer. He knows what it feels like when justice is delayed, when the heavens feel closed, when it seems like no one is listening.

So, He gives us this widow. Poor. Unprotected. Unheard. And yet she refuses to go away. Not because she's strong, but because she *knows she has no other hope*. She is the image of faith—not triumphant, not tidy—but persistent, raw, bruised.

And here's the twist: If even an unrighteous judge listens eventually, *how much more* will the righteous Judge, the One who went to the cross to plead your case, hear you?

This isn't a parable about praying harder. It's about trusting, trusting that Jesus *has already secured justice* at the cross. That the blood already speaks on your behalf. That the delay is not abandonment. It's a space in which *faith is formed*.

So come to Him. Again, and again. Weary. Empty-handed. Undone. You don't have to be eloquent. You don't have to be brave. Just keep knocking—because *the door is already open*.

SERMON: "WRITTEN ON THE HEART"

TEXT: JEREMIAH 31:27–34

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There comes a time—maybe more than once—when you realize the old way of doing things isn't going to work anymore.

For some of you, that moment came when your marriage broke down.
For others, when the addiction came back.
Or when you sat with the same old sin in your hands again and said, "I thought I was done with this."
Maybe it was when you stood at the grave. Or when the apology didn't come. Or when your strength—physical, emotional, spiritual—finally gave out.

That's where Israel was in our reading today.

Jeremiah is not preaching to people at the height of their powers. He is preaching to a people in exile, who have watched their temple burn and their city fall. The old covenant was still true—but it had done its work. It had exposed the people. It had shown them what they could not be. And they knew it.

They were not looking for an upgrade. They were looking for mercy. And that's what God gives them.

"The days are surely coming," He says, "when I will make a new covenant."
Not a better version of the old one. Not a tightened contract with more precise terms.
A *new* one.

God doesn't just patch the old covenant. He *buries* it. He does not say, "Try harder." He says, "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." That's not advice. That's a promise.

Now let's be clear: the old covenant was good. The law is holy. But it cannot save. All it can do is expose the truth: that we are not who we think we are.

And some of you know this all too well.

You've spent years trying to fix yourself with more effort, more discipline, more religious resolve. You've tried to outrun shame by being impressive. You've tried to manage sin by keeping it quiet. You've prayed for God to be close but kept hoping He wouldn't see too much.

But He *does* see.

And still, He says: "I will write my law on their hearts." Not in stone. Not on scrolls. But *on hearts.* And not clean, polished, well-behaved hearts—but tired, scarred, sinful, breakable hearts.
Your heart.

This is not a covenant for the strong. It is a promise for the broken.

And this new covenant is not sealed with ink. It's sealed with *blood.*

Not a better law, but a crucified Lord. Not another chance, but a *new creation.*

God doesn't wait for you to get your act together.
He comes *while the ink is still wet on your failures* and writes something better: mercy.

The world says: You are your successes.
Your shame says: You are your failures.
But God says: *You are mine. I remember your sin no more.*

This is not sentiment. This is a Word that does what it says. So, what does this mean for you?

It means your story is not about repair. It's about resurrection.
It means your righteousness doesn't depend on your record—but on His.
It means you no longer have to carry your guilt. Christ already carried it.
And it means your name is now bound to His: "You are my people. And I am your God."

And when your heart accuses you, and it will;
When the old legal covenant still whispers in your ear, and it will;
When you feel like a fraud or a failure, and you will;
You don't have to argue back.
You point to the cross and say:

"There. There is my promise. There is my righteousness. There is my God who remembers my sin no more."

Because He's already written it on your heart.

In the name of the One who was broken to make you whole—Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen. Amen.

PROPER 25 COMMENTARIES

Joel 2:23–32

The prophet speaks to a people who've known devastation—locusts, drought, the collapse of everything they thought they could count on. They are spiritually famished, worn thin by judgment and grief. And now God promises not just restoration, but overflow: "The threshing floors shall be full of grain. The vats shall overflow with wine and oil."

But this isn't the prosperity gospel. This is resurrection talk.

The God of the cross doesn't erase the wound. He fills the empty. He doesn't rewind history. He walks into it. He says: I will repay the years the locusts have eaten.

That's not just economics. That's grace for people who have wasted their years in sin, pride, addiction, bitterness, or fear. People who think it's too late. People like us.

And then He promises: "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." Not just the clean. Not just the temple-keepers. All flesh.

This is not a Word for the worthy. It is a promise for the desperate.

Because the cross is for the ones who have nothing left to bring but a ruined field, and God says: That's precisely where I'll plant the harvest.

2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18

Paul knows he's near the end. His strength is gone. His companions have left. And yet, he doesn't despair. Why? Because he knows who stood with him.

"The Lord stood by me and gave me strength."

The theology of the cross does not promise visible success. It promises presence. Christ with you in the courtroom. Christ with you when your friends desert you. Christ with you when you face death.

Paul says, "I have fought the good fight." But it's not a victory lap. It's a confession of faith. He has not won. He has been kept.

"I have kept the faith" doesn't mean Paul never doubted. It means he clung to the promise—when it hurt, when it was quiet, when no one stood beside him but Christ alone.

This is the life of the baptized: not control, but confidence. Not applause, but mercy. Not rescue from suffering, but a Lord who enters it with you, and carries you through.

Luke 18:9–14

Two men go up to the temple to pray. One thanks God he's not like other people. The other can't even look up.

And Jesus says: Only one went home justified. And it's not the one who looked impressive.

The Pharisee's prayer is full of performance. He's done the work and kept the rules. He thanks God, but only so he can admire himself in the mirror of comparison.

But the tax collector? He brings nothing. No resume. No spiritual credentials. Just a desperate cry: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

This is the heart of the theology of the cross. We do not climb the ladder to God. He *descends* to us—right into the dust where sinners kneel.

And Jesus says, "That man went home justified." Not improved. Not reformed. Justified. Declared righteous by the sheer mercy of God.

The people will come to church empty, ashamed, hollowed out by guilt or regret. They are in the right place. Because Christ did not come for the strong. He came for sinners. And the only prayer He answers is the one that has no backup plan:

"Lord, have mercy."

SERMON: "THE YEARS THE LOCUSTS ATE"

TEXT: JOEL 2:23–32

In the name of Jesus Christ, the One who does not improve sinners but raises the dead. Amen.

There are sermons we want. And then there are the sermons we need.

We want sermons that tell us how to rebuild. How to recover. How to restore what we lost—our marriages, our youth, our discipline, our direction. And if we're honest, we want God to sign off on that kind of project. A little holy help. A divine assist. A push in the right direction. And there is no shortage of those sermons out there today.

But Joel doesn't give us that sermon.

Joel speaks to people standing in a field that once held a future—a land stripped bare by judgment. Crops gone. Wine gone. Hope gone.

And God doesn't say: "You've learned your lesson—now let's move on."
He doesn't say: "You're ready now—start again."

No. He says something that makes no sense if you're still trying to earn it:

"I will repay the years the locusts have eaten."

That's not repair. That's resurrection.
That's not reward. That's grace—the kind that comes when you've got nothing left to trade.

Let's be clear: the locusts are judgment. That's what Joel says. God sent them. Not because He's cruel. But because the people trusted themselves. They turned religion into a system of control. They thought they were managing God. And so, He stripped them down.

And maybe that's where some of you are now. Stripped. Empty. Looking back at years devoured by addiction, anxiety, pride, selfishness—by trying to be your own savior.

And here's the truth the old Adam hates: You can't get that time back**.** There's no virtue in pretending it didn't happen. The law will not help you rewrite the past. It names it. It exposes it. And it kills.

But God does something the law can't. He says: *I will repay it.*

Not because you've earned it. Not because you've changed. But because He is merciful. Full stop.

And then the promise gets bigger:

"I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh."

Not the good flesh. Not the cleaned-up flesh. All flesh**.**

God does not wait for your readiness. He doesn't wait for you to "let Him in." He doesn't wait for your re-dedication, your spiritual progress, or your cleaned-up heart.

He breaks in.

He pours His Spirit out on sons and daughters, old men and servants, the burned-out, the scared, the confused. People who know they've got nothing left to prove.

This isn't empowerment. This is death and life.
You are crucified with Christ. The old you is done. And the new you? You didn't build it. It was given.

The Spirit is not a reward. The Spirit is Christ's breath into the lungs of dead people.

So, what do we say to all this?

We stop trying to make it about us.
We stop calculating whether we're far enough along to deserve the harvest.
We stop asking, "Have I changed enough?" "Have I done enough?"
And we stand there—empty, exposed, and baptized—and we receive**.**

Because here is the good news:

Your baptism is not a memory. It's a verdict.
Your sin is not stronger than His mercy.
Your lost years are not outside His reach.
Your ruin is not your ending.
It is the field where Christ *has already planted* a new beginning.

You don't have to build a new identity. It was poured out upon you in the water.
You don't have to earn your name. It was spoken over you when you were joined to His death and raised in His life.

The cross is not where God improves the religious.
It's where He drowns the sinner and raises the beloved**.**

And today, in the hearing of this word, that includes you.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

PROPER 26 COMMENTARY

Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4 — Faith in the Silence

The prophet doesn't begin with praise. He starts with a complaint—raw, urgent, unfiltered: *"How long, O Lord?"* His words could be ours. Violence without justice. Destruction without redress. God's silence feels like absence. Yet Habakkuk doesn't walk away from God. He stations himself at the watch post and waits. That is the shape of faith in exile: not optimism, but defiant patience.

The Lord's answer does not dismiss the pain. It gives a promise: *"There is still a vision… if it seems to tarry, wait for it."* The just shall live—not by sight, not by success, but by faith. That line becomes a cornerstone in Christian theology, especially in the theology of the cross. Faith, here, is not a virtue we achieve, but a way of receiving the Word in the dark. The Word that justifies, even when the world is not yet set right.

2 Thessalonians 1:1–4, 11–12 — Endurance, Not Escape

Paul greets the Thessalonians with a peculiar kind of praise—not for their accomplishments, but for their endurance: *"your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring."* This is not a church praised for growing attendance or its stand on social justice, but for faith that persists under pressure.

The church is not removed from trouble. It is refined through it. And Paul's prayer is not for their success, but that God would make them worthy of His call. This is passive voice—God makes them worthy. Not the other way around. The power is not in their progress, but in the grace that sustains them.

What emerges here is a theology of sanctification through suffering—not the suffering that earns, but the suffering that exposes our need and opens us to grace, that the name of Christ may be glorified *in* us—yes, even in our weakness.

Luke 19:1–10 — The God Who Comes Home With Sinners

Zacchaeus is more than a Sunday school story. He's a parable of grace that moves first. Jesus doesn't wait for a moral turnaround. He looks up into the branches and says, *"I must stay at your house today."* Not if you clean up first, not after you've proven yourself, but now. The gospel arrives before repentance. And that is what produces it.

Zacchaeus climbs the tree out of curiosity. Jesus turns it into a cross-shaped encounter. The crowd grumbles—because mercy offends our sense of fairness. But Christ doesn't come to meet our expectations. He comes to seek and to save the lost. And that salvation looks like dinner with a cheat.

Repentance flows not from fear, but from fellowship. Grace goes home with the sinner. And the sinner comes down, changed—not by law, but by love and mercy.

SERMON: "BY FAITH"

TEXT: HABAKKUK 1:1–4; 2:1–4

In the name of Jesus, who does not hand us answers—but gives us Himself. Amen.

Let's be honest: the book of Habakkuk does not start like a devotional. It begins like a fight.

"O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?"

That's the opening line. Not "Praise be to God." Not "Great is Thy faithfulness."
Just: *"Where are you?!"*

Some of you have asked that question too.

How long will I pray for my child to come back, and nothing changes?
How long will I work hard, live clean, and still barely hold it together?
How long will the wicked prosper, while the faithful feel forgotten?

You open the news, you look around, you scroll your feed, and it feels like the wicked *are* winning.
Justice is delayed. Truth is trampled. Violence multiplies. And God?

God seems slow. Silent. Maybe even absent. And your faith has collapsed.

That's Habakkuk's cry. And maybe it's yours too.

Now here's the surprising part: God doesn't rebuke the prophet**.**
He doesn't say, "Be quiet." He doesn't say, "You have no right to question Me."

He listens. And then He answers.

But the answer isn't easy. It's not clean. God says: "Write the vision… If it seems slow, wait for it. It will surely come."

And then: "The righteous shall live by his faith."

Not by certainty. Not by seeing. Not by understanding everything that's happening.

By faith.

This is not sentimental faith. This is not spiritual optimism.
This is not "trust God, it'll all work out." That's not faith. That's fortune cookie theology.

Real faith—the kind Habakkuk is given—is faith that lives in the gap between what God has promised and what we see.

Faith says: "I don't see justice—but I trust that God still reigns."
Faith says: "I don't feel peace—but I trust the Word is true."
Faith says: "Everything in me wants to give up—but God has spoken, and I will wait."

That is faith *under the cross.*

Because God never explains Himself.
He doesn't sit down with Habakkuk and lay out the strategy.
He doesn't justify the delay or tie up the loose ends.
He gives a promise. And that has to be enough.

That's what it means to live by faith—not to understand God, but to *trust Him when you don't.*

And some of you are there right now. You've been faithful. You've prayed. You've stayed. And it still feels like the locusts are winning. You wonder if you've been forgotten. You may even believe that you have been forgotten.

Hear this: You have not been forgotten. God is not slow. He is not cruel. He is not absent.

He is hidden. But He is not gone. And the cross tells us that God does His saving work in hiddenness.

Not in noise, but in silence. Not in lightning, but in nails. Not in a throne room, but on a cross—where all seemed lost, and yet the world was redeemed.

The world says: "God helps those who help themselves." The cross says: God helps those who can't lift a finger. The world says: "Strong faith will see results."
The cross says: Faith may see nothing—but Christ is still enough**.**

So what do we do in the meantime?

We take our place at the watch post—like Habakkuk. We cry out when we need to. We wait when the waiting is long. And we live by the Word that does not lie.

Because the Day is coming. And until then, the righteous will live by faith—not faith in their own strength, but in the crucified One who has already carried us through death and into life.

That Word is enough for you Even now. Even here. Even in the dark.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.

PROPER 27 COMMENTARIES

Haggai 1:15b–2:9

The people have returned from exile. They're trying to rebuild the temple. But it's not going well. The work is slow. The result is unimpressive. The old glory is gone, and the new walls don't look like much.

And into this discouragement, God speaks:
"Take courage… for I am with you."
Not: "The work looks great."
Not: "You've recaptured the past."
Just: "I am with you."

The theology of the cross tells us that God's presence does not show up in power and polish. It shows up in weakness and waiting. In slow rebuilding. In half-finished sanctuaries and tired hands.

And then He says: "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former." But it won't be because the people pull it off. It'll be because God fills it with peace—not through architecture, but through presence. Not through gold, but through the One who will one day walk in that very temple in flesh.

So when your own life looks like a fragile wall—unfinished, unimpressive—take heart. The Lord is with you. And that's the glory that lasts.

2 Thessalonians 2:1–5, 13–17

Paul is writing to a church caught in panic. Rumors have spread. They fear they've missed the Lord's return. Confusion is setting in. And Paul tells them to stand firm—not in certainty, but in something far better: they were chosen by grace.

That's where the comfort comes from—not timelines or control—but the gospel:
"God chose you… through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth."

The theology of the cross doesn't explain history. It doesn't decode political unrest. It doesn't offer a blueprint for the end of days.

It says: You are baptized. You are chosen. You are kept.

Paul says: Stand firm. But not in your strength. Stand firm in what Christ has done, in the Word that does not change, in the promise that does not shake.

The world thrives on fear. But Christ does not rule by fear. He rules by the cross—and that means you don't have to understand everything to belong to Him. You just need the promise. And you have it.

Luke 20:27–38

The Sadducees come with a question designed to trap. It's not a real question. It's a riddle. A test. They don't believe in the resurrection, and they want to make it sound absurd.

But Jesus doesn't take the bait. He points them to the living God. "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living."

Here's the deep truth: God's promises do not die with us. They are not dependent on our understanding, or on what we can prove, or what we can explain. They are bound to *Him*. And He is the God who raises the dead.

This is not about speculative theology. It's about trust.
Not in arguments, but in a God who binds Himself to the weak and keeps His Word even in the grave.

The theology of the cross says: We will die. But we will not be lost.
We belong to a God who calls things that are not as though they are.
And His promise is not for the clever or the bold.
His promise is for the broken—and the buried. And He will raise them.

SERMON: "THE GLORY THAT REMAINS"

TEXT: HAGGAI 1:15B–2:9

The scene in Haggai is one we know, even if the geography is foreign.

The people have returned home after decades in exile. But what they return to is not glory. It's rubble. The temple is gone. The city's a shadow. And though they've started to rebuild, the work is slow, the stones are heavy, and the spark is gone.

Some of the older folks remember Solomon's temple—the gold, the carvings, the fire descending from heaven. And now? A few half-laid walls. Scattered lumber. A dry well.

And maybe you know that feeling too.

You come back to what used to be strong—your faith, your family, your church, your country, your body—and it looks tired. Thin. Diminished. You're doing your best, but it's not what it used to be.

You pray. You show up. You try to be faithful. But the glow is gone.

And that's precisely where God speaks. He doesn't say, "Great job!" He doesn't say, "This looks like a solid recovery plan."

He says: "Take courage… for I am with you." That's it.

Not because the work is complete. Not because the temple's glorious again. But because His Word remains.

This is the theology of the cross in real time. God's presence does not ride in on success. It doesn't wait for beauty or numbers or excellence. It shows up in unfinished sanctuaries and tired hands.

He does not say, "Once you rebuild it right, I'll show up." He says, "I was with you when you came out of Egypt, and I am still with you now."

Because the glory of God does not depend on us. It's not something we manufacture. It's something He gives. Something He is. And then He says this strange and beautiful thing:

"The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former."

Now, that must have sounded impossible. They didn't have Solomon's wealth. They didn't have David's army. They didn't have half the skill, resources, or national confidence.

But they *had the promise.* And that promise was pointing forward.

Not to a golden temple. But to the One who would one day walk into this very space—not with trumpets, but with sandals. Not with smoke and thunder, but with a body, and a name: Jesus.

He didn't come to admire the architecture. He came to be the temple**.** To be the place where God meets sinners. To fill the house not with power—but with peace.

And that's the promise still. When your own life looks like a fragile wall—unfinished, unimpressive—take heart. God is not waiting for you to finish the project. He is not assessing the quality of your spiritual masonry. He is with you, for you.

And He still fills weak places with peace. He still shows up in crumbling sanctuaries and small congregations and hearts that only know how to pray, "Lord, help."

That's the glory that lasts. Not what we build. But the Christ who comes and dwells in it anyway.

Amen.

PROPER 28 COMMENTARIES

Isaiah 65:17–25

"Behold, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth…"

God doesn't promise a repair job. He promises a creation. Not a better version of the old order, but something entirely new. That's what grace does. It doesn't tweak. It resurrects.

The people Isaiah speaks to aren't living in glory. They're surrounded by grief. Mourning and weeping are still part of the daily liturgy. Houses are unfinished. Labor feels pointless. Life is short, and the wicked still seem to get ahead.

And yet—God speaks into that weariness and says: "The former things shall not be remembered." Not because they weren't real, but because they'll be swallowed up in joy.

This isn't triumphalist. It's patient hope for people who live with loss.

The theology of the cross teaches us that God does not erase suffering—He redeems it. And in the new creation, the pain is not explained. It's replaced—with laughter, long life, peace, and the quiet end of predation.

It's not a metaphor. It's a promise. And for the crucified and risen Christ, nothing is too ruined to be made new.

2 Thessalonians 3:6–13

At first glance, this sounds like a warning against laziness—and in some sense, it is. But read through the cross, Paul isn't scolding the idle because they're inefficient. He's reminding them what it means to live in light of grace: don't grow weary in doing good.

In other words, keep showing up. Keep loving your neighbor, even when it doesn't pay off. Keep putting one foot in front of the other, even when your efforts feel small or unseen.

Paul's own example—working with his hands, refusing to burden the congregation—isn't about moral superiority. It's about living freely, not being entitled. Living not to earn salvation, but as a response to what Christ has already done.

The theology of the cross tells us: grace does not make us passive. It frees us to live without fear, without scorekeeping. And it gives us the strength to keep going when no one notices but God.

This isn't law dressed up. This is freedom grounded in promise. Do not grow weary—not because you're strong, but because Christ is faithful.

Luke 21:5–19

The disciples are impressed by the temple's beauty. But Jesus sees something else: its end.

He doesn't flatter their nostalgia. He doesn't celebrate their pride. He tells them the truth: "Not one stone will be left on another." The institutions will fall. The systems will collapse. The world will shake. That is true about everything you see around you today.

And then He says, "Do not be terrified."

This is where the theology of the cross holds. Not in times of stability, but when everything you trusted starts to crack. Jesus doesn't promise protection from disaster. He promises His Word will hold through it.

"You will be hated," He says. "You'll be dragged into court. But this will be your opportunity to bear witness."

Notice: not your opportunity to win. Not your opportunity to avoid pain.
Your opportunity to testify—not to your own strength, but to His mercy in the middle of loss.

And then He says something only Jesus can say with a straight face: "Not a hair of your head will perish." Even as He talks about persecution and death.

That's resurrection talk. That's the promise of the One who went to the cross first—and walked out of the tomb.

When the world falls down, and your strength runs out, and your answers fail—you are not lost.

Not a hair.

Because He is risen. And His Word endures forever.

SERMON: "BEHOLD, I CREATE"

TEXT: ISAIAH 65:17–25

The people Isaiah speaks to are not doing well.

They've been through exile. They've seen the temple fall. They've watched the promises handed down from their ancestors burn in front of them. They are tired. They are scattered. They are disappointed.

And into this grief, God speaks: "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth."

Let's be honest—when life falls apart, that's not the word we expect.
We'd settle for patchwork. We'd be grateful for a repair job. We'd be thrilled if God just rewound the tape and gave us another shot at the life we lost.

But God doesn't offer a rewind. He provides resurrection life.
Not "I will improve." Not "I will restore." But: "I will create."

This is not a metaphor. This is not a soft-focus vision for when things get better.
This is a Word spoken into the ashes:

"The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind."

That doesn't mean your grief didn't matter. It means it's not the last chapter.
Because in the new creation, God doesn't ask you to forget.
He fills the space with something greater.

No more infants dying young.
No more labor that ends in futility.
No more building only to see others take.
No more crying in the streets.
No more wolf hunting the lamb.

And then, this line:

"They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."

This is not a fantasy. It's not a projection of our best hopes.
It's a promise—from the God who has already passed through death and made it home.

We don't live in Isaiah 65 yet.
We live in the gap between the promise and the fulfillment.
We still bury children.
We still work hard, yet we lose ground.
We still see war, betrayal, fear, cancer, dementia, and loneliness.

And the temptation is to take God's promise and either delay it into irrelevance—
"That's for later, not now"— or shrink it down into something manageable— "God helps me cope."

But Isaiah won't let us do either. He lifts our eyes—not to escape the pain, but to name it fully and still say:

"This is not the end. God has more."

That's the heart of the theology of the cross. Not a spiritual bypass. Not a call to cheer up.
But a Word that says: God enters into the ruin—your ruin—and speaks creation where you can only see loss.

That creation begins in Christ. It has already begun within you through your baptism.

Jesus didn't come to inspire better living. He came to bury the old world in His death.
To carry all of it—the pain, the injustice, the unmet hopes—into the grave. And then walk out with something the world can't produce: new life.

He is the firstborn of the dead, the cornerstone of a world that doesn't wear out.
The Lamb who no longer runs from the wolf—because He has already conquered.

So, when you look around and see rubble— When the temple of your expectations lies in pieces—
When you've given up on the idea that the best is yet to come—

That's precisely where God speaks:

"Behold, I create."

Not because you've held on so well. Not because you finally figured out how to make peace.
But because He delights in giving what we cannot earn: joy.

And it starts now—not in full, but in truth. Water poured on you. In bread broken for you.
In Christ, risen for you.

So, when your world feels old and worn out—when you carry more memory than energy—
when you wonder whether the days ahead can be better than what's been lost—

Listen again:

"Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth."

And your name is written in it.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

CHRIST THE KING COMMMENTARIES

Jeremiah 23:1–6

Jeremiah opens with a rebuke: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep." That's not poetic language. That's God speaking judgment against every leader who has used power for self-preservation rather than protection. And He's not just talking about kings. He's talking about priests, prophets, politicians, pastors—anyone entrusted with care who turned it into control.

But God doesn't just denounce. He promises: "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock."
"I will raise up a righteous Branch."

That's the heart of it: God doesn't leave His sheep to be devoured. He comes after them. And He doesn't outsource the job. He does it Himself.

This is not the theology of glory. This is not about strong rulers or reform plans. This is the cross: where the Shepherd becomes the Lamb. Where the King steps down and walks into the thorns Himself. He gathers by laying down His life. And the name He bears is our only hope:

"The Lord is our righteousness." Not our effort. Not our clarity. Not even our faithfulness. His righteousness—for us.

Colossians 1:11–20

Paul is describing cosmic glory. Christ as the image of the invisible God. Firstborn of all creation. Creator and sustainer. Preeminent over all things. It soars.

But then, just as it reaches its height, Paul brings it down—not in tone, but in direction:

"Through Him, God was pleased to reconcile all things… by the blood of His cross."

That's the scandal. That's the mystery. That the One in whom all things hold together was Himself held to wood. That the One through whom the universe was spoken became speechless in death. That the King of creation made peace not through conquest—but through crucifixion.

This isn't theology for winners. This is truth for the broken. For people who can't hold it together. For a world, for people unraveling at the seams.

And Paul says: all things—not just the spiritual parts—are reconciled in Him. That includes you. Your past. Your regrets. Your doubts. Your weary little corner of the cosmos.

All of it—held in mercy, by the One who bled to make it so.

Luke 23:33–43

This is the most absurd coronation scene in all of Scripture, in all of history.

A man nailed to wood and mocked by soldiers and abandoned by His followers. Crowned with thorns. And above His head, a sign meant to humiliate: "This is the King of the Jews."

And the truth is—it's exactly right.

Because this is what Christ's kingship looks like. Foolishness. Not triumph. Not spectacle. But silence. Blood. Mercy.

And while one criminal hurls curses, the other makes no demand—just a plea:
"Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." He doesn't ask for a reward. Just not to be forgotten.

And Jesus gives him more than he asked for: "Today you will be with me in paradise."

That's the kingdom: not a place for the cleaned-up, but a promise for the condemned.
A kingdom not of escape, but of presence. Today. With me. In mercy.

The theology of the cross tells the truth: this world crucifies its King. But the more profound truth is this: the King does not abandon His world.

He reigns from a cross.
And He remembers sinners—even now.

SERMON: "THE SHEPHERD WHO BECAME THE LAMB"

TEXT: JEREMIAH 23:1–6.

In the name of Jesus, the Shepherd who became the Lamb. Amen.

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep."

That's how this text opens. No pleasantries. No introduction. Just a word of judgment—and a sharp one.

God is speaking directly to those entrusted with care. Those given authority not to dominate, but to tend. Kings, priests, prophets—and yes, pastors. Anyone called to watch over others, to guard the weak, to guide the lost.

But instead of gathering, they scattered. Instead of feeding the sheep, they fed themselves. Instead of protection, they brought harm. And God says, plainly, "I've seen it."

And this is important: God doesn't brush past it. He doesn't say, "Well, that's leadership for you." He says: Woe.

Because God takes wounds seriously—especially the ones caused by those who were supposed to care.

But here's the surprise: God doesn't just judge. He steps in. "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock." "I will raise up a righteous Branch."

God doesn't leave His people in the hands of the corrupt. He doesn't wait for better leaders to show up. He says, "I will do it Myself."

This is not about spiritual strategy. This is not an institutional fix. This is the theology of the cross.

Where the Shepherd becomes the Lamb. Where the Judge takes the judgment. Where the King wears the thorns—not to rule from a distance, but to bleed among the scattered.

And this isn't theoretical. We've all been scattered, haven't we?

Some by abuse. Some by apathy. Some by disappointment in the very places we trusted most—church, family, leadership. Some of us have been scattered. Some of us, if we're honest, have done the scattering.

And into that mess, God does not say, "Try again."
He says: "I will gather you Myself."

And how does He do it?

Not with force. Not with performance. Not with moral clarity or religious intensity. He gathers us by laying down His life.

The cross is the gathering place of the lost. It is where all our scattered selves are pulled into one body—His body—and declared righteous. Not because we finally got it right. But because He is our righteousness.

That's the name Jeremiah gives: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Not our effort. Not our clarity. Not even our faithfulness. His righteousness—for us.

So when you feel the ache of disillusionment—when the people who were supposed to care have turned away, when the institutions you trusted fall apart, when even your conscience convicts you—remember this:

The Shepherd has come. And He did not come to evaluate. He came to gather.

And the name He bears is now written over you: The Lord is your righteousness.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

REFORMATION SUNDAY COMMENTARIES

Jeremiah 31:31–34

In this luminous promise from Jeremiah—spoken to a people in exile and judgment—God declares something utterly new: a covenant not written on stone but inscribed on hearts. This is not a call to moral reform, but a divine act of re-creation.

The old covenant was broken, and the Lord declares He will not simply renew it but replace it. This new covenant is not conditional. Its center is God's unilateral mercy: "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." It's not that sin disappears—it's that God chooses to forget. Law becomes internal, not imposed; obedience flows from transformation, not coercion.

This is grace made flesh, and the cross is its ink.

Romans 3:19–28

This is the thunderclap of the Reformation. Paul writes with legal precision and pastoral urgency: the law silences every mouth. No boasting. No comparisons. All fall short.

And then—"but now"—righteousness is revealed not through achievement but through Christ Jesus. This righteousness is not our improved morality but God's verdict, handed over through faith. "Justified" is courtroom language: the Judge declares us right because Jesus has borne the sentence. The phrase "apart from works of the law" still startles.

It demolishes any economy of merit. It leaves only grace. And it re-centers the believer's life not on effort, but on trust in the One who justifies the ungodly.

John 8:31–36

This gospel text presses into the heart of human self-deception. Jesus speaks to those who *believed* in Him—religious insiders—and tells them they're not as free as they think.

"Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." This is offensive. We prefer to think we sin as a matter of bad choices. Jesus sees it as bondage. The claim of Reformation is echoed here: freedom is not the right to choose, but the gift of being set free by Christ. "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." This freedom is not abstract. It is the lived reality of being united to the Truth—who is a Person, Jesus Christ.

SERMON: "I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SIN NO MORE"

TEXT: JEREMIAH 31:31–34

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The word from Jeremiah today is not a command. It is a promise. And not just any promise—but the kind that changes the world.

"I will make a new covenant." "I will write it on their hearts." "I will forgive their iniquity."
"I will remember their sin no more."

God does all the verbs.

Let's be honest: if we were writing the covenant, it would be different. We'd put conditions in. "If you clean yourself up... if you believe sincerely enough... if you try harder, pray longer, feel deeper..." Then maybe you'd be worthy. That's the covenant we try to make with ourselves.

But God tears that up. He says: That covenant was broken. I was their husband—but they were faithless. And now? He doesn't give a lecture. He gives a gift.

"I will make a new covenant."

This new covenant is not written on tablets. It's not about external control. It's not a behavior management plan. It's written on the heart—that is, at the center of who you are. And it's written by God. Not by pastors or parents or principles of the law. But by the same hands that formed Adam from dust. The same hands that bore nails.

This new covenant is not a ladder to climb. It's a grave to fall into. It's not about becoming more spiritual. It's about dying and rising with Christ. It's baptism.

It's terrifying, really. Because it means the old you can't be improved—only crucified. But here's the gospel: God does not wait for you to be ready. He doesn't wait for your faith to measure up. He makes the covenant Himself. And He writes it in blood.

"For I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

Don't rush past that line. Let it linger. Because it's not saying your sins don't matter. It says God chooses not to hold them. Not because they're small—but because Jesus bore them.

The God who remembers everything—the stars by name, the span of time, the words on your tongue before you speak them—that God forgets your sin.

On purpose.

Not because of your resolve. Not because you said the right prayer. But because Christ took it into Himself. And now when the Father looks at you, He sees His Son.

This is the scandal of the gospel. That grace is free. That sinners are justified. That the cross is enough.

And this is why we still proclaim it. Not as history—but as hope. For every heart still trapped in the old legal covenant of trying harder. For every weary soul who fears they've failed too many times. For every believer who wonders if they're really free.

You are. Because Jesus said: "This is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you."
Yes, for you. And He means it.

Amen.

ALL SAINTS COMMENTARIES

Daniel 7:1–3, 15–18

This apocalyptic vision arrives in the night—and rightly so, for Daniel's world is marked by imperial oppression and divine silence. The four beasts represent violent empires (Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome), all rising from the chaotic sea.

But the focus is not on the beasts. It's on what comes after them. In verses 15–18, Daniel is disturbed, but the angel interprets the dream: the terrifying reign of the beasts will end, and "the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom." Not conquer it. Not build it. Receive it. This is grace in apocalyptic form. The saints inherit not through power but promise. This is the reversal that defines the reign of God.

Ephesians 1:11–23

Paul's letter zooms out to cosmic scale. In Christ, we have obtained an inheritance—not by chance, but by the purpose of Him who "works all things according to the counsel of his will." That's not fatalism—it's promise. Paul wants the Ephesians (and us) to know "the hope to which you are called," and "the immeasurable greatness of his power." But note where this power is seen: in Christ, raised from the dead and seated above all rule and authority. That resurrection power is now at work *in us*—the saints. The church, often weak and confused, is described as "his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." All Saints Day proclaims this mystery: the saints are not superheroes but receivers—filled, sealed, and seated in Christ.

Luke 6:20–31 (The Beatitudes in Luke's Gospel)

Theme: Blessed Are the Poor—and Woe to the Satisfied
Luke's version of the Beatitudes is sharper, more unsettling. There are blessings—but also woes. Jesus blesses those the world forgets: the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated. Not because poverty or hunger are good in themselves, but because God's reign comes not to the powerful, but to the empty-handed. And He warns the satisfied: your comfort is fleeting. In Luke, the Beatitudes

are not abstract virtues. They are a theological reversal: a proclamation that God's kingdom favors those who know their need. And this is what makes the saints: not moral success stories, but those who hunger, grieve, and trust Christ for their reward.

SERMON: "IN THE ASHES AND THE HOPE"

TEXT: DANIEL 7:1–3, 15–18

The beasts rise from the sea.

Daniel dreams not in serenity, but in storm. The sea is churning. The wind is fierce. And from the deep come monsters—four of them, grotesque and violent, each worse than the last. These are not bedtime visions. They are nightmares. And Daniel is terrified.

This is what apocalyptic literature does. It doesn't pretend that the world is calm. It names the beasts. The ones that devour justice, that trample dignity, that boast and threaten and rule by fear. Babylon. Persia. Rome. But also—every empire that dehumanizes, every system that rewards greed, every voice that mocks the weak. The beasts still rise.

But Daniel's dream does not end with terror. And neither does yours.

Because the angel speaks. And here is the promise:

"The holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever."

This is not fantasy. This is promise. And it is the heart of All Saints Day.

Because saints are not remembered for their strength. Saints are those who waited through the night and still held on. They saw the beasts rise—and they didn't have answers. But they clung to the Word.

And the Word said: the kingdom is not achieved. It is received.

You don't storm your way into heaven. You don't become a saint by effort or virtue or success. You become a saint by grace. You are claimed. You are sealed. You are filled.

Not because of your power—but because the Son of Man has already faced the beasts, and conquered them not with a sword, but with a cross.

That is the strange logic of God's kingdom: the Lamb wins by dying. The saints reign by trusting. And the final word is not judgment—but inheritance.

That's why Paul can say, "the immeasurable greatness of His power is at work in you who believe." Not because you feel powerful. But because Jesus rose from the dead and sat down at the right hand of God.

And you are in Him.

Right now, it may not feel like it. Right now, the sea still roars. Some of you are grieving. Some of you are tired. Some of you carry names of loved ones who now rest in Christ. And still the beasts growl. The violence of the world still echoes.

But listen again: "The holy ones shall receive the kingdom."

This promise is not built on your ability to hold fast. It is built on the faithfulness of the One who holds you. It is not a question of whether you're strong enough. It's whether Christ is. And He is.

So we wait. Like Daniel. Like the saints. Not with optimism, but with faith. But listen—don't turn it into a banner. Don't polish it into hope-speak. "The holy ones shall receive the kingdom."

That doesn't mean you'll feel holy. That doesn't mean you'll win. It means you'll wait while empires of this world devour, while beasts speak arrogant words, while graves fill and thrones mock.

But the kingdom isn't earned. It's given. Given to the crushed. Given to the weary. Given to those who have nothing left but Christ. And He will not let go.

So we wait—not clean, not confident, but clinging. We wait in baptism's promise, in the ashes and the hope. And He comes.

For He is faithful.

Amen.

GREEK WORD STUDIES

PROPER 21 – LUKE 16:19–31

Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

1. **πλούσιος (plousios)** – "rich man" (v. 19)
    - From πλοῦτος, wealth.
    - Not merely economic status—it often signals self-reliance and distance from the poor (cf. Luke 6:24).
    - In Luke, the "rich" are consistently targets of reversal (cf. 1:53, 6:24).
2. **χάσμα (chasma)** – "a great chasm" (v. 26)
    - Literal meaning: a gaping void, a gulf.
    - Symbol of irreversible separation in eschatological judgment.
    - Theologically, this "chasm" is not created by death but by indifference in life.
3. **ἀκούω (akouō)** – "listen" (vv. 29–31)
    - Used three times: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."
    - Not mere hearing—carries connotation of obedient response.
    - Jesus critiques the refusal to heed God's Word, not lack of miracles.

PROPER 22 – LUKE 17:5–10

Faith and the Unworthy Servant

1. **πίστις (pistis)** – "faith" (v. 5–6)
    - Not a quantifiable substance but a trust relationship.
    - Jesus' reply redefines faith as potent not because of size, but source.
    - The object of faith—not the quantity—matters.
2. **συκάμινος (sykaminos)** – "mulberry tree" (v. 6)
    - A vivid example of deep roots—difficult to uproot.
    - Emphasizes the disproportionate effect of faith rooted in God.

- Uprooting the tree = an image of radical change by divine trust.

3. **ἀχρεῖος (achreios)** – "unworthy" or "unprofitable" servant (v. 10)
    - Means "not useful" or "without need."
    - The servant does not earn standing by fulfilling duty.
    - Theologically dismantles merit—faith does not boast (cf. Eph 2:9).

PROPER 23 – LUKE 17:11–19

Healing of Ten Lepers

1. **καθαρίζω (katharizō)** – "cleansed" (v. 14)
    - Root of "catharsis"; implies ritual and physical purity.
    - Lepers are made whole before returning—but the Samaritan also returns in thanks.
    - Healing precedes response, but faith sees the gift as more than cleansing.
2. **εὐχαριστέω (eucharisteō)** – "gave thanks" (v. 16)
    - Related to χάρις, grace.
    - Eucharistic overtones—giving thanks is worship, not manners.
    - The healed man acknowledges the giver, not just the gift.
3. **πίστις (pistis)** – "faith" (v. 19)
    - "Your faith has made you well" (σέσωκέν σε).
    - Not a power inside the man, but trust that receives what Christ gives.
    - Salvation (σῴζω) is more than physical—it's spiritual wholeness.

PROPER 24– LUKE 18:1–8

Parable of the Persistent Widow

1. **ἐκδικέω (ekdikeō)** – "grant justice" (vv. 3, 5, 7, 8)
    - From δίκη, meaning judgment or righteousness.
    - The word has legal, not merely emotional, weight.
    - God is not like the judge, but how much more will He vindicate His elect?
2. **ἀνέχω (anéchō)** – "bears with" or "puts up with" (v. 7)
    - Implies divine patience or long-suffering (cf. Rom 2:4).

- God delays not because He's unjust, but merciful.
- Divine delay is not divine absence.

3. **πίστις (pistis)** – "faith" (v. 8)
    - "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith?"
    - Faith here is enduring trust, especially amid silence.
    - Eschatological: Will the faithful still be looking to Christ when justice seems slow?

PROPER 25 – LUKE 18:9–14

Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

1. **ἱλάσθητί (hilastheti)** – "be merciful" or "make atonement" (v. 13)
    - From ἱλασμός—used in temple language, pointing to covering or appeasement.
    - The tax collector doesn't ask for leniency; he pleads for atonement.
    - It's a temple word in a temple setting—a cry for reconciliation, not a bargain.
2. **δικαιόω (dikaioō)** – "justified" (v. 14)
    - Legal declaration: "acquitted," "declared righteous."
    - Passive voice—justification happens **to** the man.
    - This is sola gratia in Lukan form: mercy makes righteous.
3. **ὑψόω / ταπεινόω (hypsōō / tapeinoō)** – "exalt" and "humble" (v. 14)
    - These verbs are set in eschatological tension.
    - The one who exalts himself (like the Pharisee) will be brought low.
    - The one who is lowly (like the tax collector) is lifted up—by grace alone.

PROPER 26 – LUKE 19:1–10

Zacchaeus the Tax Collector

1. **ἀναβαίνω (anabainō)** – "he climbed" (v. 4)
    - From ἀνά ("up") + βαίνω ("to go"); used for ascending physically or spiritually.
    - The irony: Zacchaeus climbs a tree to see Jesus, but Jesus descends into Zacchaeus's life.
    - Theologically: the upward move of man meets the downward grace of God.

2. **σῴζω (sōzō)** – "to save" (v. 10)
    - "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."
    - More than rescue—it implies healing, restoration, and divine rescue from judgment.
    - Echoes the Lukan concern for sinners, not the righteous (cf. Luke 5:32).
3. **ἀπολωλός (apolōlos)** – "the lost" (v. 10)
    - Perfect participle of ἀπόλλυμι: to perish, be destroyed, undone.
    - Zacchaeus isn't just lost geographically—he's theologically adrift.
    - Jesus doesn't shame him—He finds him.

PROPER 27 – LUKE 20:27–38

The Sadducees and the Resurrection

1. **ἀνάστασις (anastasis)** – "resurrection" (vv. 27, 33, 35–36)
    - Central theological term; literally "a standing up."
    - Sadducees deny it; Jesus reclaims it.
    - Not about return to earthly life—but entry into God's living reality.
2. **ἰσάγγελος (isangelos)** – "equal to angels" (v. 36)
    - A rare word in NT; from ἴσος (equal) + ἄγγελος (angel).
    - Points to the transformation in the resurrection—not immortality as stasis, but new creation.
    - Theologically, the risen are not married because they already fully belong.
3. **ζάω (zaō)** – "to live" (v. 38)
    - "He is not God of the dead, but of the living."
    - Life is not just biological duration; it is divine communion.
    - God names Himself as the present-tense God of Abraham—meaning Abraham still lives.

PROPER 28 – LUKE 21:5–19

Apocalyptic Discourse: Temples and Endurance

1. **ἀπόλλυμι (apollymi)** – "to perish" (v. 18, negated: "not a hair will perish")

- Same root as "lost" in Zacchaeus.
- In Lukan theology, perishing is not just death but being cut off from God.
- Jesus paradoxically says: though you'll be hated and killed, you **won't** perish.

2. **ὑπομονή (hypomonē)** – "endurance" or "patient steadfastness" (v. 19)
    - Compound of ὑπό (under) + μένω (to remain).
    - Not passive suffering but active, faithful endurance.
    - Theologically: salvation isn't escape from trial but perseverance through it.
3. **πλανέω (planeō)** – "to be led astray" (v. 8)
    - Root of "planet"—something that wanders.
    - Jesus warns against being spiritually disoriented in times of chaos.
    - Faithfulness clings not to signs, but to the One who speaks.

PROPER 29 (CHRIST THE KING) – LUKE 23:33–43

The Crucifixion and the Thief's Plea

1. **σταυρόω (stauroō)** – "to crucify" (v. 33)
    - Brutal Roman punishment.
    - In Luke, the cross is the enthronement of the King—not just a defeat.
    - The cross becomes a judgment seat—and mercy reigns.
2. **μνήσθητί (mnēsthēti)** – "remember me" (v. 42)
    - Aorist imperative of μιμνήσκομαι, "to remember."
    - The thief does not ask to be rescued—but remembered.
    - This is a plea for grace from a dying man to a dying God.
3. **παράδεισος (paradeisos)** – "Paradise" (v. 43)
    - From Persian *pairidaeza*; used in LXX for Eden.
    - Jesus' promise is not "someday," but today.
    - The kingdom arrives in crucified mercy, not in might.

REFORMATION SUNDAY – JOHN 8:31–36

The Truth Will Set You Free

1. **μένω (menō)** – "to remain" or "abide" (v. 31)
    - Jesus says: if you remain in my Word, you are truly my disciples.
    - Not intellectual assent, but spiritual dwelling.
    - Discipleship is remaining—not following or understanding everything.
2. **ἀλήθεια (alētheia)** – "truth" (v. 32)
    - Not propositional correctness but God's self-revealing Word.
    - Truth is a person (cf. John 14:6), not a proposition.
    - The truth sets free by killing illusion, especially about ourselves.
3. **ἐλευθερόω (eleutheroō)** – "to set free" (vv. 32, 36)
    - From ἐλεύθερος, freeborn.
    - This is freedom from sin, not freedom from responsibility, from stewardship.
    - True freedom is not the absence of limits—but life lived in the truth of grace.

All Saints Day – Luke 6:20–31

The Beatitudes

1. **μακάριος (makarios)** – "blessed" (v. 20 ff.)
    - Not "happy" but favored by God.
    - These blessings run opposite to worldly values.
    - The poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated—they are blessed.
2. **οὐαί (ouai)** – "woe" (v. 24 ff.)
    - Prophetic lament or denunciation.
    - The opposite of blessing—not punishment, but warning.
    - Luke pairs every blessing with a woe—this is not comfort, but confrontation.
3. **ἀγαπάω (agapaō)** – "love" (v. 27)
    - Commanded toward enemies—not as emotion, but active good.
    - Cross-shaped love does not begin with deserving.

BIBLE STUDIES ON THE PSALMS

These studies are not meant to comfort with clichés or equip with spiritual techniques. They are meant to undo you—and then hold you together again by grace. Each psalm and canticle cuts against the grain of our desire for control, success, or clarity. They call us not to escape suffering, but to meet God within it—not as an abstract idea, but as the crucified and risen presence who bears the weight we cannot. This is not about self-improvement or theological posturing. It is about being confronted by the living Word—sharp enough to wound, faithful enough to heal. In these texts, you will not find easy answers. You will find truth. And if you dare to stay with it, that truth may set you free.

PROPER 21 — PSALM 91:1–6, 14–16

Theme: Dwelling in the Shelter of the Most High

Psalm 91 offers deep assurance to those who trust in God's presence. Verses 1–6 speak to God's protection from fear, pestilence, and danger—not as magical exemption from hardship, but as a promise that God's presence is with us amid it all.

Verses 14–16 shift into God's voice: "Because they hold fast to me... I will deliver them." This is not a transaction, but a relationship rooted in steadfast love. The psalm's poetic imagery ("under His wings," "His faithfulness is a shield") calls us to cling not to certainty of safety but to the certainty of God's care. Where do we dwell—and in whom?

***Theology of the Cross Reflection*:**

Psalm 91 does not promise exemption from the terror by night or the arrow by day. It assumes them. The dangers are not illusions to be prayed away—they are real, and they remain. The psalm's comfort lies not in their removal but in the radical claim that the Most High dwells with you in their midst. That's the scandal: God doesn't rescue you from the cross. He joins you on it.

This isn't the theology of glory, where safety is the reward for righteousness. It's the theology of the cross, where deliverance looks like endurance, and where divine protection means presence, not escape. "I will be with them in trouble," God says—not "I will keep them from it."

We're tempted to turn faith into a defense mechanism—to use God as a guarantee against uncertainty, suffering, and loss. But Psalm 91 doesn't offer that kind of transaction. It's not: "Believe, and you won't hurt." It's: "When you hurt, I will be there."

All of this speaks not to wishful thinking but to the necessity of confronting the full weight of reality. You are not safe. No one is. The arrow will come. The plague will touch the house next to yours. So the real question becomes: Where do you *stand* when it does? Under what shelter do you remain when fear claws at the edges of your order?

To trust God's shadow, rather than your strength, is not to abdicate responsibility—it is to relinquish the illusion that you can manage your way to peace. It is to accept that your justification does not lie in your spiritual performance or moral calculus, but in the mercy of the Crucified One who enters danger for you.

In Christ you do not meet the God who lifts you *above* the chaos, but the God who descends *into* it. That's where you'll find your refuge—not in the illusion of control, but in the Word made flesh, whose shelter is presence, and whose promise is: "I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue and honor them."

The psalm doesn't promise a life without suffering. It promises a God who does not run from it.

Questions for Discussion:

How do we confuse God's presence with the absence of suffering—and what happens to our faith when hardship is not removed but endured?

In what areas of your life are you seeking control instead of shelter—and what would it mean to trust God's presence rather than your own strategies for security?

PROPER 22 — PSALM 137

Theme: Faith in Exile

Psalm 137 is raw lament. Set during the Babylonian exile, it remembers Jerusalem with weeping and bitter longing. The opening lines—"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept"—echo every place of displacement, grief, or injustice. This is faith in exile, love for a broken homeland, and the pain of memory. The darker closing verses are disturbing, yet they remind us: Scripture does not sanitize suffering. The psalm insists that God's people are allowed to weep, to rage, and to remember. This psalm raises the tension between patience and protest, obedience and grief.

***Theology of the Cross Reflection*:**

Psalm 137 is not polite. It does not conform to our desire for clean faith or sanitized lament. It bleeds. It remembers too much. It mourns not just the loss of home, but the loss of song—the collapse of meaning in a place where joy no longer fits. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" It's not a question seeking an answer. It's a cry that reveals the fracture between what was and what is.

This is not the faith of triumph. It's the faith of survival. The kind that clings to memory when hope is gone, that weeps when the world expects composure. Real faith is not found in denying pain but in naming it—sometimes violently, sometimes bitterly. There are moments in the life of faith where praise is impossible, where all you can do is hang your harp on a tree and stare at the water.

And yet—and this is the hard edge of the cross-shaped life—God does not reject the ones who rage. He does not require sanitized lament. This psalm is Scripture not in spite of its violence but because of its honesty. It tells the truth about trauma. About longing. About what happens to the soul when it is forced to bow to a foreign rhythm.

We are told, often, to be grateful. To sing. But what if the only honest response is silence? Or fury? Or prayer sharpened into protest? The cross-shaped life does not avoid exile. It walks straight into it. It does not tidy up despair; it sits beside it, waits through it, and calls it holy—not because pain is good, but because God refuses to abandon us in it.

So don't rush to fix your grief. Don't try to baptize it in optimism. Instead, sit by the river. Weep if you must. And trust this: the silence, the rage, the bitter remembering—these, too, are heard by God. Even when you have no song left to offer.

Discussion Questions:

What parts of your life feel too bitter, too broken, or too angry to bring before God—and what might it mean that Scripture gives space for that very kind of grief?

In what ways have we tried to sanitize faith—ours or others'—instead of allowing lament, protest, and memory to shape our understanding of God's presence in exile?

PROPER 23 — PSALM 66:1–12

Theme: Refinement Through Trouble

Psalm 66 opens with joyful praise but quickly turns to recounting God's testing: "You have tried us as silver is tried." The path to praise runs through fire and water. God leads us through—not around—trial and brings us out "to a spacious place." With Jeremiah's letter to exiles encouraging them to "seek the welfare of the city," this psalm reminds us that worship is not a denial of hardship, but its transformation. Our trials are part of God's refining work, not evidence of His absence.

***Theology of the Cross Reflection*:**

Psalm 66 doesn't flinch. It names the joy, yes—but not without the fire. Not without the flood. "You brought us into the net… You laid burdens on our backs… We went through fire and through water." This isn't praise that floats above suffering. It's praise that comes *through* it. And that changes everything.

There's a tendency to interpret trial as punishment—as a divine reaction to our failure or a signal that God has withdrawn. But this psalm dismantles that logic. The weight, the fire, the burden—

they're not signs of abandonment. They're signs of refinement. The fire doesn't destroy. It reveals. It purifies. The Word of God burns away the lie that you can save yourself.

And this is the scandal of grace: God doesn't wait for your deliverance to begin his work. He begins in the depths. While the net is still tight. While the fire still sears. He speaks—not from beyond the struggle, but from within it. And He brings you, not back to comfort, but forward into what the psalm calls *a spacious place*—a roomier, riskier, more honest life that's been hollowed out by trouble and filled by mercy.

From the perspective of real human experience, that kind of refinement is terrifying. It means letting go of control. It means watching your illusions burn. But that's precisely where transformation begins—not in the moment when the pain ends, but in the moment when you no longer have to deny it. The promise is not that you will be spared, but that you will be changed.

So don't rush to frame your hardship as either failure or fate. Let it speak. Let it expose what you've trusted in besides God. And trust that the fire, however brutal, is not the end. God brings you *through*—not by avoiding the flood, but by passing through it with you.

Discussion Questions:

What illusions or attachments in your life might God be burning away—not out of wrath, but to free you for something more true, more spacious?

How might praise change when it isn't the reward for deliverance, but the confession of faith right in the middle of the fire?

PROPER 24 — PSALM 119:97–104

Theme: Delight in God's Word

These verses are a love song to God's law—not as burden, but as light. "How sweet are your words to my taste," the psalmist declares. Scripture is not just instruction; it is a source of wisdom that grounds us in truth and gives understanding beyond experience. This psalm reminds us that God's Word is both true, and beautiful.

Theology of the Cross Reflection:

Psalm 119 sings of delight—but it's the kind of delight that's forged, not floated. "How sweet are your words to my taste," the psalmist says, but that sweetness doesn't come cheaply. It's not sentiment. It's survival. This is the song of someone who has clung to the Word because everything else fell apart.

God's Word is not sweet because it flatters. It's sweet because it tells the truth—truth about us, about the world, and about the One who enters into both to redeem them. It wounds before it heals. It dismantles before it strengthens. This is not the kind of wisdom that lifts you above suffering. It's the kind that teaches you how to walk through it without losing your soul.

There are times when we don't come to Scripture for insight or uplift. We come to it like someone pressing against a closed door, hoping it will still open. We come with questions that won't resolve, with grief that won't lift, and with hope that flickers like a match in the wind. And still—the Word endures. Not as a technique, but as presence. Not as clarity, but as faithfulness.

It doesn't always feel sweet. Often it feels sharp. "Through your precepts I get understanding," the psalmist says, "therefore I hate every false way." That's not piety. That's pain. Because to love the Word is to be confronted by it. It shows us where we've built our lives on lies. It shows us what needs to die in us for something true to live.

But here's the miracle: the more you lose yourself in the Word, the more you're found by it. The sweetness returns—but it's no longer sugar. It's sustenance.

Discussion Questions:

When has Scripture stopped feeling "sweet"—and what kept you returning to it anyway? What changed in you when you stayed?

How has God's Word exposed something false in your life—not to shame you, but to free you—and what did that experience teach you about real delight?

PROPER 25 — PSALM 65

Theme: God of Abundance

Psalm 65 praises God as both Savior and Sustainer—from forgiving sin to watering the earth. It moves from the temple ("to you all flesh shall come") to the fields ("you crown the year with your bounty"). God is not confined to the sanctuary but is active in the cycles of rain, harvest, and joy. Joel's promise of restoration echoes here: abundance comes after loss. And this grace is not earned—it "drips" from God's goodness.

Theology of the Cross Reflection*:*

Psalm 65 doesn't begin in the fields. It begins in the temple—with sin, silence, and the God who forgives. Only after that comes the rain. Only after that comes the harvest. That's the logic of grace: abundance doesn't rise from human sufficiency, but from divine mercy. God doesn't wait for the ground to be ready. He waters it. He doesn't require righteousness before He gives. He gives—and in the giving, life begins.

And that's where the scandal lies. Because we are conditioned to think of abundance as the result of effort. We want grace to be proportional, measurable, deserved. But Psalm 65 says otherwise. "You visit the earth and water it… you soften it with showers." Not because the earth earns it. But because that's who God is. The bounty drips—not from human hands—but from heaven.

This is not optimism. This is the shape of faith that has walked through famine. The kind of trust that arises when the barns are empty, the sky is hard, and you know you've got nothing to trade. The theology of the cross does not say, "You will be blessed because you endured." It says, "You were already blessed—because God endured for you."

It's one thing to give thanks when the granaries are full. It's another to remember the grace that came when you were starving—spiritually, emotionally, materially. And it's even harder to admit that the harvest was never yours to begin with.

But when you do—when you stop pretending that abundance is earned—you finally begin to see what the psalmist saw: the hills shout, the valleys sing, and grace runs down like water from a hand you did not raise.

Discussion Questions:

What part of your life once felt barren—until God gave what you didn't know how to ask for? How did that reframe your understanding of grace?

Where are you still tempted to treat God's abundance as a reward rather than a gift—and what might change if you saw the bounty as dripping from mercy, not merit?

PROPER 26 — PSALM 119:137–144

Theme: Righteousness That Endures

This portion of Psalm 119 affirms God's righteousness as steadfast even when trouble abounds. "Your promises are well tried," the psalmist says, anchoring trust not in circumstances but in God's faithful character. In Habakkuk's cry against injustice, and the Thessalonians' patient endurance, we see the same theme: God's justice will not fail, even when it feels delayed.

Theology of the Cross Reflection:

Psalm 119:137–144 names a kind of trust that doesn't make sense unless you've already seen everything fall apart. "Your righteousness is righteous forever," the psalmist insists—but not from the comfort of victory. He says it *while trouble finds him* and *while anguish seizes him*. This is not trust born from stability. It's trust that clings to the Word when nothing else holds.

That's the paradox: God's promises are described as "well tried," not because they prevent suffering, but because they endure through it. Like gold tested by fire, they shine brightest *after* the burning. But the trial must come. The Word of the Lord is not proven in strength, but in suffering. Not in dominance, but in a cross.

When injustice reigns, we instinctively want a God who crushes it with immediacy. We want righteousness to roar. But the righteousness the psalmist speaks of—the righteousness that Jesus embodies—comes low. It bleeds. It forgives. It bears the weight of what is wrong without retaliation. That's the offense. And that's the hope.

This kind of righteousness doesn't reassure us with explanations. It meets us with presence. It doesn't fix the world on our timetable. It endures it. It absorbs it. And in that endurance, it breaks the cycle. The Word is not trustworthy because it works like power. It is trustworthy because it remained true even under nails.

So what does it mean to trust that kind of Word? It means you keep going when the headlines don't. It means you act justly when justice seems invisible. It means you hold to the promise *not* because it guarantees safety, but because it already bore the cross and came out the other side.

That's not naïve. That's resurrection.

Discussion Questions:

When have you experienced God's promises not as quick fixes, but as a presence that held you steady in the middle of delay or injustice?

How does it change your understanding of righteousness to realize it was fulfilled not in conquest but in crucifixion? Where might you be called to that kind of trust now?

PROPER 27 — PSALM 145:1–5, 17–21

Theme: God's Nearness and Majesty

Psalm 145 holds together God's transcendence and intimacy. He is majestic and yet "near to all who call." His greatness is unsearchable, yet He knows the cry of every creature. This psalm calls us to worship a God who is both King and Companion.

Theology of the Cross Reflection*:*

Psalm 145 proclaims God's greatness—unsearchable, exalted, beyond measure. And yet, in almost the same breath, it insists: "The Lord is near to all who call on him." Majesty and nearness. Glory and tenderness. Power and presence. But what we often miss is how God draws near. Not on a throne lifted above our pain, but in an agonized cry that echoed from the cross.

We want nearness in comfort. We expect majesty to manifest in clarity, control, or conquest. But this psalm pushes us into the deeper mystery: the King who is worthy of all praise is also the God

who emptied Himself. The One who reigns is the One who suffers. The Lord draws near, not through spectacle, but through surrender.

That's the shape of the cross. God's nearness is not sentimental. It's not a warm feeling. It's the raw, unguarded presence of a God who doesn't wait for us to ascend—but descends into death itself. His greatness isn't that He avoids the valley. It's that He enters it with us.

To praise this kind of God requires a different kind of faith. Not the faith that seeks proof or ease, but promise. Not seeing glory in success, but in sacrifice. It means trusting that the unsearchable greatness of God has already been revealed—in the most unexpected place: a crucified man who spoke mercy with His last breath.

That's why the psalmist can say "every day I will bless you." Because he's not waiting for everything to go right. He's living from a promise that does not fail, even when everything else does. The nearness of God is not measured by outcomes. It's measured by God's faithfulness.

Discussion Questions:

How does it challenge or comfort you to consider that God's nearness is revealed not in splendor, but in the crucified Christ?

Where are you being invited to praise—not because the evidence is clear, but because the promise still holds?

PROPER 28 — ISAIAH 12 (PSALM SUBSTITUTE)

Theme: Songs of Salvation

Isaiah 12 is a short hymn of deliverance, promising joy drawn "from the wells of salvation." It remembers anger turned to comfort, fear turned to trust. Like a psalm, it sings—not because trouble is gone, but because God has shown Himself to be present. In a world shaking with uncertainty, this canticle gives voice to quiet confidence.

Theology of the Cross Reflection*:*

Isaiah 12 is not a naïve song. It rises from a people who knew judgment, exile, and fear. And yet it begins with this startling confession: "Though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me." The shift isn't sentimental. It's theological. It names the deepest paradox of salvation: God absorbs the wrath that was ours—and gives comfort in its place.

This is not a God who softens the blow. It's a God who takes it. Who bears His own judgment so that what remains for us is not terror but trust. That's what makes this song holy. Not that danger is gone, but that the singer now knows who is present. "God is my salvation… I will trust and will not be afraid." Not because there's nothing left to fear. But because the fear no longer owns us.

The wells of salvation don't spring from moral victory or emotional clarity. They are dug in the valley—where mercy meets judgment, where death gives way to resurrection. That's baptism. That's the well. You don't climb down into it. You are drowned into it and raised by grace alone.

So when the world shakes—and it will—you don't need to manufacture joy. You remember your baptism. You remember that you've already died with Christ. And that means the worst has already happened—and grace still held. Salvation is not just your rescue. It is your *song*—sung from the other side of judgment, in a voice that's been through the fire and come out confessing mercy.

This is not the absence of sorrow. It is the sound of joy born from death, echoing with quiet defiance: "Surely God is my strength and my song."

Discussion Questions:

What does it mean to draw joy from the "wells of salvation" in a world where fear and judgment still press hard—how does that change when you remember your baptism?

How does the image of God bearing His own anger reshape your understanding of judgment, comfort, and the meaning of trust?

PROPER 29 (CHRIST THE KING) — LUKE 1:68–79 (BENEDICTUS)

Theme: God Has Visited His People

This canticle, spoken by Zechariah, celebrates the coming of Christ as the sunrise from on high. It praises God's faithfulness to covenant and proclaims rescue from sin—not by power but by mercy. In light of the cross, this song reminds us that the King rules not from a throne but from a tree, bringing peace through sacrifice.

Theology of the Cross Reflection*:*

The Benedictus is a royal song—but not the kind we expect. There's no trumpet, no procession, no throne in sight. Zechariah sings of a king who brings light, not by force, but by mercy, who comes not to crush the enemy, but to guide feet into peace. And the scandal at the heart of it all is this: "the sunrise from on high" rises through blood and wood—not gold and marble.

This is what kingship looks like in the kingdom of God. Not domination. Not spectacle. But wounds. The King who visits His people does not arrive with armies. He arrives in flesh that bleeds. His reign is inaugurated not by conquest but by crucifixion. And that is why His peace holds.

Because it is not a fragile peace. It is not the absence of conflict or the illusion of control. It is the peace that comes only after death—the kind of peace that walks through the shadows because it has already overcome them.

But this dawn doesn't always look like dawn. Often it arrives slowly, painfully, through sorrow that hasn't lifted yet. Christ's light breaks in not by blinding the darkness, but by inhabiting it. That's why the song still matters. Because it was spoken *before* the cross and fulfilled *through* it.

To follow this King is to walk in the shadow of death—and not be undone by it. It's to hold fast to mercy when nothing else explains the world. It's to trust, against every visible sign, that the sunrise has come and is coming still.

This is not the kingship we would invent. But it's the only one that saves.

Discussion Questions:

How does it challenge your assumptions about power and deliverance to see Christ rule not from a throne, but from a cross?

Where in your life are you still waiting for the dawn—and how might Christ's wounds, not His might, be the light you need to trust?

REFORMATION SUNDAY — PSALM 46

Theme: A Fortress That Will Not Fail

Psalm 46 is the battle cry of the Reformation: "God is our refuge and strength." It speaks of chaos—mountains trembling, nations raging—but insists that God's presence is steadfast. The Lord of hosts is not a distant commander, but "with us." Reformation reminds us that righteousness is not earned but received through faith. God is not just refuge from judgment—He is the one who justifies the ungodly.

Theology of the Cross Reflection:

Psalm 46 doesn't pretend the world is stable. It names the terror: mountains collapse, waters roar, kingdoms fall. It doesn't ask you to escape the chaos. It asks you to confess who holds you in the midst of it. "God is our refuge and strength"—not because we've earned shelter, but because He refuses to abandon us.

This was the heartbeat of the Reformation—not a return to certainty, but a return to grace. A God, who, in His freedom, chooses to justify the ungodly. A fortress not built by effort but given in promise. That's the kind of strength that matters when the world shakes—when your inner life caves in, when the voices accuse, when the silence of God feels louder than His presence.

"Be still," the psalm says. But this is not quietism. It's surrender. It's the kind of stillness that only comes after the fight, after collapse—the moment when you realize that your striving, your righteousness, your defense mechanisms cannot save you. And they were never meant to.

To be still in this sense is not to go limp. It is to drop the sword. It is to stop justifying yourself and let the Word speak instead: "I am with you." Not above the trouble. Not on the sidelines. With you. In the rubble, in the crossfire, in the failure.

That's the promise. Not that you'll be strong enough. But that God has already been strong for you. And when all else fails—reputation, resolve, religion—grace does not. The God of Jacob is your fortress. And He does not tremble.

Discussion Questions:

What are you still trying to hold together in your own strength—and what would it mean to lay it down and be still before the God who justifies?

Where in your life do you most need to hear, not "be better," but simply: "I am with you"?

ALL SAINTS DAY — PSALM 149

Theme: Joy and Judgment Together

Psalm 149 is both celebration and warning. It calls the saints to praise with dancing and instruments—but also to wield a double-edged sword. This tension reflects a holy people who rejoice in God's victory but do not forget justice. This psalm affirms that the humble and the persecuted will share in the triumph of God—not by domination, but by God's decisive grace.

Theology of the Cross Reflection:

Psalm 149 holds a strange tension—joy and judgment, dancing and swords, praise and power. It isn't clean. It isn't tame. And neither is sainthood. The saints are not those who floated above the world's pain. They are those who bore it. They sang, yes—but often through tears. They endured, not by strength, but by grace.

To be a saint is not to be polished. It is to be claimed, baptized. Marked not by achievement, but by mercy and named holy not because of what you've done, but because of what Christ has done for you—and in you. The double-edged sword is not a call to violence. It's the Word that cuts through

illusion and pretense. It's the judgment that begins with grace: the truth that God has acted, and nothing false can endure.

That's the joy of the saints—not the joy of winning, but the joy of belonging. Their triumph is not domination. It's participation in the victory of Christ crucified—the One who reigns not by might, but by mercy poured out. Saints are those who trust that the cross, not the throne, is the place where justice was made real and grace unleashed.

So, what does it mean to be a saint? It means you live from a gift, not toward a goal. It means you carry Christ's death in your body and His life in your breath. It means you sing while the world trembles—and trust that God's final word will not be wrath, but resurrection.

Discussion Questions:

How does it shift your understanding of sainthood to realize it's not about moral achievement, but about being named and sustained by grace?

Where in your life do you feel the tension between rejoicing and enduring—and how might the cross hold both together?

ABOUT THIS SERVICE OF WORSHIP

This service is shaped by the truth that worship begins not with our ascent, but with God's descent. It opens in confession—where all striving ends, and the sinner is silenced. Not silenced by shame, but by the weight of mercy. The absolution is not a suggestion. It is a declaration of the Gospel: that Christ has died your death and now speaks your name. The Word does not wait for your readiness. It finds you in your need.

Throughout the liturgy, the pattern is clear: no detour around the cross. The litany echoes with exile and fire, shadow and silence. And yet it never falls into despair, because the voice that speaks through the sorrow is one who has passed through it. Here, joy is not manufactured. It is given. Resurrection joy, not the kind that ignores death, but the kind that knows it and still speaks life.

The prayers do not flatter God with clichés, nor do they flatter us with illusion. They name our ache, our exhaustion, and our defiance. They pray not from a safe distance, but from the middle of the flood. This is how a crucified people must pray: with nothing to bargain, and everything to receive.

The structure is clean, cruciform, and clear. It offers no false scaffolding of spiritual performance. It moves steadily from death to life, from confession to promise, from silence to praise. The creed, the Word, the prayers, and the benediction all carry the same shape: *Not I, but Christ.* Not effort, but grace. Not escape, but presence.

In short, this is not a service that makes you feel better. It is a service that tells the truth. And it is only from that truth—from the cross—that real peace comes.

A SERVICE OF THE WORD

NOTE: The choice of hymns, readings, and songs for this service is left to those planning worship.

L: We are gathered as we live; in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: Amen

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

L: We come not as the righteous, but as the weary and the wrong.

We have trusted our own strength. We have praised with hollow hearts.

We have kept silent when we should have cried out and spoken when we should have knelt.

C: God of mercy, we have feared what we cannot control

and forgotten the refuge You offer in the shadows.

We have fled from the fire instead of letting it refine us.

We have hidden from Your Word when it cut too close to our pride.

We have no defense. We have no excuses.

Yet we are dust that dares to pray.

Have mercy on us. Speak to us again.

Raise us with Your Word.

ABSOLUTION

L: Beloved in Christ:

God is not waiting for you to clean yourself up. He is not measuring your progress.

He has already acted—once, for all, in Christ.

The cross was not a proposal. It was a verdict.

There, your sin was finished.

There, your death was taken.

There, your life was begun.

So I do not offer you a second chance. I proclaim a new creation.

In the name of the crucified and risen Christ, you are forgiven.

You are free. You are held. You are His.

C: Amen.

HYMN

LITANY

L: We have wept by foreign rivers.

C: And hung up our harps on silent branches.

L: We have walked through waters that did not part.

C: And fire that did not spare us.

L: Yet You, O Lord, are our refuge.

C: A fortress that will not fail.

L: You come not in conquest—

C: But in mercy.

L: You rule not from thrones—

C: But from a tree.

L: You are not far off—

C: You are with us.

HYMN OF PRAISE

SCRIPTURE

SERMON

HYMN OF THE DAY

THE APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

L: Let us pray for the Whole People of God in Christ Jesus, and for All People According to Their Need.

L: For the church, in all its frailty and fullness—

C: Let us be still. And know that You are God.

L: For preachers who are weary, and congregations who hunger for grace—

C: Feed us again with the Word that does not fail.

L: For the saints who came before us and the saints beside us now—

C: Teach us to rejoice in mercy, not in might.

L: For those who feel the waters rise—

C: Be our raft and rescue.

L: For those who cannot fix what they've broken, and those crushed by what they cannot control—

C: Stop our striving. Drown our pride. Raise us in You.

L: For those who are certain of their own righteousness—

C: Break them with the law. Heal them with nothing but Christ.

L: For the strong who hide their fear, and the weak who think they are forgotten—

C: Remind us all that Your strength is made perfect in weakness.

L: For those who mistake blessing for entitlement and suffering for punishment—

C: Teach us again that grace is not earned, and the cross is not a mistake.

L: For the sick, the dying, the grieving, and all who carry despair like breath—

C: Be their breath. Be their peace. Be enough.

(Silence)

L: Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray,
trusting not in our righteousness, but in Yours alone.

C: Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.

BENEDICTION

The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make His face shine upon you—
and be gracious to you.
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you—
and give you peace.
In your going out and your coming in,
in your weeping and your singing,
in your labor and your resting,
know this: You are held. You are named. You are not alone.
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
C: Amen.

HYMN

GOD'S WORD IS LIFE

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