

What is it that you long for? What do you really yearn for? A lot of people might say they want more money, but is that what they really want? Do they really yearn for more money? If that's what people really yearn for, then once they had some money they'd be satisfied, but I've yet to find somebody who said, "Well, as soon as I have 'X' amount, then I'll be fine." There's always something more. So, what is it that someone's yearning for when they say they want money? Well, maybe they want security. Maybe they want toys. But is that what you're really yearning for? What is it that your heart really wants?

The Psalm today is so beautiful, "As a deer longs for the water brooks, so longs my heart for you, O God." You think of a deer out in the middle of the summer, and it's hot, and it's thirsty, and all it wants is some fresh, cool water – that yearning. What is it in your heart that you really yearn for?

In the Gospel story today we hear of Jesus going across the Sea of Galilee leaving the Jewish area and going into an area that was Gentile, to a Roman city, one of the Decapolis, to a place where the people were what were called Hellenists or Greeks, which meant they worshiped lots of different gods, they had a pagan sensibility, not a Jewish sensibility. Jesus, numerous times, goes into areas where there are no Jewish people around

When he gets there, he encounters someone who is described as being possessed by demons. That was the diagnosis in that time. It was a time period where people were very literal in how they interpreted things. These days, we would probably diagnose this person as having schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder because we know in schizophrenia that there are voices. Often, people hear voices, and they are voices that tell them to do things that aren't good for them.

So, this person was hearing voices in his head that told him to rip his clothes off, voices that told him to break his bonds, voices that drove him away from his home. In that time period, the only way they could understand that was that those voices represented beings in his mind, demons that had possessed him. He had all of these voices going on, voices that weren't good for him, and my guess was that what he yearned for was some peace and quiet, and that's what Jesus gave him. He quieted those voices. He stilled the voices so that he could listen to the truth within him, and put clothes on, and sit quietly, and rejoin society.

We all know what it's like to have those voices. If you've ever gone through a period of time where you've been depressed, you may have found that, sort of, broken record about something that's concerning you. It's just – you know - things are terrible, and they're gonna get worse. Oh, things are terrible, and they're gonna get worse. And it doesn't really matter what the particular thing is, but the mind just keeps going round and round. Somebody may have hurt you. You might be afraid of something, but it's like a voice in your mind that you can't control. We've all felt that way. Or we've all had experiences where we're trying to make a decision, and it seems like there's an argument going on inside of us, different voices talking.

So, we've had smaller experiences of the extreme experience of this person that Jesus healed, and what Jesus gave him was he quieted the voices within, and then he was able to receive the love and care and healing of Christ.

We all know those voices. They're very familiar. Father's Day may even bring up some of those voices, after all. How many of us walk around and have our father on one shoulder and our mother on the other, and sometimes they're whispering, "Good job, great. I'm glad to see you doing so well." And other times they go, "I can't believe you did that."

We carry within us lots of different voices, which brings us to the Old Testament reading where Elijah is in the cave waiting for God. Now, to give you a little background of how he came to this situation - there was a conflict within Israel between worshipping Yahweh, the one God, or worshipping the other gods like Baal and other idols. When you read the Old Testament this conflict goes on for centuries where one side gets stronger than the other, and at this point the king had married a worshipper of Baal, Jezebel, and Baal was taking a ascendancy, and worshippers of these various "gods" would make idols. They would make a cow or some other idol, and then they would go and worship it and thought that that temple and that idol represented God. Other times they would worship on a hill because they thought that was how to connect with God - or a pillar or a tree.

Well, there was this conflict, and Elijah was speaking up and the representative for Yahweh, and so they had the big contest. This was the Superbowl of contests between prophets, and you probably remember it from Sunday School or reading the Bible. It's quite a story. Elijah challenged the prophets and priests of Baal to a competition, and they got two bulls to offer to their god, and one bull was cut in half and put on wood to be offered to Baal, and Elijah said go offer that to Baal but don't light the fire; let Baal do it. If he's god, if Baal is so powerful, let god take that offer. So, the followers and priests of Baal spent all day chanting and singing and praying and dancing around this sacrifice that just sat there, and nothing happened. And then Elijah took the other bull and put it on some wood, and he said just to show you I'm gonna pour some water over it. You know, we'll make this hard. And then Elijah prayed to Yahweh, to the one God, and Yahweh sent down fire to burn the offering and consumed it.

Well, the people of Israel realized, okay, Yahweh is a real God who can really do something, and so they grabbed all the priests and prophets of Baal and gathered them together, and this is the part of the story that's really hard for us to read, because Elijah had them all killed. Well, of course, Jezebel didn't like that, and so Jezebel - this is where the reading comes in - says, well, I'm gonna kill Elijah for doing that, and Elijah's scared, and he runs off into the wilderness. As he's there he's waiting for God, and at one point he gets the sense that God is coming. And so he waits, and then there is this huge storm, this windstorm like a hurricane. Things are being blown over. It's very dramatic, and it says, "But God was not in the wind." And then there was an earthquake, and the whole world trembled, "but God was not in the earthquake."

Now, the worshippers of idols would've considered these as omens that represented god, but for Elijah, no. God wasn't in the wind. God wasn't in the earthquake. And even when the fire came, Elijah knew that God was not in the fire. Elijah knew that God was not just out there in dramatic things. "And then" – and in this translation, the New Revised Standard Version translation it says, "And then came the sound of sheer silence." I love that alliteration, "the sound of sheer silence." You may have heard it in the King James Version as "a still, small voice," or, "a quiet whisper." But I really like this "sound of sheer silence." God is in the silence. God is in the silence.

Think about it; if you have a friend, and you go out to coffee, and we may all have friends like this. At coffee they talk nonstop. They don't even breathe. They just keep talking, and they tell you about their children, and they tell you about their grandchildren, and then they tell you about the movie they've seen, and then they talk about politics, but they never listen to you because they're too busy talking about themselves, and you'd really love to tell them something that you think might be helpful for them to hear, but they're just talking on and on, and they don't even have time to drink the coffee because they have so much to say, and by the time your coffee is over you're exhausted listening to them, but you haven't said a single word. It's not much of a friendship, is it?

But that's what our relationship with God is often like. When we sit with God how much time do we spend chattering, and how much time do we spend really listening to God? God speaks to us in that still, small voice. God is known to us in those moments of sheer silence. And if you've ever tried to quiet your mind, if you've ever tried to sit still, you'll notice, okay, let's be quiet, and we have a brief moment of silence before the service. Well, the first thing you'll notice is all the sounds outside, and you'll hear the sound – the buzzing of the lights, and the sound of the birds and cars going by, and then you'll start noticing your body, and how it doesn't like the pews 'cause they're, kind of, uncomfortable, and then you maybe have an itch here or there, and then you'll start thinking, and you'll notice all the voices in your mind. You know, one goes, "Oh, gosh. How long are we gonna have to sit in silence? When is this gonna be over? "Gee," you know, "after church we need to stop at the grocery store. Now, what did I need? I needed" – And then it's like, "Well, what am I gonna make for dinner, or I have this to-do list. It's Father's Day. Hopefully I won't have to actually do it today." And, you know, you have this whole chatter that goes on, all those voices.

How can we hear the whisper of God through all those voices? God is speaking to us always with love and care and support and wisdom, but the noise sometimes keeps us from hearing. God is not out there in the idols. God is in the sheer silence, in the still, small voice, and the gift of healing we can receive from Christ is that peace that passes understanding, that peace that quiets the worry, that quiets the concern, that quiets all those voices and gives us a chance to just be with God because as the deer longs for the water brooks, our souls long for the living God.

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As most of you know, I just got back from a fabulous trip to the Holy Land. I got back Friday night, so my body has no idea what time it is, but I'm awake right now, so we'll go with that.

We started our trip in Amman, Jordan. We went to some ruins in Amman, the first set of many ruins. I'm not quite sure when I look at my pictures whether I'm going to be able to figure out which ruins go with which place. This area that is set aside in Amman, has ruins that go back well before the time of Christ and to the time of Christ and the Byzantine time and the Turkish time. There's these layers of history in the Holy Land.

But one of the things that I was really drawn to were some ruins of a Byzantine church. And I walked through them alone. It was kind of quiet in the area. And there were stone steps in the floor. You could see where the church would have been, where the people would have stood. And there were places where there were pillars, where you could see that the pillars would have been that would have held up the roof. And in a Byzantine church where the altar is, there's always a semicircle, so I could see where the altar would have been. And I walked around, and there was some grass coming up through the rocks.

I walked around and imagined being in that church. I imagined being up at the altar and looking out at a congregation that would have gathered to hear the word of God, that would have listened to a sermon 1,400 years ago. They would have shared the Eucharist together. And I'm sure that those people really loved their church. They built it. They put the stones together. They worshiped there. And now it is in ruins.

I thought about St. Barnabas and how wonderful and lovely a structure we have. And I thought about 1,400 years from now, 3400, what will be left? Will archeologists find a little bit of cement on the ground and try and piece together that this was a church. Figure out what we were doing in the courtyard out there. Where did we worship? Or will there be anything left? Because I don't think cement sticks around quite as long as blocks of stone.

Then we went into Israel. And then we came back to Jordan, and one of the last days we went to a town called Jerash. And it is a little bit north of Amman, and it has some of the best ruins that go back to Roman times of anywhere in the Middle East. We had seen more ruins than you could imagine by the time we got there, and we were all very impressed.

This town was on a big crossroads. It was a major metropolis. There was a road that went north-south that was part of the highway that connected Damascus with the ports on the Red Sea. And there was another road that went east-west that connected the Mediterranean with the Arab areas. The town was located on these cross roads.

One of the roads that they've reconstructed and put back together is over a mile long with big blocks of stone. And on the stone you can see the marks where the chariots went. And it was a road that would be good in California these days, you know. It was wide

enough for two chariots to easily pass one another. And we were walking along for a while, and then all of the sudden I noticed there were sidewalks on either side of the road. There was a raised area that was about 3 feet wide, just like our sidewalks.

All along this mile long road there were columns. These beautiful columns with all these wonderful decorations on the top, which probably had a roof over it. And then there was the other street going the other way, and there was a big area that was a marketplace. This was a major center in the Roman times, the time of Christ.

At the time of Christ Jerash was part of the Decapolis. You may remember that Jesus went to visit some of the cities of the Decapolis. And it's name was Antioch. And Antioch, we heard in the readings today, was where Barnabas went and preached and got Paul to come. Where they went, this Antioch was a major city of this time, a Roman city. Not a Jewish city. When they say the Hellenists, they mean the ones who had taken on the Greek culture. There are layers upon layers of culture that happened over there.

And of course as we wandered around those ruins, we found the ruins of a church, not from the first century but probably from the fifth or sixth century. And once again you could look – and this church was a wealthy church because on the ground it didn't have just stones, it had beautiful mosaic. And it was a little larger, and you could walk around it once again and see that place where the altar was.

And it was obviously a thriving church at one time. And it's in ruins. Because the church is not the building. There are still Christians in Jerash who worship in churches. The fact that an old church has died and new ones have come up is not what's important. The fact that those churches don't have a stone left upon each other doesn't mean that they were insignificant.

Think about the story we heard today from the church in Antioch. The church in Antioch was the first church, the first place where people actively reached out to non-Jewish people to tell them about Christ. And that's made all of the difference in the world. If that had not happened, what we call Christianity would have been a small cult within Judaism. But instead, it's expanded to cover the whole world.

We would not be here today as Christians worshiping if it hadn't been for some people who went to Antioch and started telling people who were outsiders about Christ. And Barnabas, who is our patron saint – and churches are named after a saint because that saint can inspire us, inspire us of how we live out our lives as Christians.

And what an amazing inspiration Barnabas is. When he heard that some people had gone to Antioch, and the non-Jewish people, they called them the Hellenists, they were the Greek-speaking people, were interested in knowing about Christ. Barnabas, who was one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, and through the other place we see in Acts just before this, is one of the first people who sold his land and gave it to the disciples to give to the poor. Incredibly generous.

And it says he was filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith. And he made the trip from Jerusalem over to Antioch to find out what was going on. This, to him, was good news. Those who were outcasts and separate and different had heard the word, and that was good news to him. He was excited about the fact that the story of Christ was being shared with people it had never been shared with before. And he traveled to Antioch, and he saw that what was happening was good and exciting and worthwhile.

And so he stayed there, and he taught people what he knew. And he realized – St. Barnabas was also very discerning. He realized that this guy who had been called Saul but was now Paul that he'd met who had this profound experience and transformation, that he would be the perfect person to come to Antioch and minister with him. And he went to Tarsus and brought Paul to minister at Antioch.

Well, now we all know that that made a huge difference. Imagine if we didn't have the letters of Paul. Imagine if Paul and Barnabas had not gone around to all these different places in Turkey and in Greece, teaching them about Christ. The world would be a different place. Christianity would never have thrived.

You see, the church, whether it be in Amman or in Jerash or in Antioch, is not about the building. It's about the people. It's about lives that are transformed. It's about being an instrument of God's will. It's about lifting people up who can change lives. And we never know. We never know what affect we are having. We never know what is happening to the other people sitting in this church on any given Sunday.

My call to ministry began in a church in Minneapolis. I had been raised Episcopalian, and then I spent almost 20 years studying yoga philosophy and hadn't been to church for a long time. And I was going through a difficult point in my life, and I was on retreat, a yoga retreat in Minneapolis, and it happened to be Palm Sunday. And I didn't have anything scheduled for that morning, so it occurred to me, eh, I think I'll see if there's a church around.

And I wandered around into the downtown Minneapolis, which like many cities they had some large churches where not many people came. And I found a church that some people were going into. It was a Roman Catholic Church. Larger sanctuary than this, maybe 20 people in it. But I listened, and I heard the gospel, and it spoke to my heart, and it changed me.

Now, I didn't talk to anybody there. I slipped out the back as quickly as I could at the end of the service because I didn't want to talk to the minister. I didn't talk to any of the people. No one in that church knew I had been there. And certainly, no one could have imagined that that day, the fact that they had come together to worship, that they had been faithful, that they had showed up and kept that church open, changed my life. We never know. We never know.

So here we are, St. Barnabas. We're all gathered together for one service, which is a delightful thing to have everyone here together. We are St. Barnabas. This building is

not St. Barnabas. This building will be ruins one day. But what we do and what we say and what we teach and the lives that can be transformed by us, whether we know it or not, are what will remain. That's what's important.

St. Barnabas was a wonderful inspiration because not only was he extraordinarily generous, not only was he willing to reach out and speak to people who weren't considered worthy and part of the community, but bring them into the community and tell them about Christ. Not only was he willing to travel with Paul and start up churches all over, he also didn't need to be well known. He never wrote anything with his name on it. He didn't need to be top person. He let Paul be the big guy out there.

But he was faithful. And he was loving. And he was open. And he was generous. And that's what we're called to do at St. Barnabas. I know this congregation is generous. I know this congregation is loving. I know this congregation is open to all people, and this congregation can reach out to those who don't yet know Christ or may have known him at one point but have fallen away.

The Old Testament reading from Isaiah says that we are the light of the world. That's what's important. So each one of us, and all of us together as a community, can be a light to the nations, and together discern how we can invite people to know Christ, how we together can know how to spread the love that we've experienced and share it with each other.

Amen.

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Arroyo Grande, California
The Rev. Valerie A. Valle

There was a story about a woman who had a long day at work and was pretty tired. She'd had some difficulty with some of her coworkers. And then she came to a church meeting. It was one of those meetings that wasn't nurturing, but rather, somewhat irritating, and it went over, and so she was late and concerned about getting home to fix dinner because she was expecting someone. When she got in her car to drive home she was not at her best. Of course what happens when you're in a hurry on a day like that, someone cut her off, and then slowed down, and was driving slowly. Naturally she was honking her horn, get moving guy. As soon as she had an opportunity she zoomed around, and passed him. She got in front of him and started going slowly herself, because he needed to learn. Right?

When they got to a stoplight he pulled up beside her, rolled down his window and said something I can't repeat during a sermon, and she responded with a hand gesture that I also can't repeat during a sermon. When the light changed she just floored it. She was going to show this guy that he wasn't going to treat her like that. Next thing she knew there were these little red lights going on behind her. The policeman pulled her over. She said "Gee, I wasn't speeding that fast." Well he came up to her door and he said "Lady, get out. Put your hands up on top of the car." He started frisking her and she said "Officer, what have I done? I haven't broken any laws." He said "What do you call grand theft auto? That's a felony." She said "What do you mean?" He said "Clearly you stole this car." She said "Well why would you think that?" He said "Well look. There's a cross hanging from the rear view mirror, and on the back bumper there's a sticker that says 'Honk if you love Jesus', and clearly no Christian would behave the way you've been behaving as you've been driving."

Jesus said "They will know you are my followers by your love for one another." How do we know that someone is a follower of Christ in our society right now? Do we know because they're wearing a cross, or maybe they have cross earrings on? These days that can be a fashion statement. Some people just wear crosses because it's the latest fashion bling, just to look nice. Do we go by what the bumper sticker says? Do we go with the Episcopalian that has the sort of subtle Episcopal shield, or whatever other denomination that has a bunch of bumper stickers with political statements? How do you know someone is a Christian? If you listen to the TV and radio right now you would think that the way you would know someone was a Christian is by how they vote and how they feel about certain hot button issues like abortion, gay rights, or any of those various issues.

How do you know that someone is a follower of Christ? Jesus said that if you love one another as I have loved you, they will know that you – he was talking about the community – are my followers. Or as the one song says "They'll know we are Christians through our love." What does it mean to love as Christ loved us? It's not a soft, warm, fuzzy feeling. There's more to it than that. One of the problems with English is we are not very subtle in our language sometimes, especially with the word "love". We use the same word love to refer to our relationship with God as we do to our relationship with our cars. We use love as erotic, excitement, and passion, and love as how we treat our children.

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In Greek, especially at the time of the New Testament, there are at least four words that are translated as love in English. C.S. Lewis did a marvelous book called *The Four Loves* where he analyzed all this. It's not too long. It's worth taking a look at. I don't know whether I'll actually pronounce them correctly, and I do know that Fred is here and knows how they were pronounced correctly, so excuse me. I didn't learn spoken Greek.

The first one is Storge, which is affection, which is familial love. That would be the kind of love that a parent would have for a child. It is affectionate, warm. The second you've heard, Philia, which is brotherly love. The name Philadelphia actually is a Greek word that if you translate it means brotherly love. So when they say that Philadelphia is the City of Brotherly Love, it is not because of the behavior of the people of Philadelphia. It is because that's what it means.

Then there's Eros. Most of us have heard of Eros which is that passionate, attraction, and it's not just sexual attraction, but it has a passionate flavor to it. Then there's Agape, Agape love, which is the word in this text that Jesus uses. When he says that you are to love one another as I have loved you, he uses the word Agape. It's hard to really define what Agape love is, but it's not a personal love. It's not a love that possesses. It's not a love that is asking for anything in return. It is the love which God has for us. It is a love which is sacrificial, open, inclusive, and action.

For Jesus to say "They will know you are my followers if you love one another.", he wasn't saying "They'll know you are my followers if you have warm, fuzzy feelings for each other." It has nothing to do with warm, fuzzy feelings inside. In fact, you can have Agape love for somebody you don't have any warm, fuzzy feelings for at all. In fact you may find that it would be hard at this church, but you may find there might be one or two people at this church that somewhat irritate you. That doesn't mean you can't love them. Jesus' Disciples often acted in ways that must have been very irritating to Jesus, but he loved them with an Agape love. It was an inclusive love, an unconditional love.

This love of Christians for one another, this love within the community has been the central mechanism for spreading Christianity. Historians suggest that the reason Christianity spread so quickly in the Mediterranean in the early Roman world is because at that time there was no social safety net. The only safety net you had was your family, and if you didn't have a family you were on your own. People didn't care for each other. It was just the nature of the society at that time, but the Christian were different. The Christian communities, when there was a plague, would take care of each other. When there was hunger they would feed each other. You can read about it in Acts where one of the issues is who is going to be feeding the widows and orphans. There was this sense that we are a community together, and we take care of one another. That was extremely attractive to people of that time, to see a community that loved and cared for each other, a community where you could have slaves and slave owners coming together, where you could have people of Jewish decent and people who had been pagans. When you could have people that spoke different languages come together, share a meal, worship God, support one another, concretely expressing their love for one another.

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This was terribly attractive, a community you would want to be a part of, because you would say "These people have something that I want in my life." All of us want that kind of love in our lives. This was true throughout the centuries. When you study evangelism you find people like Augustine who went to take the Roman form of Christianity to England. He was a monk and he and several of his monks went together. What they did was not go around knocking on doors. What they did was they set up a monastery and they worshiped God, and they loved each other, and they lived pure lives, and they cared for the people around them. The people saw who they were and their integrity, and they said "I want to find out more about this. I want to be part of that. I want that in my life." So then they began converting. Over and over again it has been the expression of love, and commitment, and self-sacrifice that has been what has drawn people to the Christian faith.

Jesus' command, "Love one another as I have loved you." Sacrificial love, agape love, unconditional love. How are we to do that as a community? The first thing about love, the number one thing, is showing up, because you can't express Agape love from a distance. It's about being there and being with people. We come together in worship to support one another. I imagine that most of you here have at least at one time in your life, when things have been really tough, when you've been hurting, and alone, you really needed to come to church on Sunday morning, because church will nurture you, and church will be a place where you can hear the music, and you can listen to scripture, and maybe be touched by a sermon, and you'll be surrounded by a community, and you'll know you're not alone.

Imagine coming to church on one of those days and you pull up in to the parking lot, and you only see two cars. Well, you're not quite sure what's going on. You check your watch. You come up to the front door and there's nobody to greet you because the greeters forgot, and you come in and you stand there, and we have the organist playing, and you have a priest doing their best to sing, and that's it. Nobody else is here. There is no community to surround you, and of course all the people that weren't here had good reasons. Some were out of town. Some were sick. Some had to work in their garden and it was a nice day. Some had stayed out late the night before. Some had had a quarrel with someone else in the church and didn't want to see them that day. Some had been asked to do the coffee hour for just one more time, and they just refused. They were just tired of being asked. This time they just weren't going to do it. Let them deal for themselves. Everybody has reasons, and it just happened that the day you really needed a church community, by random chance, nobody was there.

We come to church sometimes for ourselves. We come because we need to hear God's word, and we need to be part of the worship. But we also come to church because we're part of a community, and to be there for each other, and to support one another, and you never really know what your presence – how it affects someone else. I remember one time when I had recently started back at church – I had been coming to church again for six or seven months. I think it was my first Holy Week, on Maunday Thursday, I had stuff going on in my life, and I was back in the pew. I had tears in my eyes, and I had my

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head down and I was praying. Someone just touched my shoulder. I don't know who it was, but it was a touch of love, and I felt connected, and I felt God's love through that touch. Sometimes we can just smile at someone, and they will feel "Oh, I'm not alone." Or we have an informal conversation after church, or over in coffee hour that just begins a relationship, but then later you find out that that same person is hurting, and you already have a relationship to start with so you can reach out to them and call them. Love starts with showing up. Showing up at a hospital when someone's sick. Showing up with food at someone's door when they need it. Showing up with some care, compassion, and love. To love one another as Christ has loved us, by giving, and being, and listening.

Part of showing up is really listening. I think we've all had the experience where there's been someone who really heard us, who really understood, and that was a healing thing. It's profoundly healing, but the only way that can happen is if someone shows up not just with their body, but with their mind, and listens with their heart. Of course there's the other side of when the Christian community doesn't look like the community of love, when things might be said in the parking lot, or when cleaning up after coffee hour, or I don't know what happens with the choir. It's probably all positive, but I have a mic on, and every now and then between the services I forget to turn it off. Someone, maybe Altar Guild, or someone from the choir comes over and says "You know, your voice is still coming out over the speakers." I think "Oh my gosh. What did I say? I hope I didn't say anything bad."

We all heard recently about the politician in England who had this wonderful encounter with the sweetest woman you could possibly imagine, and got back in the car and forgot his mic was on and said "Oh that was a disaster. She's such a – he called her a name. Ruined his political career. In a community of love we hold that love all the time. Imagine if you thought of yourself as having a live mic on all the time. Would that change how you would speak to one another, or about one another?

There is something about a community of love. There's something about people who love one another, and support one another, and are there for each other when they're hurting, that celebrate with each other when it's wonderful, that come together in worship, that is so attractive that people want to be part of it. Jesus gave us one commandment, to love one another as he has loved us, and that is how we are to be known in the world.

Hallelujah – Christ is risen!

Congregation: The Lord is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

Please be seated. I can't say that enough; I just love having a chance to say that during Easter season. It's been two weeks now since Easter – since we celebrated the Resurrection – and the readings today look at what it's like to live as people of the Resurrection. What is our relationship with Christ now that he's been raised from the dead?

The gospel reading from John is the last story in the Gospel of John. In fact, it's sort of a postlude, because in John's Gospel, right before this he says why he wrote the book and kind of summarizes it, and then this is tacked on the end. Some scholars think that it was probably added by his followers or that it was something he wrote at another time which they put in there.

But it is clearly the same writing as the writer of John, the same language, and the same detail that you might find from someone who was there at the time it happened – from an eyewitness. Details like 153 fish, or that Peter put on his clothes. This seems like something that John is saying actually happened. So let's think about what the setting is for this. A couple of weeks ago – we don't know exactly how long; a week, two weeks – we're not sure exactly how long – the disciples had been with Jesus, and there had been the triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The one who they'd been following was seen as the Messiah there was cheering and great celebration.

And then they had that last poignant dinner with Jesus. During dinner Jesus looked at Peter and said, "You will betray me three times." To which Peter, being the person he is consistently in the gospel, said, "No, not me!" And yet later that night, when Jesus was arrested and was being tried, outside, three times people came up to Peter and said, "You were part of that crowd, weren't you?" He said, "No, I don't even know the guy." And then the cock crowed and Peter realized what he had done. Imagine how you would feel if you had a friend that you also felt was the most wonderful person that had ever lived; that you saw as being a great teacher; that you were their right-hand man; and then you denied you even knew them. It must have been terrible for Peter.

And even when Jesus appeared to the disciples and showed up in the upper room, and they saw that he was alive and that he wasn't dead, but that he was alive again, there must have been a part of Peter that wondered, "How do I relate to him now, after what I've done? Will he still love me? Will he still want to be in relationship with me? What do I say?" Well, some time has passed, a little bit of time has passed, and they've gone from Jerusalem up to Galilee. The Sea of Tiberius is the Roman name for the Sea of Galilee, and that's where, before this whole thing started, Peter and John and James and probably some of the other disciples were fishermen. They basically had gone home, and they didn't know what to do.

If any of you have ever had an experience where you've had a real peak experience – maybe you went to Cursillo or some other type of retreat, or you were reading a book, or something happened at church that you had some kind of peak experience where you knew God in a whole new way. And then the next day it's like, "Okay. Now what do I do? Well, I guess I get up and I go to work. I don't know what else to do." So Peter, not knowing what to do, says, "Let's go fishing." He wasn't saying, "Let's go fishing," like "Let's take a day off." He was saying, "Let's go back to work. Let's go back to the office." And sure enough, they say, "Sure, we'll go fishing with you."

And they go out, and all night long they're fishing and they don't catch a single fish. A frustrating time. And sometimes it feels like that after you've had a profound experience of God, and you go back to work and it feels kind of empty, like nothing is working quite right. Or maybe if you're at a time when you've kind of walked away from God and nothing works quite right in your life. It's all sort of empty. Going through the paces – like fishing all night but not catching anything.

Maybe while he's having this frustrating experience of not catching any fish, he might be remembering an earlier time - another day when he was fishing all night and hadn't caught anything. The day in which Jesus came to him and said, "Put the net out on the other side." Then, in the early dawn they make out a figure on the coast, on the beach, on the shoreline. They can't tell who it is because there's not enough light yet. Then the voice comes, "Children," which is an interesting way for a stranger to greet you. "Children, you haven't caught any fish, have you?" You can almost hear the humor and the laughter, like, "You're trying to catch fish without me?" right? "You haven't caught anything, have you? Throw it in on the starboard side."

And they did that, and they got a huge catch – so much they couldn't even pull it into the boat. And the disciple that Jesus loved, it clicked for him. This happened before – that's got to be Jesus! Nobody else could do that. When the disciple Jesus loved says that, Peter goes, "Wow, yeah – it's Jesus!" And he's always the one who's most impetuous so he jumps in and swims over to the shore.

Now it is a really odd thing for us to think that you're in a boat and you put on your clothes before jumping into the water. But this is different. He was naked; they were working naked. This is Israel, it was dark, it was hot, they're messy, so they take their clothes off. It would be kind of like a group of guys gathered at one of their friends' house, and they're putting in a new patio. And it's a hot day, and it's hot, sticky, messy work, and they've been drinking a few beers. They all have taken off their shirts, because - you know – they're all sweaty. Their shirts are off, and they're putting down the patio, and all of a sudden the wife says, "Hi, honey. Your boss just showed up at the front door." Well, you know as the guy is running into the house he's going to grab his shirt and put his shirt on because he doesn't want to greet his boss shirtless, hot, and sweaty. That's what Peter was doing. He wasn't about to greet his teacher, his Lord, naked.

And of course the clothes they wore – he wasn't putting on a suit jacket that would be destroyed by the water. It was all natural fiber, used to being in the water, no big deal. He's a fisherman. So he swims up, and the others pull the boat in. And what he discovers is Jesus has already got a fire going. He's already got some fish frying. He already has some bread baking. He's prepared breakfast for them. Where did he get the fish? It doesn't say. He wants to have a meal with them. And it probably reminds them of the time when Jesus took a couple of loaves and a few fish and fed 5,000 people. So they're going to have a meal together – they're going to have breakfast together, and Jesus is abundantly providing.

But it's interesting – Jesus also says, "Go get a couple of the fish you caught." This is going to be a potluck. The disciples are able to add something as well. Then they see what a magnificent catch they have, and they share, and they sit, and they eat. It must have been wonderful for the disciples to have that kind of informal friendship again that they had shared with Jesus during his ministry, to just be with him, and just be in his presence. To eat with him; to share the bread. But Peter was probably still feeling bad inside. He was probably still carrying some guilt.

So Jesus took him aside and said, "Peter, do you love me?" He says, "Of course I love you." "Then feed the babies – take care of the little ones. Peter, do you really love me?" "Yes, Lord, of course I love you." "Well, then, feed the sheep. Take care of the older ones. Peter, do you love me?" And Peter, he's getting frustrated being asked a third time. "Of course I love you. You know everything." "Feed my lambs. Take care of people." And this – this is how Jesus provided reconciliation for Peter. This is how Jesus let Peter know that he was forgiven and still in relationship and still valued by Christ and still wanting him to do the ministry.

Notice the forgiveness was not, "Okay, Peter, grovel – you really blew it. I'll forgive you." It was a mercy that was overflowing. It was a mercy that was expressed in a way so that Peter could feel whole again, and feel in a right relationship again. It was an extraordinary expression of Christ's love and mercy. And then he said the same thing he'd said to Peter those years before on the seaside: "Follow me."

The other readings today have other expressions of God's extraordinary mercy and grace. In that first reading, Saul is the person who becomes Paul and writes most of the letters that are in the Bible. He sets up all these churches. He becomes probably the most effective evangelist.

But before that, he had been persecuting the Christians. He was on his way to arrest people and bind them and bring them back to Jerusalem to stand trial. You can't do much worse than that in terms of the church. He was persecuting Christians. And Jesus appeared to him – not in fury, not in anger, but in love. Just asked him a question: "Why are you doing this to me?" What grace – what amazing mercy and grace that Christ offered Paul the opportunity to change!

In the Psalm we read today, the psalmist had obviously had a close relationship with God, and then something had happened to it. Maybe he did some kind of sin; maybe he pulled away. But in some way, his heart got separated from God. And then there was forgiveness and reconciliation, and he sings a song of praise for that – for that healing, merciful grace.

In the reading from the book of Revelation we hear what happens in heaven. In heaven, what we get to do is sing. Now I know for the choir and maybe some of you here, think of the best time you've ever had singing. Maybe you were singing a hymn that just knocked your socks off. Or maybe it was some contemporary music playing on the radio; Christian music you were singing along with. Or during the Easter service, where you're just belting out and you just don't care whether anybody else is singing. Or maybe nobody's around, you are just praising God, and you feel this sense of worship and praise and joy just welling up inside of you and being expressed.

Imagine the best possible moment of expressing your love for God, and doing that for eternity. That's the vision of heaven. So that's the nature of our relationship after Easter, a knowledge of and expression of thanks for this incredible mercy and love of Christ.

In just a couple minutes we are going to be baptizing Olivia Ann, and there'll be a new member of the body of Christ. One of the things we'll do at that baptism is I will put oil on her, and I will say, "You are sealed as Christ's own forever." That means she will have a relationship with Christ forever. She will be surrounded by that love and mercy of Christ forever.

When she's learning to walk, Christ will be there every time she falls down. When she's learning to talk, Christ will celebrate. When she gets to be a teenager and she starts to question whether God exists or not, Christ will be right there. And when she gets to a point in her life where, like all of us, she will do or say things that hurt other people or hurt herself, Christ will be there also, forgiving, holding her in his mercy and love. If she walks away from Christ and wants to pretend that there's nothing there – if she ends up being an antagonist to the church and is like Saul, and critiquing the church, Christ will be there with her. Whenever she opens her eyes and welcomes Christ into her life, he will hold her in his arms and welcome her home. He will be there with her in the good times and bad. He will hear all her cries and all her joy. His mercy and his love will surround her. And even when it comes time for her to die, Christ's love and mercy will be there to hold her and bring her to heaven, where she can join in that wonderful chorus of angels. And so, Olivia, you have a wonderful future ahead.

Of course all of us have that love and mercy of Christ surrounding us, and that's what the Resurrection is all about. The Resurrection is not about an empty tomb. The Resurrection is not solely about the fact that some people long ago saw Christ alive. The Resurrection is the fact that we know Christ is with us, resurrected, present right now in our own lives.

Alleluia. Christ has risen.

Response: The Lord has risen indeed. Alleluia.

You can do better than that.

Alleluia. Christ has risen.

Response: The Lord has risen indeed. Alleluia.

Much better.

There's a story from during the time of the Soviet Empire when the communists were ruling and were trying to eliminate all religion, that they had people who were trained to go around through the countryside to all the towns and teach them about atheism. One of these teachers of atheism, these philosophers, they called them, came to a town. All the people were gathered because they didn't have any choice about coming.

In this large auditorium he expounded eloquently on how atheism was the only real truth. At the end of the couple of hours of exquisite reasoning, he looked down on this group of people that he was sure that he saw shattered faith and hopelessness, that they had been convinced.

There was a moment of silence, and he asked, "Are there any questions?" There was some more silence. Then way in the back of the auditorium, a man with a loud and clear voice said, "Christ has risen." And the whole auditorium responded, "The Lord has risen indeed."

Christianity always has responded well to affliction. When the culture has tried to make Christianity illegal, it has become stronger. When it has gotten pushed down, it has grown up. When there have been martyrs, new people have become Christians. Christianity can resist that kind of thing.

But our culture doesn't actively resist Christianity. In fact, it calls itself a Christian culture. But it has done something more insidious. It has taken Easter and it has trivialized it. Easter has become domesticated with cute little chickens and baby rabbits. And Easter has become commercialized. We all know this.

It's become all about springtime. Easter break is now spring break where you go party. When you go into the stores, you see all the Easter decorations and all the nice pale spring colors. It's all very pretty, and it's all very nice, but not real important. It's become trivialized as another time to send cute little cards on Facebook. Or perhaps you go and visit your family.

But, of course, we know Easter isn't trivial. That's why we're here. It makes all the difference in the world. The commercialization, the making of Easter commercial, to me is very ironic because Jesus, the one who died and has risen again, He went into the temple and kicked out the moneychangers because He didn't want the worship of God to become commercial.

We've done a pretty good job with Easter. You know what I mean. I found this one, which is the one that gets me. (*Holds up a stuffed animal*) It looks like a little bunny rabbit, cute, soft, fuzzy little bunny rabbit, but actually, it's a bear in a bunny costume [*Laughter*]. What that has to do with the life, death and resurrection of Christ, I have no idea [*Laughter*].

Rabbits became associated with Easter because Easter was also the time of Pagan fertility celebrations, and rabbits are known to be prolific. Nothing to do with Easter. And then we've got plastic eggs. Now, real eggs, real colored eggs came to be associated with Easter for a real reason. The story goes, that Mary Magdalene, after The Resurrection, traveled all over the known world, which was the Roman world at that time, telling people about The Resurrection and her experience of the risen Christ.

And it said that she made it all the way into Caesar's Palace and was meeting with the emperor. As she was talking, the emperor said, "That can't be. There couldn't possibly be a man risen from the dead. That would be like that egg over there on the table turning red." She reached over and she picked up the egg, and she raised it up, and it turned bright red.

So if you ever see an icon of Mary Magdalene, you'll see her holding a red egg. And that's why we started dying Easter eggs. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the tradition of Easter eggs is taken to a high art, and they still remember Mary Magdalene, and why it was done.

Here in the United States we get plastic ones (*Holds up a plastic Easter egg*) [*Laughter*]. You just go to the store and you buy them. What do these have to do with Easter? They're hard. And you know what? When you open them up – if you had a real egg, if you really cooked an egg and dyed it and then you opened it up, you'd have something nurturing to eat. There's no better protein than eggs. But when you open up one of these plastic ones, there's candy inside? (*Walks into congregation*) Who wants some candy? Do you want to pass that [*Laughter*]? Yeah. There. You want some candy? Is he allowed to have a little candy?

Response: Yeah.

Yeah. I'll give you a few. Who else wants some candy? Anybody here? You like candy, Bill? Oh, Brian. You'll take some candy [*Laughter*]. All right. Who else is brave? Who wants to get your sugar high early [*Laughter*]? All right. We got one more here. One more. Bill, would you like it? There we go [*Laughter*]. Great to get an

Easter egg and you get a piece of chocolate candy. Wow! And you eat it, and it tastes good, and it's gone [*Laughter*].

You're not really filled up. In fact, you just want more chocolate. Sugar and chocolate just make you want more. And it puts a little weight on too, if that's an issue for you. It doesn't really nurture you. It doesn't really give you anything. It looks like it would. It has the appearance of something of value, but it's fleeting. It's momentary. And it doesn't really nourish you.

But Easter is different. Easter is not trivial. Easter is the moment at which history changed. Nothing has been the same for humanity since that day. We even have our calendar as before and after that. Everything changed. And even if you haven't accepted Christianity, the philosophy or the understanding of the nature of humanity changed.

And everyone has had to deal with the Resurrection of Christ or deny the Resurrection of Christ since that day. It's not trivial, and it's not domesticated. It's not a little chicken. It's a roaring lion. It's not a cute little bunny. It's something that transforms our lives. It's not safe. It's not predictable.

The women go to the grave, and the first response is fear. Not domesticated. And, of course, it's not commercial because what Easter has to offer is grace. And grace is free. You can't make money off of grace because it's given by God generously and abundantly.

We have a tendency in our society to trivialize things. I was a psychologist before I became a priest, and one of the things I noticed as a psychologist is that we weren't very good at dealing with guilt. Now, we were good at dealing with what's called neurotic guilt, that's where you feel guilty about something but you really didn't do anything wrong.

As a psychologist, we were good at helping people deal with the guilt that something was done to them, and helping them realize that they weren't responsible for the fact that their mother or father abused them or whatever it is they were feeling guilty about. We could deal with that kind of guilt.

And we could help people realize that if they felt guilty because they didn't wash their hands that that wasn't important. We could deal with that kind of guilt. But we had no answer to when someone had deeply wronged another person, when they knew they had hurt someone and they felt guilty about it. Oh, sometimes in the liberal progressive psychology one could say, "Well, you murdered because you grew up in a poor home and you didn't have the right upbringing" or whatever. You blame it on the parents.

But the truth is that's not dealing with guilt. That's making excuses. And when you're really feeling guilty and responsible for hurting someone, what you need is someone who

will take it seriously, to not trivialize it, to not explain it away, but to acknowledge the pain that we have inside when we know we've hurt someone.

And that's what we have with Easter. God never trivialized our guilt. God never said, "Oh, it's okay. I understand. You had a hard upbringing. I understand that you've hurt other people." No. God never trivializes the way we hurt one another. But God will forgive it when we acknowledge it. The God of Jesus Christ is the good father whose son goes off and squanders his money, does all kinds of nasty things. When he comes home, the father runs to him. The father wasn't saying it was okay to do that, the father was expressing his love.

The answer, what we get at Easter is that God loves us like a good parent. Acknowledging that we make mistakes, acknowledging that we hurt each other sometimes terribly and cruelly, and yet, even on the cross, Jesus asked for forgiveness for the ones who killed Him.

The Resurrection says that even when we hurt each other, even when we're lost, even when we run from God, even when we pretend there's nothing beyond ourselves, there's still hope. Even when we're dead and lost and hurting inside, there's still hope because God never gives up on us. There is always the hope and the promise of the Resurrection.

The resurrected Christ - whatever that means to you - something happened. Something happened that day when the tomb was empty and the frightened disciples became courageous. Something happened, and what they tell us happened was that Christ has risen and we're forgiven and we are loved. And that makes all the difference. It brings us hope, it brings us joy, and it brings us new life.

Alleluia. Christ has risen.

Response: The Lord has risen indeed. Alleluia.

It's been quite a journey. We have talked about this Lent as a journey to Jerusalem, as a journey to the Holy City, as a journey to the center, to the center of the labyrinth. Now, some of you may have had an intense and profound Lent and have given things up and fasted. Some of you may have been so busy during the last couple of months you hardly even noticed that Lent was happening.

Or some of you may have been doing this for a long time or some of you may have just started out. It doesn't matter. It's all part of the journey. It's all part of the journey of salvation history, which is what we heard this evening over in the Parish Hall. That is the idea of the Vigil. The Vigil was originally designed for the people who were about to be baptized.

On the eve of Easter, they would literally stay up all night reading scripture to tell the story. It was a teaching moment. It was a remembering moment. It was a time to be with the literature, to be with the history, to be with the journey of the people of God. Then at sunrise those who had prepared for months would be baptized and have First Communion on Easter.

We don't do it all night. It's hard enough to get just a few people here in the evening, let alone do it all night. But we do remember and read the salvation history, the story of God's walk with God's people. We hear about the Israelites who were in bondage in Egypt, and how God came and called them to leave their bondage, to leave slavery and walk free, and how they got to an obstacle. They got to the Red Sea, and they couldn't go any further, and they were about to give up. And God said, "No. Don't turn around. I'll make a way when it seems like there is no way."

One of the things that we heard on Thursday night as we reflected on and lived out part of what a Passover meal would be like is that for the Jewish people when they remember this story at Passover, they don't remember it as something that happened thousands of years ago. They remember it as something that has happened to them. They say, "We got out of bondage in Egypt. We crossed the Red Sea."

It's not even really in the past tense. It's something that we're living today. We all know what it's like to be in bondage. Maybe bondage to a job or a bondage of fear of not having a job. Maybe bondage to drugs or alcohol or bondage to food or bondage to a relationship or bondage to fear. We all have ways in which we are not free, in which our lives do not live out of the freedom of choice of the moment, but lives out of habit and fear.

We all know what it's like to be in bondage. And so just as thousands of years ago the people of Israel were invited to leave the bondage of Egypt, we are always invited to leave whatever it is that binds us and to walk free. And we may have freed ourselves from something and then run into an obstacle. We're always running into obstacles. We're always running into times when we want to turn back.

We remember what it was like for the Israelites. They got hungry, and they remembered there were onions, there were leeks and there were other good things in Egypt. We should go back they told Moses. Sometimes when we are seeking our freedom, we feel like we need to go back; we remember the good old days.

Or sometimes we run into an obstacle where we feel like there is no way that we can move forward in our lives, that we're stuck, we can't move forward. But God opens the way. God just parts that Red Sea, that obstacle that looked impossible, just opened it right up, and the people walked through. No matter what the obstacles we face in our lives right now, God is with us opening it up.

And we read Isaiah who was speaking to people who were in exile. He said, "Come you who are hungry and thirsty. Eat and drink in abundance. If you hunger, eat and drink." He talks of the abundance of God, that God just wants to shower good things on us. Back then God wanted to do it, right now God wants to do it, tomorrow God will want to do it.

To those who hunger for God, who hunger for peace, who hunger for joy, God will be there. If we thirst for love, if we thirst for God's presence, God wants to provide for us. Salvation is offered to everyone. Mercy is offered to everyone.

Then we read how God is giving a new heart. Not just back then, not just to them, but to us and to everyone on earth because for God time is not like it is for us.

We live in linear time, but God lives in some other kind of time. I don't know what it is, but it's not linear. I know that. And God is not limited to one place. God isn't just offering salvation to us or to the people of Israel or to the people in Africa or to people who believe in a certain way. God is offering God's love to everybody all the time everywhere. Always was, always will be.

And then we heard about the dry bones. Who can forget when Fred reads about the dry bones? Of course the writer was not talking about literal dry bones. He was talking about the people, the people of his country who had become dead inside. They had become spiritually dead, and the prophet was feeling hopeless. "I talk to these people and they're dead. It's like talking to a pile of bones."

Then God says to the prophet "Is there life in those bones?" The prophet says to God, "You know. I don't. I don't have any hope for these people, but, God, you're in charge." Then God says to the prophet, "Prophecy and make these bones come alive." And he speaks to the bones and says, "Come alive." And they start getting back together again. But they aren't fully alive until God breathes the spirit into their nostrils.

Tonight, yesterday and tomorrow God is speaking to the dry bones, to people who are spiritually dry, to whatever in us that's not fully alive can live. The bones can come back together and new life is breathed into them. And that is called resurrection, which, of course, is what we're celebrating tonight. That Christ died and was buried. Then people

went to the grave not knowing what to expect. They discovered it wasn't a dead body, it was an empty grave, and then they even met Jesus, they were fearful and joyful.

In all of the stories about The Resurrection, the response is fear and joy because there's something about it that when we realize, when we come to know that Christ died and is risen for us, that we will not die, that there is that much love in the universe, that God cares for us that much, there's something scary about that because there's nowhere to hide. We can't hide in our fear. We can't hide in our doubt. We're called to step out of Egypt. We're called to cross the Red Sea.

How can you look at a resurrected Christ and not accept a new heart and a new mind? And so it's kind of scary, but it's wonderful and joyful. When we accept it, we are new people. Each day, every day, but tonight especially, we are invited to open our hearts and minds and let God's love that shone through Christ come into us, transform us, and make us whole.

Amen.

I don't know for sure what makes it so hard to hear The Passion. Is it the suffering of Jesus or is it the incredible cruelty of which humanity is capable? When we read The Passion, like we did tonight, and people read different parts, you begin to realize that very few people in this story come out with anything positive about them. Instead, what you run into is betrayal, cowardice, self-centeredness, fear, power, and manipulation - all the things that make us human, at least all the negative things that make us human.

Everything that's cruel about humanity is part of this story, even the word crucify. The Romans tried to control people when they conquered them. They didn't worry about making them their friends. They decided the best way of doing it was fear. And so over time they developed different ways to punish people that would elicit fear.

Crucifixion was the most elegant of them all because with crucifixion it was not just the fact that the person was nailed up on a tree or a wall or even tied so it would take longer. It was designed to maximize the pain so that they would live as long as possible. Then the bodies just hung there.

Crucifixions were always done in public places so when people were going back and forth down the street to go get their groceries, they might see a person or five or a hundred hanging on a wall or up on a hill. They might be dying, they might be dead, they might have the birds eating their flesh. It was unbelievably cruel.

It's hard to imagine how a culture could be that cruel. Yet, when we read this story, and as most of you had a part to read, we hear echoes of ourselves. We have all had times in our lives when we have been afraid and acted out of fear. We have all had times when we have denied somebody else, kept quiet when we could have spoken up.

I sometimes try to imagine who I would have been in the story. And I think the person that I would have been is one of the ones who was cheering Jesus as he came down into the city a week ago, but once He got arrested, I didn't want anything to do with it, and I stayed home, and I stayed away.

I doubt I would have been there yelling "Crucify Him." It's not my style. But I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have been there protesting. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have been speaking up and saying, "Not Him" because I know how many times I see injustice in the world and I stay quiet.

Each one of you, where would you be in this story? I'd like to think I'd be standing at the cross. Jesus' friend who stood by his mother. I doubt it. I doubt it. I know myself too well. Nobody comes out very good from this story except his mother and John. And even Joseph of Arimathea, who offers his grave, had been silent because he was afraid. He was a secret follower of Jesus.

When Bishop Mary was in Paso on Wednesday night, she said that there is a tradition of theological reflection that goes way back of people wondering what it was Jesus did in

that part of the Apostles Creed where it says, “He descended into hell.” What was he doing during that time in hell? She said that one of the theories is that He was looking for Judas. He was looking for the one who betrayed Him to get an opportunity to forgive Him.

Because, you see, in the Matthew version of The Passion, Judas, when he sees that Jesus is going to be killed, realizes what he did. He repented of it, but he was so disturbed, he went and killed himself. It also says that Jesus didn’t lose any one of them. So I could imagine Jesus looking for His friend Judas to tell him he was forgiven. Just like Jesus comes looking for us who have all let him down in one way or another in our lives. He comes looking for each one of us, each one of his friends, so He can tell us that we’re forgiven, that we’re loved, that it’s all going to be okay.

In fact, it’s going to be more than okay. Out of the sadness of our lives, out of the tragedy of our lives, out of the things we do wrong in our lives, Jesus can come and take that part of us that is dead and He can transform it, forgive it, love it, and resurrect it. This was a bad Friday for most of the people in the story, but we know that it’s not the end of the story. And that’s why we call it Good Friday.

Amen.

Whenever I am in a pine glen or a pine forest where the pine needles are on the ground and it's warm and the sun is shining on them, there's a certain smell. It's not the same smell as a Christmas tree. That's smells green. This is the dry brown pine needles with the sun on them in the summertime.

There's a certain smell, and whenever I smell that smell, I remember the place where I spent my summers in Ontario, Canada. It was on a lake where there were lots of pine trees. In the summertime, that smell triggers that memory. It feels like I'm standing right there. - Scientists have found that the sense of smell is the sense that most clearly triggers memory.

Do you have any memories that get triggered by smell? Maybe a certain food that when you were a child was made at the holidays. Maybe your mother's perfume or the smell of your father when you gave him a hug. Do you have any of those kind of memories? Sensual and vivid? Those kind of memories are not of words. You don't think about that memory. You relive it.

On the last night that Jesus had with His disciples, He could have done a lot of different things. We all know about someone who's dying and may want to pass something on to their family and their friends. Sometimes you might even think about what it is you would want to pass on.

There are lots of ways that Jesus could have spent that last night. He could have written out instructions. He could have written a whole book like Mohammed did. Or He could have told a scribe to write it for Him. He could have told His disciples a clear set of beliefs, spelling out in great detail the nature of The Trinity and the relationship between the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Don't you kind of wish He'd done that instead of us trying to figure it out ourselves? But He didn't.

He could have given them a list of rules, something like the Torah. If you've ever picked up Leviticus, you know that there's a whole set of rules of how you're supposed to do things. On His last night He could have said, "These are the things that I really care about, so make sure that you do this, this way and that that way", but He didn't.

He didn't choose to do it that way. Instead He had dinner with them. He ate with them. They tasted. They smelled. They touched. Some of us had dinner before this service where we had some of the parts of what a Passover meal might have been like, and it would have had bitter herbs. Horseradish is what we usually have. And then a sweet thing made with honey and apples and raisins, bitter and sweet. There was bread and lamb, unique textures with different flavors. And, of course, the flavors of the wine. And the smells would have been rich, sensual, material, incarnate. A very human experience.

And then He took this dinner, and He used it to teach. Not by giving a grand explanation, not by talking theology, not by setting up rules, but by taking the bread and adding to the blessing when He broke it, saying, "This is broken for you. This is my body, broken for

you.” And He gave it to them to all eat. And as they ate it, they tasted, they savored, they consumed it, they chewed it in their mouths and swallowed it. And that bread that Jesus had blessed became a part of them and fed them.

And then after dinner He picked up the cup of wine. The smell of wine. One of my memories of church were on those days when there was communion I could smell the wine. It’s a unique smell. And, of course, there was the taste. Wine is such a wonderful image. Back then wine was what you drank all the time. You didn’t drink water without putting some wine in it because you had to have something to kill all the bugs that were in the water.

Bread and wine was what you subsisted on. It’s what you survived on. That was the main part of every meal. And here He took the wine and He blessed it. And He said, “This is my blood, which is shed for you.”

Now, that is a very powerful statement for us, but for a Jew at that time, that is an extraordinary statement because, you see, the blood of animals was considered to contain the life force, the spirit of that animal. So when a Jew had meat, the animal was sacrificed to God, and the blood was poured out on the altar because they felt that they had no right to consume the blood. When an animal is killed according to kosher, it is hung upside down and its throat is slit so all of the blood can be drained out of it. Jewish people don’t consume blood. Blood is offered to God. It is the spirit. So for Jesus to say that this wine is my blood and that you should drink it must have been an odd experience for his disciples.

But wine also has another thing about it; it’s an intoxicant. It’s called a spirit because, you know, when you drink a little bit of wine, you feel different. You drink a lot of wine, you feel a lot different [*Laughter*]. You drink too much wine and it’s not good. But it changes your consciousness.

He didn’t give them grape juice. He gave them wine. And He said that that’s how we should remember Him, by breaking bread and sharing it among us, and by blessing wine and sharing it among us. He didn’t give the disciples a lot of rules. He told them to do something - to break bread and bless wine. Then He did the most remarkable thing of all.

Now this dinner, this Passover dinner, was a really great meal. At that time they ate in the style of the Greeks, so people are not sitting in chairs. They were lying on their sides on their left elbow and eating with their right hand. In John’s Gospel it says that the head of the disciple that Jesus loved was on Jesus’ breast. This just meant that He was to the right of Jesus, and his head would have rested right there.

So they were lounging, eating, enjoying the Passover together. And then Jesus just got up for no particular reason; he got up and took off in his outer garment. It would be sort of like Mr. Rogers taking off his jacket when he gets home. He took off His jacket, and

He just had on His simple garment. Then He took a towel and a basin of water, and He began to wash the disciples' feet.

Now, washing feet was something that only servants did. And, according to the law, according to Torah law, you couldn't force a servant to wash peoples' feet. It was against the law to tell them they had to do it because it was considered that demeaning. And He washed their feet. What a sensual thing to do.

A friend, for my birthday, took me to go get a pedicure. You sit in a chair, and someone comes and soaks your feet and then massages them and washes them. And it is extraordinary to have someone fuss over you like that.

Now, imagine that it is the teacher that you have been following for months, who you have seen walk on water and bring people to life and preaching with strength, the person you think is the Messiah. This is the person that you walked down the hill from Bethany with. You heard them cheering for the king of kings, yet here he is kneeling there washing your feet. No wonder Peter said, "No. Don't do that." Hard to let that kind of love in.

Jesus did give one command that last night. He didn't write it down, but it was simple enough that it could be remembered. He said, "Love one another as I have loved you." "Love one another as I have loved you." He said that after He had washed their feet. Love one another in humility. Love one another with compassion. Love one another in service and in action.

Jesus didn't talk about what the disciples should think about. He wasn't concerned about what they believed. He was concerned about what they would do. And He was very visceral and material and incarnate. This was not an abstract teacher of ethereal knowledge. This was about bread and wine and dirty feet. This was here in the body, and it was about action.

So what Jesus left His disciples with as the last thing was to do. Do. Act. Act in the material world. Be with one another. Love one another not in some abstract sense of oh, yeah, I feel a warm fuzzy feeling about everybody in the world. "Love one another as I have loved you", on my knees washing your feet. Love with your actions, as well as your heart.

That's what He taught the last day of His life. That's what we're to remember. And that's how He wants us to remember Him. And so we gather on this Thursday night as we remember each year the last week of Jesus' life. As we get prepared for tomorrow, for Good Friday, when we'll remember His crucifixion, so that we can be ready on Easter to receive the great grace and gift of His resurrection.

Tonight we do. We do in a very material incarnational way. We will wash feet, we will break bread, we will share wine, and we will remember the one who told us that we are to love one another as Christ loved us.

Amen.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable and Thy sight, oh, Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

What kind of a king was this? What kind of a king was this Jesus? He presented himself as a king. When questioned, He acknowledged, yes, He was king. And when He came into Jerusalem, he acted the part of a king perfectly. He did exactly what the Messiah was predicted to do.

He knew His scripture, and He followed it perfectly. Jewish people who are still waiting for the Messiah anticipate that the Messiah will come down from Bethany, down over the Mount of Olives from the East, into Jerusalem. When you go to Jerusalem, you find that on the Mount of Olives is the largest cemetery for Jewish people in the world, because people want to be buried where the Messiah is going to come from since they'll be the first to be saved.

Jesus knew this. And He acted out the part of king perfectly. If a king needs something, He just says, go get from one of the peasants. And if they ask why, just say the king needs it. If a king is returning from battle and from some great victory, there's a parade as he enters the city, and people cheer and throw down their cloaks and wave branches.

Jesus knew this. Jesus acted the role of king perfectly that morning in Jerusalem. But what kind of king was He? Now, in the time when Jesus lived, kings were not noble. There was no chivalry. Being king or being Caesar was about power and wielding power and controlling people and amassing wealth.

A king was someone who soldiers obeyed, not someone that soldiers mocked. A king was someone who gathered money and wealth and power. A king didn't, as Paul says, freely give up all his power as God and become human. A king meted out whatever kind of justice he wanted. A king was not someone where the perversion of justice led to their death.

Kings were cruel and tortured those that disagreed with them to keep them under control. They weren't the ones being tortured. A king, a Caesar, could arbitrarily decide to kill someone any time they wanted to. The kings were not the ones who were crucified.

What kind of king was this one hanging on a cross with a sign King of the Jews about His head? Not a king that looked like anything else that they'd ever seen. And yet Jesus systematically in scripture uses the language of king. He talks about the coming of the kingdom. He's described as the Son of Man. And here someone even says are you the Son of God?

Son of Man and Son of God were terms used for Caesar because Caesar was not just the emperor, he was considered to be divine. Some people have said that Caesar was the anti-Christ, but I was listening to a lecture recently where the lecturer said, that's not what happened. Jesus was the anti-Caesar.

Jesus was exactly the opposite of the power and might and control that was valued by the culture. He turned it all upside down. He said to His disciples the one who is the greatest should act like the youngest. The one who wants to lead should serve everyone else. First shall be last. He turned it all upside down.

In our culture, in the average everyday culture, an enormous amount of time and energy is put into amassing wealth and power. And if you are wealthy and powerful, you drive around in a big, fancy car. And if you're wealthy enough, you have somebody else drive it for you.

And if you're a man, you have people who polish your shoes. And if you're a woman, you go and you get pedicures and someone takes care of your feet. If you're wealthy and powerful, you don't get down on your knees for someone else. But Jesus turned it all upside down. Turned it all upside down.

What kind of a king was that? What kind of a king freely relinquishes his power and suffers and dies? What kind of a king is that? But we know the rest of the story. We've read the last chapter of the book. We know that although at that point when Jesus hung on the cross, it appeared that He had lost, that the powers of darkness, that the power of Caesar, that the powers of the world had won.

But now 2,000 years later, there is no Roman Empire. There is no Caesar. There is no kingdom like that. But we still know Christ. The only reason we know of Pilate is because he's the one who sent Jesus to the cross. Do you know anything else about him? Pretty insignificant person now. But Jesus, we remember everything He said and did.

He turned it all upside down. A whole different kind of kingdom. And we pray for it every day when we say the Lord's Prayer. Thy kingdom come. What kind of a king? What kind of a kingdom? It's a kingdom based on love. It's a kingdom where the greatest is the least and the leaders are servants.

It's a kingdom where money and power are freely relinquished in order to serve others. It's a kingdom where instead of condemning others, the focus is on forgiving others. It's a kingdom where instead of taking care of ourselves, we are concerned about taking care of others.

Jesus said to His disciples I give you the kingdom. My father gave it to me, and now I give it to you. We are Christ's disciples. We have been given a kingdom. It is a kingdom where the greatest is as the youngest, and it is a kingdom in which those who wish to lead are there to serve everyone else.

Amen.

[End of Audio]

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in Thy sight, oh Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

What are you afraid of? We're all afraid of something. What are you afraid of? Are you afraid of the dark? Are you afraid of spiders? Are you afraid of snakes? Maybe you're afraid of earthquakes. No, you probably wouldn't be living here if you were afraid of earthquakes, but you might be afraid of hurricanes, which is why you're not living in Florida. And your friends in Florida probably can't understand how you can live in California with all those earthquakes. We're all afraid of something.

Abram, who is later named Abraham, was afraid. He was afraid that he was going to die and have no one to carry on. He had worked hard. He was rich and powerful. And his wife had had no children. And all that he had was going to go either to a slave or to some relative that lived in a far off city, and his name and his tradition and his life would die away and no one would remember. It was all for naught. That was his fear. That's what he was afraid of.

And he had a vision and that vision starts as many visions and visits by angels begin, "Do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid." That's the phrase that comes up more than any other phrase in all of scripture. If you read the bible you're going to find lots of places where an angel or someone says, "Do not be afraid," and yet we are afraid. We're all afraid of something. We all live in some fear, but God says to us, "Do not be afraid."

What are you afraid of? Are you afraid you're going to lose your job or maybe afraid you'll never find one if you're looking right now? Or maybe you're afraid you're going to be stuck in the job you have forever. Are you afraid that you're not going to have enough money to retire or are you retired and afraid you're not going to have enough money to last? If you're a youth, are you afraid that your parents are going to embarrass you? If you're a parent, are you afraid that your youth is going to embarrass you? We all have our fears. We're all afraid of something.

Harod was afraid. Harod was afraid of Jesus. Harod was afraid because he was a puppet king. He didn't have any real power. He was a king just because he was serving the Romans. He knew that if someone inspired the people, there could easily be a rebellion because the people didn't like him very much. He didn't have any power from support of the people. He was afraid. He was afraid that he would lose his authority. He was afraid he would lose his palace. He was afraid he would lose all the perks that came from power and he knew that he wasn't standing on a solid foundation.

What he was afraid of is what leaders in Jerusalem and all over the world are really afraid of, and he was afraid of the truth. You see, Jerusalem killed its prophets because Jerusalem represented not just where the temple was, but also it was the temporal material power center, the political power center. And those who have power, most of the time, are afraid of one thing and that's the truth. And prophets, they don't predict the

future, they tell the truth. Usually people who are comfortable and in positions of power and authority don't particularly like the truth. There are things they would rather not have said, and we know that today.

Look what happens to the people we call "whistleblowers" – the ones who speak the truth about a company or an agency in the government, or what's happening in Congress, or what's happening at a school. What happens to the one that speaks out and says the truth that everybody else can see but won't speak? They usually end up, maybe not being physically killed, but they certainly are feared and an attempt is made to silence them.

The prophets spoke the truth to Jerusalem. A prophet speaks the truth to power and authority, and so that's why the prophets were killed in Jerusalem. Jesus was speaking the truth to people. Jesus was telling them about God's love. Jesus was teaching them to care for one another. Jesus was teaching them that the people in the temple were leading them astray. And Herod was afraid, but Jesus wasn't afraid of Herod.

When the Pharisees come and tell Jesus, "Herod's out to get you," we need to remember that first of all the Pharisees were not Jesus' friends so they probably had another agenda to be saying that. Secondly, Jesus already knew Herod wanted him dead. Herod had killed John the Baptist, and Jesus at this point in Luke's Gospel, is on His journey to Jerusalem. He's made it very clear to the people around him that He's on His way to Jerusalem and that He's going to die there. And what the Pharisees are doing is presenting a temptation. They say, "Be afraid and respond to your fear. Live out of your fear." But Jesus wasn't afraid. Jesus looked at this artificial power of Herod's and said, "That fox."

Fox, huh. A fox can be annoying. A fox might even grab one of your chickens and kill it, but a fox is not really dangerous to a human being. They might be wily and clever, but they're not really to be feared. Jesus knew that Herod had no power and when the time came for Jesus to be arrested and He was brought before Herod, He wouldn't even respond to him. He said nothing. And Herod could do nothing to Jesus and had to pass Him on to Pilate. But even to Pilate who looked at Jesus and said, "I have the power to have you killed," Jesus responded, "You have no power unless God is giving it to you."

Now we do know that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus had fear. Jesus knew what fear was, but that didn't keep Him from doing what God called Him to do. And when we read about the saints and when we hear about great heroes who have risked or given their lives, we have to know that they had fear, but the fear did not keep them from following God's call. The fear did not keep them from telling the truth.

Are you afraid of telling the truth? Is there some truth that you need to say that you're afraid to say because of how the person might respond? Perhaps there's a friend that you might want to tell about God's love, but you're afraid that they'll think that you're one of those. What would they think of you? Or perhaps there's a family member that you

know who needs to be told they're going in the wrong direction, but you don't want to cause any problems in the family? Perhaps there's a friend who needs that kind of truth? Perhaps you need to tell the truth at your work or your school or your neighborhood. Are you afraid? I know I get afraid. We all get afraid.

I've just been watching the Winter Olympics, every one of those sports terrifies me. I can't imagine being at the top of a hill and going down and then up over a ramp at 30 feet up in the air, and twisting around with my head down and crash into the bottom, because I know I would crash into the bottom if I try that. Or going down the bobsled run after someone has already died on that whistler course, flying down at 90 miles an hour head first, I'd be terrified. I'd be terrified to get on that fast track if I actually could skate. I'd still be terrified to be out there. And I'd be terrified to be skating up in front of thousands of people who are watching your every move and just waiting for you to fall down. But the Olympic athlete, I'm sure they're afraid sometimes, but that doesn't keep them from doing what they feel they need to do.

So how is it that we're to get over our fear and not give in to the very real fears that we have? And that's where this wonderful psalm comes in. And if you memorize one verse in scripture to hold onto in your life make it this one. The first verse of Psalm 27, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear." "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear." Remember that. Hold on to that. And when you feel afraid and when you feel there's some truth you need to speak or some action that God is calling you take, and you feel that fear come up in you, remember, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear." Amen.

I have found myself pondering why Jesus was laid in a manger. Now, I know you immediately think he was laid in a manger because he was born in a stable and that was what was handy, but he could have been laid in a basket, or he could have been laid in a bucket, or he could have been held on Mary's lap, but it says very specifically several times he was laid in a manger. And the angels say you'll find the child laid in a manger. Usually the Bible has more to it than just practically finding a place to put your kid – there might be something more there – so I was pondering that and I was thinking, what is a manger? And what a manger is is a feeding trough. It's a place where they put the hay for the animals to eat. It's where the animals go to get nourishment.

Now, let's think about hay. Could you get nourishment out of this hay? Sometimes, if it's good hay, it has some seeds on it. You might get a little bit of nourishment chewing the seeds, but if you tried to eat, if you tried to survive on hay, you'd probably not do real well. Now, you might be able to stay alive. You might be able to stay alive. But then again, you wouldn't thrive, would you? In fact, if you lived in a very, very poor country, that might be all there was, the grasslands, and you'd chew it, and it might fill up your stomach, and it might make you think that you've eaten something, but you wouldn't be satisfied. You wouldn't be healthy. You wouldn't thrive. There would still be a sense of hunger for something more.

Do you ever feel in your life that you're hungry for something more? That all the things around you are just straw? They don't really satisfy? When you've got your iPhone and your iPod, and you've got your new car that still smells like a new car, and you have your new clothes, and you have everything you've ever wanted and you still aren't satisfied. We read about these Wall Street executives who can't live with only a million dollars a year. They have to get a bonus, have another \$500,000.00, in order to survive. They have everything, but they're still hungry for more.

If you lived in a culture that told you the correct food to eat was straw and everybody ate straw, nobody would be particularly healthy, but the rich would have great big piles of straw, and the poor would have very little straw, but nobody would be healthy. Nobody would be satisfied. Nobody would be filled. No matter how much they chewed and consumed and tried, there would always be somewhere inside of them a longing for something more. Is there a longing in you for something more in your life? You do everything that you do. You are busy and active. You collect and you consumer. It's wonderful we call buying "consuming". We eat it up. We chew on it. We try to take it into ourselves. We try to satisfy ourselves by consuming things, and yet is there a part of you that isn't satisfied that's still hungry? That's still missing something?

I think sometimes we try to satisfy ourselves with hay, with straw, because that's what animals are satisfied with. This straw would be great for a cow or a donkey, but for a human being, it's not enough. Having shelter and food and comfort is fine for the animal part of us, but we're more than that. We're more than just an animal, and so we're still hungry. We still are hungry, and so God chose to come to Earth and be placed in a

manger. That within the straw of the manger, the straw of our lives that we're trying to feed ourselves, is placed Emanuel. God with us.

We heard some other names for this child that was placed in the manger. The Prince of Peace, Lord of Life, God of Gods. One of the names he gave himself. He said, "I am the bread of life. I am the bread of life. Those who eat me will know everlasting life. Those who consume me will be filled, will be satisfied." He even used in Greek, the word to chew, to consume to swallow, to take in. He is the bread of life. He is what God offers us instead of straw. If we consume him, then and only then can we be really satisfied. Then and only then will we have all the nurturants, all the nurture, everything that we need to be whole and healthy. God offers us food. God wants to feed us. And what is this food? This food is God's love.

One of the carols we didn't sing is "Love Came Down From Heaven." God loves us so much. God loves us so much, so much that for each and every one of us, for you, God took the form of a human being. And for you. And for you. If it had just been you and there had been no other human beings, God still would have been born because God loves each one of us that much. Chew on that. Chew on that for awhile. Chew on the idea that you are loved that much.

And then he taught us some other things. He said that what we are to do is to love God and love our neighbor. That it is through that kind of love that we will find meaning and purpose and satisfaction. Chew on that for awhile.

And chew on this. You know, God loves you that much, but God loves that person over there also. And you know what? God loves you that much, Dave, but God also loves the people who haven't come to church on Christmas. The ones who chose not to. The ones who didn't want to. The ones who've been hurt by the Christian religion, or the ones who are apathetic. But God loves each one of them just as much as God loves each one of us. And you know what else? Those who are Jewish or Muslim or Sikh or Hindu and therefore don't want to celebrate Christmas, you know what? God loves each one of them too. Chew on that.

God came down in the form of a little baby to show us of God's love, and some people noticed. The angels came and sang to the shepherds. Now, the angels must have been pretty loud. To have a huge chorus of angels, you'd think some other people might have heard, but they didn't. And there was a star in the sky that was a new star. Anyone could see it, but it was just some wise people in another country that knew what it meant and took the time to follow. And they came up to Herod, and Herod was told about what happened and he chose not to hear. In fact, he chose to be afraid and tried to destroy it.

We all react to the news of Christ's birth differently, and each year, each Christmas, it's a little different as well because we're at a different phase in our lives. Sometimes it is so easy to believe and be caught up in the joy and the wonder of God on Earth. Other times, we're not so sure about that. We question. We doubt. And that's normal. We're very

fortunate that in the gospels, one of Jesus' disciples happens to be named Thomas and is called Doubting Thomas because after the resurrection, he would not believe that Jesus was resurrected just because other people told him so. He had to have his own experience. It's okay if you don't believe just because other people tell you. If you believe that Christ was born and laid in a manger because I tell you, great. But you'll really believe it when you experience something. When something happens in your heart. When something happens where you no longer can question that there is a presence. That there is a love. That there's something more than the straw of our lives. Something deeper and something more satisfying.

What will you see in the manger today? Will you see straw? Will you see a pleasant myth? Will you see a child? Will you see God incarnate? Will you see the bread of life?

I invite you to ask God to touch you, to show you, to let you have an experience where it no longer will be someone else telling you, but you will know. You will know that you are loved by God and that God came to Earth to love you and to feed you. Amen.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in Thy sight, oh Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen. Please be seated.

During his 1960's presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with a story, and I know there are some of us here who may actually remember the 1960s and JFK. For those of us who do, we may remember this. He would often close with a story of Colonel Davenport. Colonel Davenport was the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives. On May 19th, 1780, the sky in Hartford, Connecticut blackened ominously, and some of the representatives thought the end was at hand, that this was the end of the world. And so, some of them asked Colonel Davenport to adjourn the meeting because the world was ending, and he said to them, "It's one of two things. Either the world is not coming to the end and so there's no reason to adjourn the meeting, or it is coming to an end and I, at the end, want to be found doing my duty. So I'm not going to adjourn the meeting." And he ordered candles be brought in.

When the end comes. We've all heard predictions of the end time: Jeremiah, before that in the Bible, from all the way back, and they're still around. You may have read how the world is going to come to an end in 2012 because the Incan calendar only goes up to 2012 and the ancient Incans must have known when the world was going to end, even though Jesus told us even he didn't know. And of course, we all remember Y2K and you know, if the computers crash, that's going to be the end of the world. People have been talking about the end of the world for a long time.

This reading from the Gospel where Jesus talks about the end, what does he say? He says that that's good news. So someone comes up to you and says, "It's the end of the world." Your response, as a Christian, is, "Great! That's wonderful news!" Because Jesus says at that time we are to stand up tall, raise up our heads because we know that our redemption is near. The end of the world means that Christ is coming near. It's not something to be afraid of. So I suggest if someone tells you the world is about to end, you say, "Fine. I want to be doing my duty."

There's a Buddhist story about an old monk who was well into his 90s. He was outside his hut planting an apple tree. It was just a tiny little apple tree and someone walking by said, "Why are you doing that? After all, you're not going to live long enough to see any apples from it." And he looked at him, and he said, "If I knew I was going to die tonight, what I would be doing today is planting that apple tree." We're doing what we're doing no matter what, even if it is going to be the end of the world.

So the next time someone predicts the end of the world, say, "Great. Now I'm gonna go about doing my duties because when the end of the world comes, I want to be found doing." I have a little refrigerator magnet that someone gave me and on it says, "The world is about to end. Christ is coming. Look busy."

So, that's what we're supposed to do if the world is truly coming to an end, but we don't know when that's going to be.

But like everything in Scripture, talking about the end times also has more subtle meanings of our spiritual journey, of our own growth. And we've all had moments in our life when it felt like our world was coming to an end. It might've been when you walked into that doctor's office, and you got the diagnosis of a dreaded disease. It might be when you got the phone call of someone you love, a spouse, a parent, a child, who is dead. It might be when someone you cared about hurt you deeply. It might be when you lost your job. It might be when you found yourself in the middle of a divorce and it feels like the world is coming to an end because the world, as you knew it, is coming to an end.

When you walk out of that doctor's office, everything is different. When the one you love has died nothing is the same. Your world has come tumbling down. The question is, "How are you going to respond to the things that happen in your life?" We all have circumstances, things that happen to us because none of us gets through life without struggles. We all have people we love die. We all have people we trusted to betray us. We all have to deal with physical illness. It's the way the world is.

The question for us is, "How do we respond to that?" Rick Warren in the video that those of us who are doing *The Purpose Driven Life* groups are going to see, says we have a choice. When things happen, we can either become bitter or we can become better. We can be bitter or better. We can take the things that happen to us and feel sorry for ourselves and blame other people or we can see it as an opportunity to grow, as a time to grow closer to Christ.

It's like at that "End of the World" time, we can say, "The world is ending," and cover our heads and moan and groan and scream, or we can stand up tall and raise up our heads and reach out our hands to God because we know that our redemption is near. When we go through these times of difficulty, we stand up and we reach out to Christ because Christ is with us, is walking with us. And they are an opportunity to deepen our faith, to deepen our compassion, to understand ourselves and the world a little better.

One of the exercises that is sometimes done in group development interactions is to make a timeline. You have your life journey, and in that life journey, you mark significant events: births, deaths, illnesses. And then you take and you make a line showing your spiritual life, how close you felt to God. And when I do that, what I find that the times that I felt closest to God were the ones where I was dealing with a crisis. Ones where illness had come upon me and the only way I was gonna deal with it was to reach out and grab God's hand because I knew I wasn't gonna get through it alone.

At the times when someone I loved died, my heart was broken, and it was broken open, and I knew my need for God. And now, going through a divorce, there's no question that I have no option but to pray and to be with God because that's the only way I'm going to get through it. When our world falls apart, when it seems like the end of everything, that's the time we realize we can't do it ourselves. That's the time when we have to

reach out to God and ask for help. That's when we know our need for God and our need to pray.

The Psalm says to trust, put my trust in God and He will teach me; to put our trust in God at the times when the whole foundation of our lives is trembling, because Christ is there. When it feels like our world is coming to an end, stand up, raise up your head and know that that is when your redemption is near. Amen.