**WEEKLY COMMUNION FOCUS**

**THE GIRL WITH THE RED JACKET**

 The movie *Schindler's List* depicts many terrible scenes during the Nazi occupation of Poland in the Second World War. The movie is filmed in black and white, which is a curious choice. Perhaps the director, Stephen Spielberg, believed that this added a touch of verisimilitude to the film. Thanks to old newsreels, I know that I seem to picture those times in black and white. It also, however, allowed him to emphasize certain things in the few scenes where he employed color.

 For instance, one particularly poignant scene in the movie involves the cleansing of the Krakow Ghetto. It is a scene of mass tragedy where thousands of Jews are being evicted from the ghetto. They are either shot on the spot or loaded up onto trucks to be transported to the death camps. Oscar Schindler watches this brutal scene in panorama from a hill overlooking the ghetto and it is the turning point in his life. That event sets him on a path to save as many Jews as he can.

 The scene depicts a tableau of human suffering. Amidst the throngs of desperate people is one little girl who is perhaps seven years old. She is never identified or named. She never speaks. She is only in a couple of shots, and she is never the main focus of any scene. The only thing that draws attention to her is that she is wearing a little red jacket while everything else is depicted in black and white. The last time she shows up is as a corpse in the back of a cart among an otherwise indistinct mass of bodies.

 I have always understood this vignette to be telling us that we do not die in large groups. We die one at a time. Each person is an individual with his or her own story, hopes, and dreams. Each person is worthy of individual consideration. We need to mourn for each person individually.

 Joseph Stalin is believed to have said -- "The death of one man is a tragedy. The death of a million is a statistic."

 There are no mass tragedies. Every mass tragedy is actually a collection of individual tragedies. If we allow the scale of a mass tragedy to overwhelm us, and we lose site of the individual stories, we prove Stalin right. The individual is important.

 Christ died for all men. While that is true, it is not how we should think about His sacrifice. Instead, we should view Christ's actions in more personal terms. *I* was lost in my sins. *I* was without hope.  *I* needed forgiveness. Christ came to *my* rescue and He died for *me* -- Jim Taylor.

Christ died for Lou Ann. Christ died for Calvin.

 Thinking of Christ's sacrifice in global terms, though certainly not incorrect, is insufficiently personal. Instead, we should remember Christ's sacrifice in individual terms. So, as you focus on the cross today, say to yourself -- Christ died for *me*.

**THE GENERATOR**

 Back in my National Guard days, I remember a night during a field exercise where I was at the battalion headquarters. I was ordered to go out to one of the line companies -- let's say, Charlie Company -- and deliver something, or pick something up, I do not remember what. Accordingly, a sergeant and I climbed into a Humvee and we set off into the night.

 I had not been to the Charlie Company location before, and all I had to guide me was a set of map coordinates. It was very late, and very dark. We were observing “light discipline,” which means we could not turn on our headlights. Instead, we only had these little, red, cat-eye lights that did not give off any real illumination. And, unfortunately, map-reading was never one of my better skills.

 We blundered around for what seemed like forever, and we just could not find it. I was not looking forward to returning to headquarters and telling the battalion commander -- "Sorry, I could not find it. It was dark."

 So, in desperation, I told the sergeant to shut down the engine, turn everything off, and be quiet. He did so. After about 30 seconds, when everything had gotten still, we heard in the distance the sound of a generator. We took a bearing on that sound and set off cross-country. We ended up crashing through the Charlie Company perimeter at some crazy angle, and we nearly ran over a couple of guys in a pup tent -- but we got there.

 I have always thought of the hum of the generator as a metaphor for the cross. It is always out there, humming away, but sometimes we do not hear it. Life is full of distractions. Sometimes, we have to tune out all of those distractions, and listen, before we can hear the call of the cross.

 This is the time we set aside each week for that purpose. I encourage you to try to tune out all of the noise -- problems at work, or finding work, arguments with your spouse, whiny kids, leaky faucets -- and focus on the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Let us now remember the great sacrifice made by Jesus on the Cross, and its significance to us today.

**THE SKI TRIP**

 Lou Ann, the boys, and I went skiing over New Years. We had a great trip. But as perhaps some of you may know, a ski trip is a lot of work. There were many of us on this trip. Five different family units within my extended family were represented. The first thing Lou Ann had to do when she planned this trip was to coordinate everyone's schedules. Then Lou Ann had to find and rent a house large enough to hold us all.

 We drove to the ski resort. We had many people in our vehicle, and a lot of luggage. So, Lou Ann rented a large van to hold all of us.

 Also, skiing comes with a lot of paraphernalia -- hats and goggles and gloves and bibs and such. Lou Ann organized all that equipment for everyone in our van, separating the equipment by person and putting it in big bags with each person's name on his or her bag.

 Food is also a big issue. Lou Ann organized a schedule and the matriarchs of each family unit volunteered to be in charge of food for specific days. Each day, the women would prepare the meals and then they would all bustle about and clean everything up.

 Now, because of her heart condition, Lou Ann no longer skis. Some of my cousins do not ski either. So they formed the support crew. They would drive us to the ski slopes in the morning. They would meet us at lunch with sandwiches and chips and drinks. And then, they would pick us up in the evenings when the slopes shut down.

 Some of you may be asking, at this point--just what did I do to make this ski trip a reality? Well, that is really an impertinent question! I don't believe that the value of my contributions can be measured in such prosaic terms.

 In all seriousness, the real answer is that I did not do a lot to make this ski trip happen. I was carried. Pampered. I enjoyed all the benefits of the trip, but I did not do any of the work to make it possible.

 And this is not the only area of my life where I enjoy the benefits, but have not done the work.

 Jesus Christ did the hard work of salvation at the cross. I did not have to suffer the betrayal and desertion of my friends. I was not arrested, mocked, and beaten. My back does not bear the scars of the lash. I did not have to carry any cross and I did not have to endure the crucifixion. Christ did all of these things. And through His efforts, and through His suffering, I have access to eternal life. All I must do is accept it and enjoy the benefits.

 So, while I am thankful to Lou Ann for doing all the hard work to organize our ski trip, I am far more thankful, and we all should be thankful, to Jesus, for doing all the heavy lifting for salvation. Let us show our gratitude by remembering His great sacrifice.

**WE ARE JENNY**

 *Forrest Gump* is one of the finest movies of my generation. I imagine most of you have seen it, and if you have not – where have you been?

 Forrest is a slow, borderline-retarded man, but he is goodness itself. The great love of his life is Jenny. Forrest loves Jenny with a simplicity, a purity and a single-minded devotion that is unshakeable.

 Unfortunately, Jenny is damaged goods. She was sexually abused as a child, and that scarred her for life. Even though she cares for Forrest, she runs from him. Perhaps she is ashamed of Forrest and does not wish to be associated with the slow-witted man. Or perhaps she feels smothered by Forrest. At any rate, she runs.

 This leads Jenny to a series of bad choices – drugs and alcohol, pornography, abusive men. On one occasion, Jenny hits rock bottom and comes close to suicide. Desperate, she goes back to Forrest, whose love for her has not diminished. He accepts her uncritically, loves her, and cares for her.

During this interlude, Forrest asks Jenny to marry him. She loves Forrest, but her answer is telling. She responds with great solemnity – “Forrest, you don’t want to marry me.” She does not believe she is good enough for Forrest. She can see Forrest’s purity and innocence and she thinks that if Forrest only knew what she had done and who she was, he would reject her. In that she is wrong. Anyway, when she gets her strength back she runs again.

 Eventually, she runs out of places to run. She is dying of a long-term illness and she has a child for whom she needs to make provision. So she stops running and goes back to Forrest. Once again, he accepts her uncritically, loves her, and cares for her. Every morning he cuts fresh flowers and puts them in a vase by her window. His devotion to her is unfailing. He stays by her side until the end, mourns her death, and cares for her child.

 Well – **we are Jenny**. Christ loves us with a pure and unshakeable love. He proved that love by going to the cross. He is always reaching out, bidding us to come to Him. Unfortunately, like Jenny, we are all too likely to run. Maybe when we look at our sinful lives we do not feel that we are good enough for Christ. Maybe we are ashamed of Christ and we are concerned that if we link ourselves with Him people will think we are religious fanatics. Maybe we want to sow our wild oats before we are, in our minds, smothered by Christ’s love.

 So, we run. We make bad decisions. Our capacity for wreaking havoc in our lives is prodigious. We get caught up in sin and run amok. If we make too big a mess, and things get bad enough for us, we may turn back to God for a time. He is always prepared to receive us in love. But once we get our feet back under us, we are prone to run again.

 Jenny could have saved herself from decades of pain and grief, and instead could have basked in the glow of Forrest’s love and devotion, if she had only stopped running sooner. We also could save ourselves great trouble, and instead know real love and joy, if we would only stop running from Christ. Jenny waited until almost the end before she surrendered herself to Forrest. Let's do better. This morning, as we contemplate Christ's great sacrifice on the cross, let us all resolve to stop running.

**THE FOOL'S PRAYER**

 There is a poem I have always loved by a man named Edward Roland Sill called *The Fool's Prayer*. It describes a throne room scene toward the end of a great banquet. It reminds me of the book of Esther where the king holds a banquet that lasts fully seven days. At the end of that banquet, the king calls for his queen and commands her to display her beauty before the assembled guests.

 Well, the king in this poem does not call for his queen. Instead, he calls for his fool -- the court jester. You know the sort; one of those guys with painted faces and pointy hats who always seem to be juggling or something. Anyway, on a lark, the tipsy king calls out--"sir fool, kneel and make for us a prayer."

 The jester comes forward. He has a wry grin on his face, but no one can see it because of the painted smile he wears. Then he cries out -- "Oh Lord, have mercy on me, a fool." That refrain -- Lord, have mercy on me, a fool -- is repeated at the end of every other stanza.

 As the prayer unfolds, the jester lists out his sins and shortcomings. He confesses his great need for forgiveness and cries out for mercy. It does not take long before one begins to understand that the jester's words have a double meaning. They may apply to the jester. But they certainly apply, with a much greater vengeance, to the party guests. The jester speaks with such eloquence and passion that the revelers are cut to the quick. All the levity is sucked out of the room.

 When the prayer is finished, the poem concludes with the following stanza:

The room was hushed,

In silence rose the king,

and sought his gardens cool.

He walked alone, and murmured low,

Lord, have mercy on me, a fool.

 In the poem, it took a clever jester, a captive audience, and a contrived situation to call these party guests back from their own sins and to confront them with their need for forgiveness. Hopefully, we would do a little better. But this is one of the reasons we observe the Lord's Supper every week.

 We are like the party guests. In our folly, we become absorbed in our little lives and we lose sight of God. We stray, we sin, and we slip away from God. We need to be brought back and reminded that we need forgiveness. We need to be reminded of Christ and His great sacrifice. We need to be confronted with the fact that we need God.

 As we turn our minds today to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, I encourage you to remember the words of the poem; words that apply to each of us today. Lord, have mercy on me, a fool.

**THE BUNK**

 When I was 18 years old, I went off to Army boot camp. I remember yelling sergeants, bustling activity, and a lot of marching. It was a time when there were immediate punishments for infractions of a long list of regulations or customs. These punishments ranged from being chewed out by sergeants, to pushups or other exercises, to extra duties like scrubbing floors with toothbrushes. I always suspected that the drill sergeants had a competition among themselves to devise the most innovative punishments.

 The sergeants would wake us up way too early in the morning. In fact, I remember an old army commercial that said "we do more before 9:00 a.m. in the morning than most people do all day." And I remember thinking to myself--how is that a selling point?

 Anyway, after being rudely awakened we would have a short period of time before we would have an inspection, and one of the things we would have to do is make our bunk. One morning, one of the guys a couple of bunks down from me was running late. Maybe he had cut himself shaving and was trying to stanch the blood. That seemed to happen a lot to 18-year-old boys who had little experience with a razor. Well, I judged that there was no way he was going to make it in time. So I dove in and made his bunk for him.

 I made a friend that day. It was not a big deal. It cost me maybe three minutes of work. But it had a big impact on him. I had saved him some trouble and it was a kindness that was unlooked for and unexpected. I knew, from that day forward, that if he was ever in a position to do me a good turn, he would.

 Now, the service I performed for my fellow soldier was very small, but his gratitude was great. The service Christ performed by His sacrifice on the cross was not small. It was, in fact, the greatest service that has ever been performed. It cost Christ great suffering and a grizzly death. In turn, our gratitude should be equally great.

 I saved my buddy from being chewed out in public and maybe 50 push-ups. Christ saved me from the consequences of my sin. And He secured for me the gift of eternal life. In fact, His great sacrifice has saved all of us. Let us bless Christ this morning as we contemplate the enormity of His sacrifice and its meaning to our lives.

**DAD AND KP**

 When I was a boy my father told me a story that, even then, I suspected was apocryphal, or at least wildly exaggerated to make a point. I did, however, appreciate the moral of the story and so I will share it with you.

 When my father was a young man he was in the Army National Guard. As part of his training he attended the Engineer School in Fort Belvoir, Virginia. When he arrived at the school he checked the duty roster which was posted on a board outside the barracks. Lo and behold, his name was on the list for KP duty the following day. In other words, instead of training on his first day at the camp, he was ordered to report to the kitchen and assist in preparing and serving the meals to the troops.

 I spent about eleven years in the National Guard myself. In my unheralded military career I, too, have pulled KP duty a few times. I remember big sacks of potatoes that needed to be peeled, endless dishes, and mop buckets. It is not a particularly glamorous or enjoyable duty.

 My father was not happy about pulling KP on his first day and he let everyone know it. He complained loudly to anyone who would listen. It wasn't fair. He came to Fort Belvoir to learn to be an engineer, not to learn to wash dishes. Somebody had it in for him.

 After a long day working in the kitchen Dad again checked the duty roster and discovered that he was on the list for KP yet again for the next day. Angry, he complained even more bitterly to anyone he could find.

 At the end of the second day of KP Dad once again checked the duty roster. You guessed it: He was on the list for KP for a third straight day. This time Dad went to the First Sergeant who prepared the duty roster. He told the First Sergeant something had to be wrong. Dad had done the math. There were only so many days in the training cycle and there were X number of people in the company. No one should have to pull KP twice, much less three times. This was not fair.

 The First Sergeant looked at him and said "I put you on KP the first time and you complained to anyone who would listen. So, I put you on KP the second time and you complained even more bitterly. So, I put you on KP a third time."

 Dad said -- "I understand." He shut up and did his work in the kitchen on the third day without complaint. He never pulled that duty again for the rest of the training cycle.

 So the moral of the story is -- nobody likes a whiner. We all have duties and tasks to perform and you should not want to be labeled a complainer.

 In fact, we should take a lesson from our Lord Jesus Christ. He had a tremendous and terrible duty. He was asked to undergo a brutal ordeal. He would be mocked and beaten by Herod and his soldiers. He would be beaten with a lash by the Romans. And then He would suffer the most gruesome and degrading punishment under Roman law -- death by crucifixion. Along the way He would be stabbed in the side by a spear.

 If anyone had a basis to complain, it was Christ. That is because none of this would be done to Him because of His own sins or culpability. Rather, Christ undertook this duty in order to redeem the sins of others -- of us. And yet, Christ did not complain. The Bible says that He went like a lamb to the slaughter and, in the end, He said "let Your will, not Mine, be done."

 So as you partake of the Lord's Supper this morning, let us all praise Christ for fulfilling this self-imposed duty and for doing so without complaint.

**THE PERFECT SACRIFICE**

 In Old Testament times, the people made periodic sacrifices to atone for their sins. But the sacrifices they made--of grain or animals--were imperfect. So as the people continued to sin, they needed to continue to make sacrifices.

 Christ was the perfect sacrifice. Because His sacrifice was perfect, it was once for all time. It does not need to be repeated. And that is a wonderful thing. I know that I would not want to slaughter a bull on an altar on a periodic basis. I am happy that this old system was not carried forward.

 But I do think that there is a danger. The Old Testament sacrifices were participatory and ongoing. Christ's sacrifice was made long before we were born -- 2,000 year ago. We did not see it. We did not participate in it. And it is not to be repeated. Because of that we might forget the significance of that sacrifice; or at least our appreciation of it might fade. What is important is to stop and periodically focus on just what that sacrifice means to us.

 About ten or fifteen years ago my sister Allison had lasiks eye surgery. My Aunt Sandra and Uncle Bill made that surgery possible. They were paying for the surgery for their own children, and they offered to pay for the surgery for Allison as well. That act of charity is over a decade old, and yet it is the gift that keeps on giving. Every morning, when Allison wakes up, and the world comes into focus, she remembers and is thankful. The gift of sight is a precious thing indeed and every now and then she calls them up again to say thank you yet again.

 Well, the gift we received from Christ's sacrifice was far more precious. We were lost in our sins. We were without hope. But Christ bled and died on the cross to redeem us and deliver the promise of life eternal. Moreover, although that sacrifice happened long ago, it, too, is the gift that keeps on giving. The cleansing power of Christ's blood washed away the sins we have committed, and provides forgiveness for the sins we will commit. We should be thankful, every morning.

 To keep Christ's sacrifice fresh in our minds we pause, each week, and partake of this Lord's Supper. This is our weekly opportunity to focus on how important Christ's sacrifice is to us even today.

**CHAPEL IN THE DARK**

 I attended Abilene Christian University as an undergraduate. One thing about attending a Christian college is that we had chapel every day. Chapel began at 11:00 a.m. in the morning in the Moody Coliseum. That is the big auditorium where the basketball team played. It has about 5,000 seats. In an average chapel service we would generally have about 1,500 to 2,000 people. I always enjoyed the singing with so many strong young voices.

 Meeting at 11:00 a.m. was a convenient time because we would all meet up with our friends at chapel and, when it was over, we would head off for lunch. The beginning of chapel was always a hubbub of noise as we all got together after our early classes.

 One day the power was out. Even so, we all dutifully trooped into the auditorium and started chatting away. But, this time, there was no electronically-amplified voice booming from the stage to call us to order. Instead, the speaker stepped up to the podium, stared out at the crowd, and waited for us all to grow quiet. Somewhat to my surprise, the method worked.

 It took a little time. Eventually, however, we all stopped talking and focused our attention on the podium. Everything was unnaturally quiet. And we found that if we all cooperated, and the speaker projected, we could hear him and chapel could go forward. Somehow, the service seemed more meaningful because of the conditions.

 Then, in the middle of the service, the power snapped back on. When it did there was an electronic hum from the equipment -- perhaps from the air-conditioning system. The noise seemed impossibly loud. At first I thought something must be wrong. I thought that the hum was sure to mute after a few seconds. It did not.

 Eventually, I realized that nothing was wrong. This was the normal sound the equipment made. It is just that we did not normally hear it because we were usually so loud ourselves and we had just gotten used to the background noise. We only heard it then because the background noise had been interrupted and we were being unnaturally quiet.

 The sound of the equipment has become, for me, a metaphor for sin and temptation. It is loud and blaring and ever-present. We should be sensitive to it. But our senses have dulled and we have become inured to it. We fill our lives with movement and we ignore the background noise. And therein lies the danger.

 If we fail to hear and apprehend the siren song of sin and temptation all around us, we will become more susceptible to it. What we need is to stop periodically and focus our minds and listen. We should think about how the negative influences around us are corrupting us. What movies and televisions programs do you watch? What gossip do you listen to at the water cooler? What books do you read? What websites do you visit? How are these things affecting you? Have your standards eroded over time because of the constant bombardment?

 Now, as we partake of the Lord's Supper, is a good time to for us to stop and ponder these questions. Christ set the example for us by His sinless life. By comparing our lives to His we can see how far we have veered off the path. Only if we understand our sin can we understand how much Christ did for us when He sacrificed Himself on the cross at Calvary.

**OZYMANDIAS**

 There is a poem I love by George Gordon, Lord Byron, that describes a massive, decaying statue in the desert. All that remains of the statue are two huge legs jutting up from the sand. The torso is gone. But from the dimensions of the legs, it must have been a colossal statue.

 There is a pedestal with an inscription that can still be read. It says

My name is Ozymandias—king of kings,

Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.

 You can almost visualize the statue as it once stood. The proud and arrogant king standing at the gates of his mighty city with arms spread wide to encompass the splendor of his domain. This king believed that his achievement was so great that it would never be equaled, much less surpassed. And the king believed that this statue would stand as everlasting testament to his enduring greatness.

 But the poem concludes with the following lines:

 Nothing remains beside the decay of that colossal wreck.

 Boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away.

 Time, and the desert wind and sands, had so completely swallowed up his city that it left no trace on the landscape and people had even forgotten it had once been there. The great statue had toppled. The proud king’s name was still on the pedestal, but it, too, would soon be swallowed up and he would be completely forgotten.

 The poem teaches us that man’s glory and accomplishments are fleeting. We cannot rely on them.

 The only thing that will stand the test of time is God. He is unchanging. His promises never fail. Two thousand years ago, God’s son came to earth to experience life as a man. Christ lived a sinless life and then overcame death through his sacrifice on the cross. Christ’s actions have profoundly changed the world, and they have stood the test of time. Moreover, because of his actions, we have the hope of life eternal.

 Only by embracing Christ can we catch hold of something that is meaningful and everlasting. Let us grab hold of that today as we turn our minds to the Lord’s Supper.

**THE SURVIVAL PARTY**

 Back when I was in law school I lived in a condominium complex built around a big central courtyard. One night, there was a party going on in the courtyard. There was a band and a bunch of people milling about. So, tempted by the smell of the hors d'oeuvres, I floated down to crash the party.

 What I discovered was that this was not a typical party. It was not a birthday party or an anniversary party. No one had just graduated or been promoted. The reason for this party was not what you would expect.

 Many years ago, two men had been in a terrible car wreck. They should have been killed, but they survived. Since then, every year, on the anniversary of that crash, these two men got together and threw a "survival party" to commemorate the day when they were given new lives.

 I always liked the idea behind this party. It has stuck with me. And today, I would like for us all to think of this service as our "survival party."

 We were dead in our sins. We were lost and separated from God. We were without hope. Then Christ came. He allowed Himself to be taken by the soldiers. He withstood the corrupt “justice” of the High Priest, of Herod, and of Pilate. He suffered the mockery and scorn of the crowds. He felt the bite of the lash. And He endured the brutal ordeal of the cross. When it was done, He triumphed over the grave.

 Through this great sacrifice, we have been given new lives. And more than that -- we have been given life eternal. So today, let us celebrate at our very own "survival party." As we do so, let us remember the one who pulled us through and gave us our new lives.

**SOMEBODY'S DARLING**

 There is a very touching poem from the United States Civil War written by Marie Ravenall De Lacoste entitled *Somebody's Darling.* The poem is told from the perspective of a harried, overworked nurse in a field hospital. It tells the story of a young, wounded soldier who is brought into a hospital ward after a battle.

 The ward is already badly overcrowded with the dead and the dying. This soldier is just one more. There is nothing special about this soldier. No one knows him, or even his name. And his injuries are so severe that he is certain to die. The overworked nurse is tempted just to pass on without giving this hopeless case any personal attention. But something makes her stop.

 She realizes that he is not just a nameless and unimportant body taking up one of the hospitable beds until he expires. This young man is somebody's darling. Someone cried when he marched off to war. Someone is lifting his name in prayer every night. Someone is staring down the road waiting for his return. To someone, this young man is their whole world.

 The young soldier does die. And the poem ends with the following stanza:

Tenderly bury the fair young dead,

Pausing to drop on his grave a tear;

Carve on the wooden slab at his head,

"Somebody's darling slumber's here."

 The poem teaches us all a lesson about the importance of the individual. We are all important and worthwhile. We are all worthy of personal attention.

 The principal thing that gives us worth is that God loves us and Christ died for each of us. If we are loved of God, and purchased by Christ's blood, we are valuable.

 Never let yourself believe that you are unimportant because you lack talents or abilities or wealth or position. Never let yourself believe that you are worthless because you have sinned. Christ's love extends even to you. We have only to read the Gospels to know that this is true. Christ chose as His disciples men of low station. And He hung around with tax collectors and sinners. Christ showed love and compassion to all men. And then He sacrificed Himself on the cross of Calvary to bring hope to each and every one of us.

 We all have worth. We are all somebody's darling.

**THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST -- STAYING ON TASK**

 My sister Allison used to tell me about her impressions from the book *The Last Temptation of Christ*. I read the book and, frankly, it was not much like what Allison described. I did not enjoy it much. So, I am going to discuss what Allison and I talked about, and what the book should have been about, and just ignore the actual book.

 After his baptism by John the Baptist, Christ wandered off into the desert and fasted for forty days. At the end of that time, Satan came to him and tempted him with three different temptations. First, Satan appealed to Christ's physical appetite, saying, “Command these stones to become bread.” In the second temptation Satan challenged Christ to put God's power, and Christ's faith in that power, to the test. Satan took Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple and told him to throw himself down to prove that God will catch him. In the final temptation Satan appealed to Christ's vanity, or glory, or thirst for power. Specifically, he took Jesus to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth and said, “All these things I will give to you if you will just fall down and worship me.”

 I have always wondered if these were the most effective temptations Satan could have employed. I do not think that Christ would have fallen prey to a physical temptation like hunger. I don't believe Christ had any need to prove anything to Satan. And the last temptation seems particularly crass. Jesus, having come from Heaven, would not be impressed by the glory of earthly kingdoms and the idea of Him bowing down before Satan seems a bit far-fetched.

 That is where the idea of a fourth, or last, temptation comes in. To be clear, this is an entirely fictional story. This last temptation is a dream sequence that plays out in Christ's mind. There is nothing crass or evil or impure about this temptation. To the contrary, it is wholesome and righteous. In this dream sequence Christ lives out a Godly life. He takes a loving wife. He has many beautiful and respectful children. He lives an upright and devout life. He is a teacher of the law and respected by all men. He lives a full and rewarding and Godly life. It is the best that a human life can offer. In short, in this last temptation, Satan tries to tempt Christ with something wholesome, rather than with something tainted. This is the last temptation that Christ must overcome and, I muse, it might have been the most difficult.

 The point of the story is this: Satan did not need to corrupt Christ. All that Satan needed to do was to deflect Christ--to keep Him from going to the cross. If Satan could lead Christ off into sin, Satan would certainly do so. But, barring that, Satan could achieve a victory if he could simply distract Christ. Offering Christ something good and wholesome could also serve Satan's purpose if it caused Christ to step off the path that led to the cross. Because if Christ went to the cross, then Satan's ultimate defeat was certain.

 Sometimes I think there may be parallels in our lives. Perhaps not all temptations are sinful or corrupt. It may be that we have a task for God that we need to complete and anything that diverts us from that path, whether wholesome or unwholesome, becomes a temptation.

 Fortunately for us, Christ stayed on task. He was not diverted from His ministry. He did not let any temptation, good or bad, shunt him off to an easier path. Instead, he stayed on the path that led to Calvary. Jesus made His great sacrifice on the cross and that has made all the difference to us. We are redeemed. We are saved. This morning, let us honor Christ for staying on task.

**SCHINDLER'S LIST -- THE LIST**

 The movie *Schindler's List* is based on a true story about man named Oscar Schindler and his actions during the Second World War. Schindler, a German, is a failure in business prior to the war. When war breaks out, however, he sees opportunities. He travels to Poland and comes into possession of a small manufacturing company, which he converts to manufacture war materials. At first, he uses Polish workers who, because of the privations caused by the war, he can ruthlessly exploit. He pays them practically nothing.

 But then he sees an opportunity to avoid spending even the meager amount he was paying the Poles. Specifically, he cozies up to local Nazi officials who help him to staff his factory with Jewish slave labor. He does not have to pay them anything at all. Schindler is a shameless war profiteer and he grows exceedingly wealthy on the backs of the Jews.

 Moreover, Schindler's willingness to exploit his workers is not his only failing. Schindler is also an alcoholic and a womanizer.

 But while Schindler is not a particularly good man, he is not a monster. And one day he witnesses something that changes him forever. From an elevated position on a hill he watches as the SS brutally clean out the Krakow ghetto. They kill many of the Jewish residents outright and ship off most of the others to the death camps.

 After that event Schindler begins to use his factory as a haven to save as many Jews as he can. He employs entire families. And as these Jews were working in critical war manufacturing they are, for a time, exempted from transportation to the death camps. But, as the war drags on, and the Nazis' time grows short, the pressure to transport Schindler's Jews to the death camps increases.

 Eventually, to protect the Jews at his factory, Schindler has to bribe corrupt Nazi officials. Essentially, he has to buy his workers, and he squanders his entire, ill-gotten fortune to do so. But to make the transaction work, he has to move quickly to identify his people, and no list of them exists. So Schindler and his Jewish manager, Itzak Stern, work late into the night to create a list.

 There is something beautiful in just the creation of the list. These two men sit down and recall each person by name, their spouse, and their children, and write their names on the list. In those incredibly dark and depersonalizing times, this simple act, by itself, affirms the humanity and worth of each person on the list. When they are done, Stern holds up the list and he tells Schindler -- "The list is an absolute good. The list is life. All around its margins lies the gulf."

 There is another list. The book of Revelation tells us of the Book of Life. Revelation 3:5 tells us that, for the people whose names are listed in the Book of Life, Christ will confess their names before His father and the angels. And Revelation 20:15 tells us that the people listed in the Book of Life will be saved from the lake of fire.

 The people named in Schindler's list were purchased with money and they were saved from an earthly death.

 The people in the Book of Life were also purchased; but not with money. They were purchased with something far more precious--the blood of Christ Jesus shed on the cross of Calvary. And the people in the Book of Life have been saved from eternal death and have, instead, been granted eternal life in Heaven.

 What you want is to have your name written in the Book of Life. The way to secure your place is to acknowledge Christ as your savior and to follow Him. This morning, as you partake of the Lord's Supper, you are attesting to your decision to follow Christ and are affirming your place on the list contained in the Book of Life.

**THE CROSSING OF THE BAR**

 *The Crossing of the Bar* is a poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. "The bar" is a nautical term describing a shallow point at the mouth of a river where the silt washed downstream piles up. At low tide the water is often too shallow for a ship to cross. When a ship "crosses the bar," it leaves the last point of influence of the land and sets off into the trackless ocean.

 In the poem, Tennyson uses "the bar" as a metaphor for death. Crossing the bar is passing from life to death. The land represents this life and the vast, dark, and forbidding ocean represents the next.

 The poem is written in the first person. Tennyson is looking ahead to his death. And, he hopes that when his time comes, he will not complain and there will be no sadness. In fact, he looks forward to it with some longing. The poem ends with the following lines:

I hope to see my Pilot face to face

When I have crost the bar.

 Tennyson sees God as his Pilot. In this life God's face is obscured. But Tennyson looks forward to a direct relationship with God, where he can see God face to face, in the next life.

 I, too, want God to be my Pilot guiding me through this life. And I pray that when I am facing the end of this life I can do so with the equanimity Tennyson shows in this poem. I seek a faith which is sufficiently strong that I can cross the bar without complaint or sadness. And, like Tennyson, when I have crossed, I hope to see my Pilot face to face.

 For a Christian, death is not the worst tragedy. A Christian has hope.

 We were dead in our sins. We were without hope. But then Jesus Christ came. He lived a sinless life as an example to all men. He preached a message of love and redemption. And then He gave his life as a sacrifice in atonement for our sins. On the third day He rose to life, breaking open the gates of death.

 Because of Christ's great sacrifice, we have hope that when we die we shall see our Pilot face to face. Let us honor Christ this morning for giving us that hope.

**ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER**

 One of the first poems that ever really caught my eye and made me want to read more poetry was John Keat's *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer.* The title may be a bit pedestrian, but the poem captures a wondrous idea and ends with a truly haunting image.

 The poem tells the story of a man without any great ideas or direction who picks up a copy of *Homer* published by the translator Chapman. The man is captivated by the epic poems about ancient Greek heroes and gods. But, more importantly, the man begins to understand what is available to him in the pages of books. The world of literature opens up before him. His life is no longer small and insignificant because he can open a book and be transported to exotic places and be immersed in exciting stories. Within the dusty pages of the books around him are limitless vistas and great adventures. It is a transformative moment.

 The poem ends with the following stanza:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

when a new planet swims into his ken

Or, like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes

He star'd at the Pacific-- and all his men

Look'd at each other with a wild surmise--

Silent on a peak in Darien.

It helps if you know that Darien is a region in Panama. But I truly love the last image.

 Try to picture the scene. Cortez and his men had been travelling for months. They had gone farther west than anyone ever had. They had traversed the trackless Atlantic Ocean. They believed that they had reached the end of the world--or at least India. But they climbed up the hill, looked out, and what did they see? ANOTHER OCEAN!!! In that moment the realization comes crashing down on these men that the world is much bigger and more wondrous than anything they had ever imagined and they are overcome with awe.

 Sometimes I think that we do not have enough awe when we consider God's faithful love for us. Who are we that God should care for us? God is the all-powerful creator of the universe. He is infinite. His glory and His majesty are unimaginable.

 We are small, selfish, weak and sinful. We have rebelled and disappointed God again and again. We do not deserve God's love.

 Even so, while we were yet sinners, God sent His beloved and only-begotten son to this earth and allowed Him to be crucified as a sacrifice for our sins. We should be awed and humbled by the depth of God's love for us. This morning, as we partake of the symbols of Christ's sacrifice, ponder God's great compassion, forgiveness and love and try to feel a sense of awe.

**HUCK FINN**

 *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of the great classics of American literature. It tells the story of a rough, semi-literate, half-wild orphan named Huck Finn. The story is set in the 1840s. Huck runs away from his Missouri town by setting off on a raft floating down the Mississippi. He is accompanied by Jim, a negro slave who had run away from his master, Miss Watson.

 Jim is the most sympathetic character in the entire book. As Jim and Huck float down the river they face many hardships and dangers. Through it all, Jim is unfailingly faithful, loving, and self-sacrificial toward Huck. Jim stands extra watches when Huck is tired. Jim nurses Huck when he is ill. And Jim risks his life, and his freedom, to keep Huck safe.

 But Huck's conscience starts to bother him. He is helping a runaway slave. Everything in his society tells him that that is wrong. He believes that he is doing a great injustice to Miss Watson. He is, in fact, breaking the secular law of the land.

 Most significantly, though, according to the pious preachers of the day, his actions are sinful and against God's law. Huck tries to pray for forgiveness. He kneels down, but the words will not come. He believes his actions have separated him from God. And so, Huck writes a note to Miss Watson telling her where Jim is and how she can recover him. After writing the note, Huck feels better. His conscience is clear and he knows he can pray again.

 But then something inside Huck rebels. Some inner spirit recoils at the thought of betraying Jim. Huck remembers how faithful Jim has been. Jim had been a better friend to Huck than anyone else had ever been.

 Huck holds the note in front of his face while a war rages in his soul. Eventually, Huck reaches a decision. He tears the paper up and says to himself -- "All right, then, I'll go to hell!" Believing he would face the most dire of consequences, Huck chooses Jim over what society and the church tell him is his moral duty. Moreover, he reasons that if he can think of anything worse to do he will do it because as long as he has cast his lot in with the wicked he might as well go the whole hog.

 The problem is that it is the inner voice within Huck that is right and points toward the moral and Godly course. It is society and the church that is wrong.

 In fact, I am ashamed that men who looked like me and professed a belief in the same God that I serve used the Bible to try to justify a wicked institution. I believe that Christianity is a powerful force for good in this world. But I also recognize that the misuse of religion can cause great harm. I pray that this will make me humble in my conclusions and loving and gracious in my presentation.

 At any rate, slavery was deeply ingrained in Roman society. It is undoubtedly true that the Biblical writers of the New Testament did not attack the practice directly. In the end, I believe that they were more concerned with man's relationship to God than they were about man's relationship to his fellow man.

 Even so, I believe that the ethical message they preached eventually spelled doom for the practice of slavery. Perhaps the apostle Paul stated it best in Galatians 3:28 when he said:

 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

 Slavery in the American South was based on the foundational belief that there was some meaningful distinction between the white race and the black race that justified the subjugation of the black man. But Christ sees no such distinction. We are all one in Christ Jesus. If Christ makes no distinction, how can we?

 Even more, Christ sacrificed Himself on the cross of Calvary. He did this for all men--not some subset of men. Christ loved all men.

 In John 13:34 Jesus said: "A new commandment I give to you, that you are to love one another, as I have loved you." We are called to love all men as Christ did. There is no room in this commandment for prejudice. We cannot reserve our love only for those who look like us.

 If we cannot rise above our prejudices then we cannot fully understand the meaning of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

**MOTIVATION**

 When I was in first grade, my class was broken up into something like five different reading levels, from the slowest readers to the most advanced readers. I was in the lowest reading group and doing just fine within that group -- thank you very much. But one day, my teacher told me that if I did not do better, I would end up being a garbage man.

 Well, with all due respect to sanitation workers who perform a very necessary and honorable service in our society, that was not the future career I had in mind. So, within a week I had zoomed up to the highest reading level. Clearly, my teacher had hit upon the right formula for motivating me.

 Different people are motivated by different things. For instance, my sister told this story to her son Taylor, hoping to motivate him to do better in school. Taylor's only response, however, was to ask if the sanitation trucks had air conditioning.

 As an elder, I spend a lot of time thinking about how to motivate people. How do I move people to be faithful in their religion? To put God first in their lives? To participate in the work and fellowship of the church? The world today is full of distractions. How do I convince people to limit their outside activities and put more of a focus on God?

 As a parent, I have the same concerns. How do I motivate my children? How do I inspire them to develop a relationship with God and place their trust in Him? How do I get them away from their video games and the internet and instill in them an abiding love for God?

 Is fear the best motivator? Should we teach lessons on hellfire and damnation? Emphasize fire and brimstone? Should I rail about sinners in the hands of an angry God?

 Or is hope of reward the best motivator? Should our teaching emphasize our ultimate reward in heaven? Eternal life, streets of gold? Should I tell them God loves you and wants good things for you and that if you keep faith with Him He will bless you?

 Right now, we are here to remember Christ and His great sacrifice at the Cross. So perhaps we should focus on gratitude. Christ came to the earth and lived a sinless life. He was guiltless. And yet, He suffered the worst punishment in the Roman world. It was not just capital punishment. It was a gruesome death.

 This was the punishment we deserve. But Christ took that punishment for us. We should be eternally grateful.

 Find whatever motivates you and hold on to it. Moreover, search for ways to motivate others -- your family, your friends, your neighbors. Because this is our chance. Christ came and suffered the ordeal of the cross to bring us the hope of eternal life. And that is one chance we don't want to miss.

**THE FOUNDING FATHERS**

 I hope that everyone had a wonderful 4th of July. As I am certain everyone knows, that is the day we, as Americans, celebrate the signing of our Declaration of Independence. That document was drafted by our revered founding father, Thomas Jefferson.

 I remember being in the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.
C., and looking at all the inscriptions on the walls. There are four or five panels that have quotations from Jefferson, and all but one invoke the name of God. In fact, in the Declaration itself, Jefferson claims that the American patriots were acting in defense of certain inalienable rights endowed by their Creator.

 But any conclusion that the Founding Fathers were acting out of religious conviction would be erroneous.

 They did not dump tea into the Boston Harbor because of some kind of religious persecution. They were unhappy because the Crown had given the East India Company a monopoly on importing tea to the colonies and they could not purchase cheaper tea from the Dutch.

 They were angry because taxes were being levied against them by the acts of a Parliament in which they did not have a voice. They were also angry because heavy taxes were being assessed against them to recoup the costs of the French and Indian War and the ongoing costs of garrisoning the colonies.

 They were forced to quarter British soldiers in their homes and supply them with food. They had no right to bear arms.

 The point is, these men acted for economic and political reasons. Even so, they invoked the name of God to claim some form of divine sanction or authority for their actions.

 Sometimes I worry that I do the same thing. I make decisions, or take actions, based on my own personal preferences. And yet I attempt to ennoble my choices by laying claim to some godly impulse. But it is an illusion. My true motivations are selfish, but I try to convince others, and maybe even myself, that my motivations are actually godly.

 I would like to do better. I want God to be my polestar such that all of my decisions and choices are pointed toward God. At every crossroads in life I want to take the path that I honestly believe serves God, and not my own selfish desires.

 But it is difficult to overcome my natural tendency to satisfy my own wants and to put God first. How do we do that?

 We must become children of the cross. We should always keep fresh in our minds Christ's great sacrifice on the cross and what it means. We were dead in our sins, and now we are alive. We were lost, but now we have the hope of eternal life with God. That should be the center of our lives, and it should be a prism through which all of our decisions and choices pass. We partake of this Lord's Supper every week to remind us, every week, of that great event.

**LESTER THE DEFENSE LAWYER**

 My brother-in-law, Lester Blizzard, is a criminal attorney. Now, some of you may think that phrase is redundant. All I intend to convey is that he practices law in the criminal justice system. He has spent most of his career as a prosecutor. But for a time, he practiced as a criminal defense lawyer.

 A good criminal defense attorney is invaluable to someone accused of a crime. It is not just that they are familiar with the criminal law. In fact, what is probably more important is the attorney's knowledge of the system and relationships with the court and the court personnel. Much more so than civil attorneys, criminal attorneys are in front of the courts almost daily. They know the judges, the bailiffs, the clerks -- everyone involved in the process. And, to be effective, they need to build these relationships and gain a reputation for honesty and integrity.

 If you are accused of a crime, your attorney is your advocate. When you appear in court, the judge does not generally speak to you. He speaks to your advocate. Your attorney. In fact, the judge does not see you so much as he sees your attorney standing next to you.

 When the prosecutor or the court negotiates for some kind of plea deal, they negotiate with your advocate. And it is important that when your advocate speaks, the court believes him. Having an advocate that is respected, and liked, by the prosecutor and the court is very important. Such an attorney can steer his client through the system far more effectively and obtain a much more favorable result.

 Well, Christ is our advocate. He earned His spurs at the cross. When we stand before the bar of judgment, He will stand next to us. He will speak for us. What is more, He will place his white cloak over us, and it will mask our sins.

 I have a friend who has a coffee mug that says -- "A good lawyer knows the law. A great lawyer knows the judge." Well, Christ knows the judge. In fact, they are related. And, with Christ as our advocate, we are guaranteed a positive result.

 Lester worships with the Impact Church of Christ. There is one family there that he and my sister have had a lot to do with. The mother of the family has nine children. As each of these children has grown up and entered adulthood, they all seem to have had trouble with the law. Anyway, the youngest girl was recently arrested for shoplifting. And, Lester being Lester, he offered to represent her for no charge.

 There is much that Lester could have done for her. This was her first offense, and it was just a property crime. With Lester representing her, the crime could have been pled down and it would have been a fairly minor incident. In fact, with the right deal, the incident would not have marred her criminal record. Instead, when the time came for her to be arraigned, Lester was there, but the girl did not show up. Apparently she had better things to do. So the court had to swear out a bench warrant for her arrest and her problems were much worse.

 And that is our lesson for today. Christ can do tremendous things for us. He can redeem us from our sins. He can clothe us with righteousness. He can secure us entry into heaven. But we have to show up. We have to accept His help. We need to proclaim our faith in Him and engage Him as our advocate by symbolically sharing in His death, burial and resurrection through baptism.

 On the final judgment day, Christ is our advocate and He, and He alone, can save us. But we have to show up.

**WANDERLUST**

 There is a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay about trains. It was written at a time before passenger airplanes, when trains were still the primary means of long-distance transportation. It tells the story of a person who lives and works near some railroad tracks. Every time a train goes by, he can hear the roar of its engine and feel the rumble caused by its passage. In the daytime, he can see the smoke puffing out of its stack. At night, he can see sparks shooting up. And the sound of the whistle always gives him a thrill.

 When a train goes by, he thinks -- where is it going? Where could it take me? Who might I meet there? What might I see? He has wanderlust.

 The poem goes on to describe how this gentleman has a very good life. He has a loving family, good friends, a satisfying career. He is happy and content. But, even so, whenever a train goes by, he marks its passage, lets out a wistful sigh, and thinks -- what great adventure have I missed? The poem ends with the following lines:

There isn't a train I wouldn't take,

No matter where it's going.

 I sincerely hope that each of you is happy and content. I want only good things for you. I hope that you have a tremendous family life. I want each of you to have good friends. I hope you draw satisfaction from your work.

 But don't get too comfortable or complacent. We should all have a touch of wanderlust. This world is not our home. Jesus came to earth, lived a perfect life, and then took on the sins of the world in His great sacrifice on the cross. He overcame death for all of us, giving us the hope of eternal life with God in heaven. He has gone on ahead of us to prepare a place for us there.

 That is our real home. That is our better home. It is where we want to be. So, while I hope your lives here are blessed, don't get so comfortable or so involved that you fail to listen for the train whistle. That train is coming, and it is not a train we want to miss.

**‘TWAS A FAMOUS VICTORY**

 The battle of Bleinheim was fought in 1704 during what was known as the War of Spanish Succession. Essentially, there was a dispute over the throne of Spain when Charles II, the last Hapsburg king of Spain, died childless. France decided that a Bourbon descendant of the French King should rule Spain and all her colonies and possessions. To enforce its claim, France invaded the Spanish Netherlands. England, the Dutch Republic and Leopold I, the Holy Roman Emperor, banded together in an alliance to challenge the French attempt to essentially annex Spain. Many of the Bavarian republics allied themselves with France.

 In 1704, a Franco/Bavarian force marched on Vienna in an attempt to knock Leopold I out of the war. But they were crushed near a small village called Blenheim by an Anglo/Dutch force under the command of the Duke of Marlborough. This battle was seen as a turning point in the war and was pivotal in thwarting French expansionism on the European continent. These events would be overshadowed a century later by the Napoleonic wars. But at the time, this battle was highly significant.

 There is a poem called *The Battle of Blenheim* that was written around 1795. It tells about two young boys playing in the fields of their father's farm, which happened to be on the old Blenheim battlefield. The boys dig up a human skull and, being young boys, they think it is cool. They show it to their father and he tells them that it must be from the great battle and that they dig up skulls all the time. So the boys ask the father about the battle, and he replies – “’Twas a great victory."

 The boys press the father for details. The father knows that the French and the British were involved, but that was really all he knows and he just keeps saying -- "’Twas a famous victory." This does not satisfy the boys. They want to know, amongst other things, why the battle was fought. When were they fighting? How many people died? Who won? How did things change after the battle? The poem ends as follows:

Why that I cannot tell, said he

But, ‘twas a famous victory.

 Less than a century had gone by and a man living on the Blenheim battlefield itself could not do better than – “’Twas a famous victory.”

 The greatest victory in human history was when Jesus Christ rose from the grave, triumphant over death. This is the central event of our faith, and a great turning point in history. If ever anyone asks you about Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection and the best you can do is scratch your head and say, “’Twas a famous victory,” then we will have failed. I want each of you to know, and be able to share, much more. That is one reason we do these communion focuses every week.

 We want to be reminded of the upper room and the last supper. Of Jesus in the garden and his arrest. Of Peter's denials. Of Jesus' so-called trial. Of Jesus' interrogations by Herod and Pilate. Of how the mob turned against Him. We want you to remember Christ's suffering under the lash, how he was forced to carry his own cross, and how he died the grizzly death of crucifixion. We want you to rejoice that Christ arose and the tomb was found empty. But, most of all, we want you to know what it all means. Through His great sacrifice, Christ redeemed us from our sins and brought us the promise of life eternal in heaven above in the presence of God.

 So, if ever you have the opportunity to tell someone about the story of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection you can tell them that ‘twas a famous victory. For, indeed it was. But, don't stop there.

**STERLING HIGH SCHOOL**

 Back when I was in the National Guard, there was a day when I ended up at Sterling High School in Baytown. I was there to teach junior ROTC students about the M-16 and M-60 machine guns. I had a couple of M-16s and a couple of M-60s, and I taught them to break the weapons down, clean each part, reassemble the weapons, simulate loading and firing them, clear jams -- that kind of thing. They had a big program at the school and I taught something like five different classes.

 But the sixth class was different. It was apparently some kind of detention hall filled with the discipline-problem kids. These were the troublemakers. Aspiring juvenile delinquents. As they filed into the classroom I was thinking that this was going to be fun. How could I keep these kids in line and keep them from causing a riot?

 Well, I need not have worried. They were interested and motivated. They listened. And when they got a chance to be hands-on with the weapons, they thought it was great. About halfway through the class it occurred to me that, perhaps, teaching this particular group of kids how to operate automatic weapons might not be the best idea in the world. But the point is, I had found a subject that engaged them and, for that class, they were model students.

 You might be asking yourselves -- what does this have to do with the crucifixion of Christ, and the Lord's Supper?

 Well, about 10 years ago, a movie came out called *The Passion of Christ*. I did not see it. But I understand that it depicted, in graphic and brutal terms, the physical ordeal Christ suffered. It wallowed in the violence and blood of Christ's arrest, flogging and crucifixion. I was surprised by the number of people who saw the film. I was also surprised by type of people who went to see the film. Many who saw the film did not seem to be people who would normally go to see an overtly Christian movie. And everyone who saw it was affected by it. Now I am not recommending this movie. But the great violence is part of the story, and this movie did reach an audience and have an impact.

 What has always been more meaningful to me than the violence Christ suffered is Christ in the garden. That vignette has always made Christ seem more human, and more real, to me. Here was a man who knew what was coming and was afraid. He felt deserted. His friends had fallen asleep. In distress, He cried out, “Lord, let this cup pass from me if it may.” And yet, He could still say, “Let thy will, not mine, be done.”

 Others may be more moved by Christ in the upper room; the love, and servant's heart, He showed by washing His disciples' feet.

 Some might find it meaningful that Christ, while on the cross itself, looked down and had concern for His mother and sought to make provision for her by charging John with her care.

 Others might focus on the empty tomb and Christ's triumph over the grave that brought our hope of salvation.

 We have a compelling story. And different parts of the story may resonate with different people for different reasons. But we have a great story. It is our job to tell it. And, when we do so, we may be surprised by some of the people who will listen, and why.

**CATALINA ISLAND**

 When I was in junior high, my father taught law at Pepperdine University in California, and my mother helped organize the Pepperdine lectureships. If you have never been to Pepperdine, it is a beautiful campus. It slopes down a hillside in Malibu, a very high-end community outside Los Angeles. Looking west from the campus affords a tremendous, panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean.

 Out to sea there is a largish island called Catalina. I have been to the island a couple of times, but I don't really know how far offshore it is. What I do know is that there were days when, looking out from the campus, the island seemed to dominate the horizon. It looked huge and it seemed as though I could almost reach out and touch it.

 There were other days, however, when I could not see the island at all. And I don't mean days when it was so socked in that I could not see anything at all out to sea. I mean that there were days when it appeared as though I could see all the way out to the horizon, but it must have been an optical illusion because I could not see the island.

 The overall impression was that on some days, the island was there as big as life. On other days, it just was not there.

 In some ways, that can describe my faith. On some days, I feel the presence of God all around me. My faith is strong and God seems palpable. On other days, I have doubts. God seems absent and my faith ebbs.

 During those times when my faith is weak, ceremony, routine, forms -- these things help and comfort me. Familiar songs. Daily prayers. And, weekly communion. These are tangible things that I can hold on to. Such things can carry me through until my faith rebounds.

 So, every week, we partake of the Lord's Supper. We take that opportunity to orient our minds on the suffering, sacrifice, and then triumph, of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is one of the few forms we have. Let observance of this form be like an anchor to keep you close to God, even when your faith is weak and you are more prone to stray. Hold on to it until your strength returns.

**OUR DEFINING TIME**

 There is a poem by William Butler Yeats about an Irish airman in World War I. Ireland was anything but a fervent ally of Britain in the Great War. But this airman flew fighter planes for Britain, even though he knew it would most likely lead to his death. The poem goes as follows:

I know that I shall meet my fate,

Somewhere among the clouds above,

Those I fight, I do not hate,

Those I guard, I do not love.

My country is Kiltartan's Cross,

My countrymen, Kiltartan's poor,

No likely end could bring them loss,

Or leave them happier than before.

Nor law nor duty bade me fight,

Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,

A lonely impulse of delight,

Drove to this tumult in the clouds.

I balanced all, brought all to mind,

The years to come seemed waste of breath,

A waste of breath the years behind,

In balance with this life, this death.

 This airman recognized that this was his defining time. His life before had not been of note. And, if he survived, his life in the future would not compare to what he was doing now. This was the time when he was daring mighty things and doing great deeds. The stories he would have from his war experiences would be the stories he would tell for all of his life. This was the time that would define him for as long as he lived.

 Well, as Christians, our defining time was Christ in the Upper Room. Christ in the Garden. Christ before the High Priest, and Herod and Pilate. Christ on the cross. And, finally, Christ resurrected in triumph. These are the stories we should tell. These were the events that shape who we are. Without Christ's great sacrifice, our life here would be a waste of breath. But, because of Christ's great sacrifice, our lives are meaningful, and hopeful. And we have the promise of life everlasting.

**PETER'S MOMENT OF GROWTH**

 In the upper room, a brash, self-assured Peter tells Jesus that even if everyone else falls away, he will never do so. Jesus tells him -- Truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times. Peter replies -- Even if I have to die, I will not deny you!

 Well, we know what happens. Later that evening, Jesus is arrested and the apostles are scattered. Peter follows at a distance and is hanging out around the fire in the courtyard of the high priest's house when he is recognized. Three times he is asked if he is one of Jesus' disciples, and three times Peter denies it. The cock crows. Peter remembers Jesus' words and he goes off and weeps bitterly.

 It is Peter's greatest failure; his lowest moment. But it is also the moment when he grows the most. Jesus forgives him. And Peter uses this failure to fuel his fire. He takes a new resolve. He will not fail like this again. Gone is the foolish, cocky, Peter from the upper room. What comes through the fire is a disciplined, serious Peter who, a few months later, could stare down the Sanhedrin and say -- We must serve God rather than men!

 It may be that some of you are struggling with sin. You may be ashamed and feel as though you have failed God. Well, if Peter could come back from his failure, so can you. Know this -- God forgives you. Christ suffered and died on the cross to bring that forgiveness.

 This morning, as you remember Jesus' great sacrifice -- do like Peter did. Remember your sins. Remember how you have failed God. And resolve that you will not fail Him again.

**THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY**

 Most of you are probably familiar with the story of the woman caught in adultery. The scribes and the Pharisees bring her before Jesus and say, the Law of Moses commands that we stone her. What do you say? Jesus replies, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." At that, the crowd filters away. When they were all gone, Jesus asks the woman -- Is there no one left to condemn you? She says no, and Jesus replies -- I do not condemn you either.

 One of the lessons that I draw from this story is that we should not be in the condemning business. We should be in the forgiving business. We should be in the loving business.

 Now, it is true that the last thing Jesus tells this woman is -- "Go and sin no more." So we are not in the condoning business either. But I would rather that we be known for our love and our forgiveness, instead of our zeal for rooting out sin.

 Anyway, this woman had sinned, and she faced a death sentence. Jesus held her life in His hands. He saved her. Jesus redeemed her from the hostile crowd. And then He forgave her. If you had been in the woman's place, how grateful would you have been? Had Jesus saved you in this way, would you strive to honor his plea that you go and sin no more?

 Well, guess what? You are in her place. We have all sinned. We were without hope; subject to death. If you believe that you are somehow less culpable than the woman caught in adultery then you are fooling yourself.

 Jesus held our lives in his hand. He saved us. He sacrificed Himself on the cross to redeem us from our sins. Through His sacrifice, we are forgiven. We have no less reason to be grateful than the woman caught in adultery. And we have just as much incentive to strive to honor Jesus' plea to go and sin no more.

**OUR LISTS**

 Many of you will probably recognize the following passage from 1 Corinthians 13:

"Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs."

It is this last phrase I want to focus on. Love keeps no record of wrongs.

 We tend to keep lists of grievances we have against people. Sometimes, these lists go back decades. Maybe it is a co-worker. Maybe it is a family member. Maybe it is a spouse. Maybe it is someone sitting in these pews.

 We file away every perceived slight or irritation. We use these lists to keep score, or to justify our bad attitudes or our bad actions. Or, perhaps, our lists make us feel superior in some way. The longer we let these lists build up, the harder it is to let them go. And our response to any new irritation is way out of proportion to the actual event because it represents years of pent-up frustration. Holding onto lists like this makes us bitter, unloving people.

 Christ came to this world preaching a message of love. He taught that the greatest commandment was that we should love The Lord our God with all of our heart, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. And he died on the cross to bring forgiveness to us all.

 This morning, as we focus on Christ's great sacrifice, I call upon you to act in love and forgiveness. I call on you to forgive your spouse, your brother or sister, your coworker. Give up your lists. It is time to wipe the slate clean, and break the chalk. Only if you do this can you exhibit the type of love Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 13.

**GETTYSBURG**

 When I was in college, I briefly dated a young woman named Jenny Everett. Jenny is the great, great granddaughter of a man named Edward Everett. In his day, Edward Everett was a United States Senator, the Secretary of State for the state of Massachusetts, and a famous orator.

 One hundred and fifty years ago, as of this Tuesday, Edward stood in front of a podium erected in a field outside of a small town called Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. He delivered a speech of around 13,000 words. He spoke for over two hours.

 When he sat down, President Lincoln took the podium. The speech he delivered had less than 300 words. He had written it on the train during the trip over from Washington. He spoke for less than two minutes.

 Few people remember today what Edward Everett said that day. But Lincoln's speech has become immortal as the Gettysburg Address. For in that short speech President Lincoln captured the essence of the American experience; the pathos of the great conflict in which they were engaged; and the promise of the future with the Union restored. In just a few short words, President Lincoln captured what was truly important and significant.

 In our walk with Christ, we do many things. We study the Bible. We sing songs. We pray. We listen to a sermon. We fellowship. All of these are good things. But, right now, I want to focus on what is really important. And it does not take that many words to express it.

 For God so loved the world that, while we were yet sinners, He sent His son to this earth. Christ experienced life as a man, and lived a sinless life. Then He sacrificed himself on a Roman cross in order to redeem us from our sins. On the third day, He rose triumphant over death and, in so doing, He broke open the gates of death for all of us, and brought us the promise of eternal life in Heaven.

 This morning, we participate in this ceremony of the Lord's Supper to honor that great sacrifice.

**NEVER**

 In 1938, Nazi Germany annexed Austria and occupied a portion of Czechoslovakia. In the Spring of 1939, Germany absorbed the remainder of Czechoslovakia. Adolf Hitler then signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union to secure Germany's eastern frontier, and thereafter invaded and overran Poland beginning in September. This touched off the Second World War.

 In April of 1940, Germany invaded and defeated Norway and Denmark. Shortly thereafter, in May, Germany launched its army--the Wermacht--into Belgium, the Netherlands and France in a lightning-quick campaign. By late summer, the only active combatant still resisting Hitler was Great Britain, and the German general staff was busily planning Operation Sea Lion -- the invasion of England.

 The Wermacht greatly overmatched any force the British could muster against it. But to subdue the British, Hitler had to get his army over there. England is an island and the Royal Navy still ruled the North Sea. What Hitler needed was absolute mastery of the skies. If he could achieve that, then his air force, the Luftwaffe, would be able to hold the Royal Navy at bay for long enough to force a crossing of the Channel. So Hitler ordered Herman Goering, the chief of the Luftwaffe, to destroy the Royal Air Force. Thus began what has become known as the Battle of Britain.

 For a few frenetic months in the fall of 1940, the fate of Great Britain, and indeed, likely the fate of the entire struggle against Adolf Hitler and Nazism, rested squarely on the shoulders of just a few hundred RAF fighter pilots. If they could survive and stay in the fight long enough for the winter weather in the Channel to make any crossing in force impracticable, Hitler would have to abandon any hope of invasion. It was at the height of this great struggle that Winston Churchill described the role of these brave pilots in a phrase that has become famous -- "Never before in the field of human conflict have so many owed so much to so few."

 Churchill was a tremendous phrasemaker and his statement perfectly captured the heart of great battle that the British people watched as it played out in the skies over their homes. But Churchill was wise to limit his statement by the qualifier "in the field of human conflict."

 The British people, and, indeed, the free world, do owe a debt to the relatively small number of RAF pilots who risked their lives to stave off invasion and check the spread of Nazi tyranny.

 But all men throughout history owe a much greater debt because of the sacrifice of just one man on a Roman cross. That is because that one man was the Son of God. And, because of His sacrifice, we all gained much more than just freedom from oppression at the hands of a despotic government. What Christ gave us was forgiveness, freedom from sin, and victory over death itself.

 So, while it is certainly appropriate for us to honor our heroes in war, we should give much greater honor to the Prince of Peace.

**I LOVE TO SING**

 Today I want to speak to the children out in the audience. I love to sing. I do not have any natural talent or ability. I am really not even a particularly good singer. But I do enjoy it, and what little I know about singing I largely learned from growing up in the Church of Christ.

 I used to be just like you. My parents would bring me to church and I would have to sit through a long, dull church service. I could not watch TV or read a book. I did not have an X-box or a handheld gaming system. So I had to figure out something to do.

 There was a wooden latticework on the back wall of the church auditorium where I grew up and I used to look at all the potential handholds and plan out the best route to climb to the top. Or I would just sit and daydream.

 But somewhere along the way, I started listening to the singing and following along in the book. I noted how the pitch of the music rose and fell with the notes on the page. I learned the intervals between the notes. I would try to pick out all the parts -- soprano, alto, tenor, bass. We would start a song and I would think, this time, I will listen for the alto part; this time I will listen for the tenor part. And you know, I found that the more I did this, the better I got at distinguishing each part.

 Then I would find someone who seemed to know what he was doing and I would try to follow him. Somewhere along the way, I got to where, at least on songs we sang a lot, I no longer needed to follow anyone; I could hold down a part on my own. I am kind of slow so it took me years to make any progress. But I had time. My parents kept bringing me back every Sunday. Eventually, I learned a skill, or at least enough of a skill, to have something that has been a joy and comfort to me all my life.

 For singing has the power to engage our emotions and change our moods. It can lift us up. It can make us happy. It can make us sad or contemplative. And it is a tremendous aid to worship.

 Right now, we are stopping to remember the great sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross at Calvary. Never do I feel a more emotional connection to Christ and His suffering than when I sing *Beneath the Cross of Jesus,* or *The Old Rugged Cross*, or *Up From the Grave He Arose*. Sometimes, during the communion service, I will just let the words and tunes of treasured hymns run through my mind.

 And that is what I ask you to do this morning. Think of your favorite hymn that reflects on Christ's sacrifice or celebrates His victory over the grave and focus on it as we serve the bread and the fruit of the vine.

**MOCK JURY**

 As most of you know, I am an attorney. At my law firm, we are all litigators and we usually handle large business disputes. If a case has enough at stake we will sometimes conduct mock trial exercises.

 Basically, a consultant will advertise and gather around 50 people from the community where the case is to be tried by offering $100 dollars or so for them to participate. We will make presentations to them of the arguments for both the plaintiff and defense, without telling them which side we represent. We may show them key pieces of evidence or video clips of key witness testimony. We give them questionnaires to fill out along the way. Finally, we provide them with a sample verdict form and break them up into smaller groups in breakout rooms for them to deliberate while we watch on closed circuit TV.

 The goal is to try to get a sense of what themes and arguments may appeal to the eventual jury. It can provide insight as to how jurors may react to certain witnesses or certain pieces of evidence. And it can give clues as to the type of jurors we may want – gender, educational background, religious preference – things like that.

 It is both fascinating and frustrating to participate in one of these exercises. I am often amazed at what these mock jurors hear, and what they do not hear. It is very difficult to guess what will be important to them. And, oftentimes, we will watch in horror as one loudmouth in a group makes a snap judgment based on some completely extraneous consideration, starts pushing other jurors around, and then just starts making things up to support his or her conclusion. That happens all the time. Sometimes it is in our client’s favor, and sometimes it is not.

 For instance, I remember the first of these exercises in which I participated. We represented a big bus company in a case against a railroad. It was a complicated contract case and there were millions of dollars at stake. We spent all morning presenting arguments and evidence to the assembled group, and then broke them up into small groups to deliberate. I was assigned to monitor one of the small groups and as I watched them file into their breakout room I heard one of them mutter –“man, the bus was late this morning!!” I knew then that it was going to be a long afternoon.

 Sometimes, we are like that mock juror. It does not matter what the message is. It does not matter what God is trying to tell us. We focus on something trivial and unimportant and we let that drive our attitude and thinking.

 I wish someone would take that crying baby out of the auditorium.

The singing really is kind of weak today.

I wish they would stop singing all those new songs.

I wish they would stop singing all those tired old hymns.

When are they going to fix that rip in the carpet?

They shouldn’t let those kids eat so many of the donuts in the morning.

I fear that all too often we let issues like this drive our attitudes about church, and even about God.

 Well, don’t let yourself be distracted. Stop focusing on the trivial and the mundane. Clear your minds. This is what I want you to think about.

 Man was rebellious and sinful. Even so, God still loved us. He loved us so much that He sent His son into this world to redeem us from our sins. Christ experienced life as a man, and then He sacrificed that life on a Roman cross after a fearful ordeal. Though sinless Himself, Christ faced this travail, and sacrificed His life, to pay the debt incurred by our sins. But, on the third day, He broke the bonds of death and rose triumphant over the grave. In so doing, He brought the gift and promise of eternal life in Heaven to all who believe, who repent of their sins, and who call upon His name. That is the good news of the Gospel.

**LAUGH AND THE WORLD LAUGHS WITH YOU**

Laugh and the world laughs with you

Weep and you weep alone

For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth

But has trouble enough of its own

Sing and the hills will answer

Sigh, it is lost on the air

For the echoes bound to a joyful sound

But shrink from voicing care.

 This is the beginning of a poem by a woman named Ella Wheeler Wilcox. It reflects the truism that the world is drawn to happy, joyful people and withdraws from the morose and the sad.

 Now we are gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Generally, that is a time of somber reflection. And perhaps that is proper. After all, the emblems represent Christ's broken body and spilled blood. But never forget--this story is not a defeat. It is a triumph. For Christ rose again triumphant over death. Through His actions, we now have the promise of eternal life. So, rejoice!

 Indeed, we need to be joyful people. I don't mean that we should be giddy. We have the same problems as our neighbors. Bills to pay. Health issues. Leaky roofs.

 But we cannot and should not be bitter or morose. As Christians, we have the good news. We have hope. That should make a difference in our lives. If we do not live as though our relationship with God brings us joy and hope, then why would anyone be drawn to us? So, let us remember Christ's great triumph and be joyful.

**UNCLE BILL**

 When I was a little boy my family would travel several times a year to Ranger, Texas to visit my mother's sister Sandra. Aunt Sandra is married to a big, gruff, kind of scary man named Bill. He was an oil man and he would wake up every morning at the crack of dawn to go check on his wells.

 I remember one time when I woke up early enough to go with him. I piled into the back of the pickup before 4:00 a.m. and we bounced off down some country roads. We went way back into the sticks to some lonely pump jack and tank and Uncle Bill read gauges or turned wrenches--I didn't really know what he was doing. Then we set off for the next pump jack. Before too long I fell asleep in the back of the truck.

 What I did not know for many years was that on one of Uncle Bill's routes an old widow lived in a little shack way off in the back woods. On most mornings Uncle Bill would stop and check on her. As she became less able to get out, Uncle Bill started buying groceries and supplies for her and he would deliver them to her. He did this for years, without anyone ever really knowing about it, until this old woman eventually died.

 I take a lesson from this story. We all have our routes. Our routines. God may place someone along your route. The question is, will you stop?

 Anyway, this was an act of kindness and selflessness that said much about the heart of my Uncle Bill. But in the end, it did not cost him that much. A few minutes each morning. Some groceries.

 Christ's great sacrifice on the Cross was the ultimate selfless act. He was sinless himself. And yet, He sacrificed Himself for the redemption of our sins. Moreover, His act of selflessness cost Him everything. Great pain and suffering. Death.

 Uncle Bill's kind actions were a great comfort to that woman, and they taught his young nephew a lesson about not judging a man by his gruff exterior. But these actions had a limited scope.

 Christ's great self-sacrifice had a universal impact on all men, throughout time. Because of Christ's great sacrifice, our sins are forgiven and we have the hope of eternal life in Heaven. Let us bless Jesus Christ, and acknowledge his great sacrifice, as we go together in prayer.

**WITH MALICE TOWARD NONE**

 President Abraham Lincoln delivered his second inaugural address on March 5, 1865. The Civil War was all but won. In fact, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia would surrender the following month. On that day in March of 1865, the challenge was not winning the war. The challenge was healing the nation. Lincoln closed his speech with the following lines:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

 In the preceding four years, the nation had suffered an unimaginable travail. Hundreds of thousands were dead. Families were destroyed. Much of the South lay in ruins. Hatred and bitterness were all around.

 Lincoln knew that to heal the nation's wounds we, as a people, needed to rise above that hatred. We needed to let go of our malice. To act with charity. To rely on the Almighty. And, further, we needed to apply ourselves to the work ahead.

 I look out today and I see a world that is increasingly bitter and partisan. Our institutions and our traditions are under attack. Sometimes, it seems as though our most basic values are under attack. There are many loud voices that are openly hostile to religion. It can make me angry. It can make me defensive. It can make me want to lash out.

 But that is not the way. For our goal is not to defeat or humble our enemies. Our goal is to lead them to Christ.

 In Lincoln's time, he was trying to rebuild a nation from the ravages of war. Our job is to redeem a society suffering from the ravages of sin. We need to rise above the fray. We must put aside any malice. We must reach out with love and charity. We cannot return insult for insult. We must rely on God. And we must dedicate ourselves to the work of living like Christ, every day.

 Finally, we must never forget that Christ sacrificed himself on the cross for all men. When He looked down from the cross at the men who were tormenting him, He cried out -- Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Christ had love and compassion even for those who were mocking and persecuting him.

 So, too, should we. In the end, I do not want us to be known for our militancy, or for our zeal at condemning sin. I want us to be known for our love and compassion.

**THE DREAD PIRATE ROBERTS**

 I would bet that most of you have seen the movie *The Princess Bride*. It is a charming tale about an evil prince, a beautiful princess, pirates, and true love. The hero of the story is a young farm boy named Westley who went off to find his fortune but was captured on the high seas by the Dread Pirate Roberts -- a terrible brigand of fearsome reputation who had terrorized the Kingdom of Florin for some 20 years.

 The pirate did not kill Westley. Instead, he took Westley on as his cabin boy and over the next several years Westley learned the life of a pirate. Then one day the pirate took Westley into his cabin and made a confession. "I am not the Dread Pirate Roberts," he said. "My name is Ryan. The real Roberts retired long ago. I inherited this ship from the last captain. He retired a wealthy man and handed the ship over to me, just as I am about to retire and hand the ship over to you."

 So, they sailed into a port and took on a whole new crew. Ryan stayed on board for a time, all the while calling Westley “Captain Roberts.” Once the crew believed, Ryan left the ship for his comfortable retirement. And that is how Westley became the Dread Pirate Roberts.

 As Westley explained, it is the name that is important to inspire the necessary fear. No one would surrender to the Dread Pirate Westley. But everyone was terrified of the Dread Pirate Roberts. Westley also explained that when his pirate ship attacked some other vessel, he had to act like the original Dread Pirate Roberts. He could not make any exceptions and leave survivors because then the Dread Pirate would no longer be as respected or feared and, in more modern terms, the power of the franchise would be diminished.

 So, what is in a name? A lot.

 We go by the name Christian. Who was the original Christian? His name was Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He lived a sinless life. He ministered to the poor. He spread a message of repentance, morality, and above all else -- love. Finally, He gave His life as a sacrifice for all men to bring hope into the world.

 The name of the Dread Pirate Roberts instilled fear and terror. That was its power. The name of Christ should instill hope, joy, and love. That is its power.

 Christ no longer walks this earth in bodily form. Now we have taken up His name and His mantle. We call ourselves Christians and thus we are the new Dread Pirate Roberts. But for the power of the name of Christ to continue, we must act as Christ did. Unless we want to be responsible for diminishing the brand, we must model hope, and joy, and love. The responsibility is yours. The responsibility is ours. Be the best Dread Pirate Roberts you can be!

**SAFETY BRIEFINGS**

 One thing I remember from back in my National Guard days is safety briefings. Part of the bureaucracy was that before we did anything, we would have to hold a safety briefing, and then document the fact that we had conducted the briefing. As a young officer I was generally the one tasked with giving these safety briefings.

 Oftentimes, it seemed pretty silly. It is time to clean the mess hall, but first we have to have a safety briefing. At other times, the safety briefings seemed like a pretty good idea. We were visiting a firing range and it certainly was helpful to talk about safe areas, cease fire signals, when weapons could be loaded, and so on.

 In the end, I think the real purpose of this abundance of safety briefings was to combat complacency. Accidents happen when soldiers become complacent; when they do not stop and think about what they are doing. When you let yourself think it can't happen to me, or you believe nothing can go wrong, that is when an accident is most likely to occur. And so, the army, in its infinite wisdom, made me sit down with my troops before we did anything and hold a safety briefing.

 The problem was that we held so many of these meetings that there was a risk that they would lose all meaning. We were just checking a box and the troops would get bored and simply tune out. So, I would struggle with ways to come up with something new and fresh for each meeting to try to keep my troops attentive.

 Complacency is a problem we face in our religious life as well. We are supposed to be salt and light -- affecting the world around us and making it look more like Christ. But, most of the time, it seems like the world resists any change. We struggle all week long in a secular world. It is difficult to maintain our spirit. There are messages all around us pushing us to compromise our values; blend in; don't make waves. Everything seems a struggle. We grow weary and can become complacent.

 That is one of the reasons why, every week, we stop and remember why we are here. Christ came to this earth, lived life as a man, and then sacrificed that life on a Roman cross to redeem the sins of the world. He arose from the grave, breaking the bonds of death. If we have faith in that, and follow Him, we have the promise of life eternal in Heaven above. That is the good news we hear every week and the hope is that it will recharge our batteries and overcome our complacency.

 But, because we participate in the Lord's Supper every week, with its familiar rituals, there is the danger that it will become so commonplace and repetitious that it will start to lose its meaning. There is a worry that we will start tuning out, like my troops would tune out the safety briefings.

 I do not want our observance of the Lord's Supper to be just “checking a box” and going through the motions. That is why we have instituted this practice of a communion focus where we try, each week, to present a short thought, or story, that is fresh and unique and helps make each observance of the Lord's Supper a little different and thus more memorable.

 In the end, though, the responsibility is yours. You will get out of the Lord's Supper what you put into it. If you let yourself become complacent such that you are just checking a box, it will not mean much to you. But if you, each time, stop and focus on Christ in the Upper Room, in the Garden, suffering under the lash, carrying his cross, suffering on the cross, surrendering his spirit, and then rising triumphant then this will be the most meaningful time of your week.

**FOLLOW THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD**

 I was recently flipping channels and I started watching *The Wizard of Oz.* Whenever I see that show I try to place it back into the context of 1939 when it came out in theaters. I try to imagine what the impact must have been when Dorothy opened that door and the dazzling colors of Oz sprang forth on the screen. I marvel at how that whimsical, beautiful fairy tale was received in the throes of the Depression and with the winds of war blowing on the European continent.

 My father was 7 or 8 years old at the time and he saw it in the theaters. He told me that it was overwhelming. He was so scared, at that young age, that he had to be carried, screaming, from the theater. I have some sympathy for him. That Wicked Witch of the West was frightening, and her cackle was blood-curdling.

 Anyway, the movie has become a beloved piece of Americana. And I love the central theme of the film -- follow the yellow brick road. Stay on the path, and you will reach the reward.

 Christ created the path for us -- paved the yellow brick road -- by His sacrifice on the cross. If we will stay on the path, we will reach the reward -- Heaven. But there are pressures and temptations that threaten to pull us off the path. And the farther off the path we get, the harder it is to find our way back.

 So we come together, each week, and take the Lord's Supper to draw us back to, and keep us on, the path. To remind us of where we come from -- a cross on a hill called Mt. Calvary --- and point us back to where we are going -- not the Emerald City; but the City Foursquare. Christ paved the path for us. All we have to do is follow the yellow brick road.

**PINOCCHIO**

 When I was a small boy I convinced some people that I could read at a very young age. The reason is that we had a copy of the book Pinocchio. My parents read it to me so often that I memorized it. In fact, I memorized not only the words, but where to turn the pages. And so, when people came to the house, I would "read" Pinocchio to them, to their great amazement.

 The truth is that I was not precocious. I just had a good memory and, apparently, I could run a good con.

 In the story, a poor woodcarver named Gepetto carves a wooden boy out of a block of wood. Gepetto names the boy Pinocchio and he comes to life.

 What everyone remembers about Pinocchio is that his nose grew whenever he told a lie. And there may be a good lesson there about how we should not tell lies. In fact, I seem to remember a commandment that addresses that general subject. But that is not really what I want to focus on today.

 Instead, what I want to talk about is Pinocchio's great ambition. What Pinocchio wanted more than anything else was to become a real boy. He wanted his wooden body transformed into real flesh and blood.

 In Philippians 3:20-21, Paul tells us that

[o]ur citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

 While we live here on Earth we are like wooden Pinocchios. We are carved out of perishable, flawed materials. We are subject to pain, decay, and death. To extend the metaphor, we are subject to the ravages of termites, rot, and fire.

 But there is hope! Jesus Christ left Heaven, came to Earth, set an example for us all when He experienced life as a man, and then sacrificed His life on a Roman cross as an atonement for our sins. Because of Christ's great sacrifice we have the promise that our bodies will be transformed and we will take up our citizenship in Heaven above. And our transformed bodies will be imperishable and perfect.

 Like Pinocchio, I want to be a real boy. I want a body that is conformed to the body of His glory. I want to take up my citizenship in Heaven. If you do, too, then remember Christ’s great sacrifice on the cross and accept Him as your savior.

**SHOOT IF YOU MUST THIS OLD GREY HEAD**

 In the late summer of 1862, Robert E. Lee took his Army of Northern Virginia into Maryland. Although he was nominally in enemy territory, he took the dangerous step of splitting up his forces. For instance, Stonewall Jackson's corps was to the west attacking Harper's Ferry so as to forage for supplies.

 The Army of the Potomac, led by the timid General George McClellan, was just shadowing Lee's force and staying between it and Washington. But then, in one of those vagaries of war, two Union soldiers discovered documents wrapped around some cigars that set out Lee's troop dispositions and battle plans. Armed with this intelligence, McClellan finally moved against Lee and touched off what has become known as the Battle of Antietam.

 In order to avoid being crushed by far superior numbers, Lee had to reconstitute his entire army quickly. Hence, Jackson's corps had to hurry back from Harper's Ferry. His route took him through the city of Frederick, Maryland. This incident set the scene for a famous Civil War poem by John Greenleaf Whittier called *Barbara Fritsche.*

 Most Union loyalists in Frederick hid when Jackson's troops passed through. But one 90-year old woman, Barbara Fritsche, climbed to the top of her attic and hung an American flag from a flagpole. When Jackson and his troops saw it, they shot the flagpole to pieces. Barbara Fritsche caught the flag as it was falling. She unfurled it in her hands and she cried out:

Shoot if you must this old grey head,

But spare your country's flag, she said.

 Jackson was impressed by her courage and conviction. And he was cut to the quick with shame. After all, less than eighteen months earlier, this was the flag under which this professional solder fought and she was a citizen of the country he was sworn to protect. So Jackson called out to his troops and told them that any man who harmed the woman would suffer severe punishment.

 I often consider how so many of our countrymen were reared in a Christian heritage, but they have fallen away from God, or even outright rebelled. How many tens of millions of Americans have fallen away from the religion of their youth? I wonder--how can we call these people back and remind them of their first allegiance?

 The first thing we need is the courage and conviction of Barbara Fritsche. We must show them that we believe that Jesus Christ died on a Roman cross to bring forgiveness into the world, to break open the gates of death, and to deliver the promise of life eternal to those who accept Him as their savior. We must make it clear that this is the most important thing in the world to us. We are not ashamed and, despite the hostility to religion that seems to be growing, we are not cowed. We are willing to work, to suffer, or even to die, for our conviction.

 By her courage and conviction, Barbara Fritsche forced the respect of the Confederate general who was in rebellion to the flag he had sworn to serve. Perhaps, if we show our courage and conviction to our fellow countrymen who are in rebellion against their God, we will force their respect. And, hopefully, we can lead them back to their first allegiance.

**THE HORNS OF ROHAN**

 I am a great fan of J. R R. Tolkien's classic fantasy trilogy *The* *Lord of the Rings*. I enjoyed the recent movies directed by Peter Jackson. But you miss a lot if you have just seen the movies and you do not read the books. In fact, this morning, I would like to talk about a detail from the books that does not come out in the movies.

 In the story, a monstrous evil grows in the east in the land of Mordor. Under the command of the dark lord Sauron the armies of Mordor move west against the kingdoms of man. In the path of this evil host lies the kingdom of Gondor and its great city of Minas Tirith. Sauron's armies surround the city and begin reducing its walls with tremendous siege engines.

 Inside the city the people begin to despair. There is no escape. It seems only a matter of time before the enemy breaks into the city. When that happens they face death or worse at the hands of a monstrous foe. All hope is gone and they are near collapse.

 But, just before the siege began, they had managed to light the huge signal fires that alerted their ally -- the horse clans of Rohan -- to the plight of the city. Rohan had had its own troubles, but they had survived and they rally to the cause of Gondor. They gather their army and march to Minas Tirith.

 Rohan begins to engage the armies of Sauron when they are still some distance from the city. Their progress is slowed, but they want to let the people of Minas Tirith know they are coming. They carry great signaling horns along with the army and they blow the horns as loud as they can.

 The people in the city still cannot see Rohan and its army, but they hear the great horns on the wind. They know that they have not been abandoned. Rohan has come. They are not alone. There is hope. The defenders of the city stiffen their resolve and when the troops of Rohan draw closer, they sally forth from the city in a coordinated attack that lifts the siege.

 Sometimes we may feel alone and abandoned. The troubles and cares of life may be beating us down. There have probably been times for all of us when it seems as though the enemy is at the gates. Our hope is low and we feel as though we are near collapse.

 But we are not alone. And we do have hope. Christ came to this earth to bring us that hope. Christ overcame death itself by His sacrifice on the cross. And Christ brought with Him the gift of life eternal in Heaven when our struggles in this life have ended.

 We may not see Christ, but when we celebrate the Lord's Supper it is as though the horns are blowing. The sound of the horns reminds us of Christ, His great example, His great sacrifice, His great gift, and the promise that He is coming back. Whenever you are in distress, listen on the wind and hear the sound of the horns blowing from Calvary.

**MY IPAD**

 My dear wife has been traveling some as of late and she has been taking my Ipad with her. That is a bit annoying because I have found it to be a useful device and I hate to be without it. I compose all of my communion focus messages on my iPad, as well as Bible lessons. A couple of years back when we did the “Bible in 90 Days” program, I scrolled the entire Bible on this Ipad.

 At home, I find that my Internet needs consist mostly of checking email or weather or sports scores, searching for movie times, or purchasing things off Amazon. Lou Ann, on the other hand, spends time keeping up with people on Facebook. When I travel, I like to watch Netflix on the Ipad. Anyway, a tablet is the ideal device for all of these tasks. It is much more convenient than a laptop.

 I am not trying to sell you an Ipad. In fact, my friend Ryan McDonald would probably tell you that you would be better off with a Galaxy Tab.

 The point I want to make is that five years ago, I did not even know that I needed a tablet. There was no hole in my life that I thought a tablet would fill. And I certainly could find other purposes for the $800 or so it would take to purchase an Ipad.

 But there were people that I cared about, whose opinions I respected, who had Ipads and who told me that they would never again be without one. For instance, it would be accurate to say that you will have to pry my sister's Ipad out of her cold dead fingers. So I took the plunge and made the purchase. I did not know then that I needed a tablet. But I have found it to be an extremely useful device and now I, too, would no longer be without one.

 All of us need the redemption and the forgiveness that Christ brought by His sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. But so many of our neighbors, and so many people around the world, do not know that they need it. Maybe they don't feel a hole in their lives at all. Or maybe they do but they do not understand what they need to fill it. So, how do we show them that they have a need and what will satisfy that need?

 Well, we have to show them how important it is in our lives. We must make it clear how a relationship with God meets needs in our lives. It makes a difference. We are forgiven. We are children of God. Our names are written in the Book of Life. We have hope. Let others see how big a difference it makes in our lives and they may decide to see if it will make a difference in their lives. And, hopefully, once they do, then they, too, will decide that it is something they do not want to be without.

**THE LITTLE DRUMMER BOY**

 I love the Christmas song *The Little Drummer Boy.*  Whenever I think about drummer boys my mind flashes to grainy, black-and-white daguerreotypes of little boys of 10 or 12 who were drummer boys in the Civil War. Those little boys shared the rigors of camp life with the soldiers and faced the same dangers of the battlefield. So many of them were maimed or killed.

 The Civil War drummer boy is probably not a very apt analogy for the drummer boy in the song. But it does give me an image to focus on and, for me, adds a bit of poignancy to the song.

 Anyway, in the song a poor little drummer boy somehow finds himself in the entourage of the wise men and is ushered in with them into the presence of the baby Jesus. He watches as the wise men present their expensive gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And then, everyone turns to him.

 The boy explains that he is a poor boy. He is not a great wise man and he has no gift fit for a king. But he asks -- shall I play my drum for you? The song continues:

Mary nodded, pah rum pa pum pum

The ox and lamb kept time pa rum pa pum pum

I played my drum for him pa rum pa pum pum

I played my best for him pa rum pa pum pum

rum pa pum pum, rum pa pum pum

Then he smiled at me pa rum pa pum pum

Me and my drum.

 I was probably in junior high before I realized that the little drummer boy is not, in fact, a Biblical story. I was very sad. Even so, I do believe the song tells a Biblical message. This little boy was not titled, educated or wealthy. But he had the desire to honor Christ, he made an offering to Christ of the best that he had, and Christ smiled at his offering. It was enough.

 Christ made the ultimate sacrifice when He died on the cross. Through this act Christ redeemed all of us and secured a place for us in Heaven above. We owe Christ every possible honor. We may be lacking in talent, or education, or possessions. But, while such things are nice, they are not necessary for us to honor and serve Jesus. In the end, Christ does not really need our meager talents or our stuff. What Christ wants is that we have the desire to honor Him. And that, whatever we have, we offer Him our best. Christ deserves no less than our best. Whatever our best is, if we offer it in the right spirit, it will be enough.

**MAN'S GREAT ACHIEVEMENT**

 In 1957 the Soviet Union shocked the world when it managed to place the first artificial satellite -- Sputnik -- into low earth orbit. This stoked fears in America that the Soviets had charged ahead in missile technology. This was the so-called "missile gap."

 Four years later the Soviets succeeded in launching the first man into space -- Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. America was falling behind in the space race.

 And so, in 1962, President John F. Kennedy stood at a podium just a few miles down the road from here at Rice University. In a landmark speech he challenged the nation when he said:

We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win. . .

President Kennedy laid down the gauntlet, and the nation picked it up.

 It was the height of the Cold War. Beating the Soviets to the moon seemed a national imperative. The resources, energy, and creativity of the nation were focused on a single goal. It was one of the greatest endeavors ever undertaken and the effort was massive. Just seven years later Apollo 11 set down on the surface of the moon.

 We did it! We landed a man on the moon by the end of the decade. It was a triumph and perhaps man's greatest achievement.

 But let's keep it in perspective. All we did was travel from the Earth to the moon. God created the Earth and the moon. God laid out the foundations of the Earth and created us from the dust. All of our achievements are just scurrying around in God's sandbox. Nothing man has ever done, or could ever do, could compare with God's works.

 God is the author and master of the universe. We are merely a part of God's creation, and a disappointing one at that. We forget and neglect God. We sin. We rebel.

 Even so, despite our insignificance, and despite the many ways in which we have been unfaithful, God has been constant and loving. God displayed that love when he sent his only begotten son to this earth to provide an example and spread a message to lead us back. And then God allowed His son to be sacrificed on a cross in atonement for our sins. For us, that has made all the difference.

 Our science and technology, that has led to our baby steps into space, may improve our condition in this life. But it is God's love and Christ's great sacrifice that will gain us entry into the next. And that is where we want to be. This morning, let us celebrate God's great love and Christ's great sacrifice.

**THE DESTRUCTION OF SENNACHERIB**

 In the time of King Hezekiah the army of Assyria descended on the Kingdom of Judah. The Assyrians crushed the fortress city of Lachish in Southern Judah. Then the huge Assyrian army invested the city of Jerusalem.

 Shouting up at the walls the Assyrians taunted Hezekiah and mocked God. Militarily the situation of the city was hopeless. But Hezekiah prayed to God, and God heard him. Through the prophet Isaiah the Lord told Hezekiah that He would defend the city for His own name’s sake and for the sake of His servant David. What follows in Isaiah 36 are two innocuous little verses. They are easy to skip over and we don't focus on them much. Verses 36 & 37 read:

Then the angel of The Lord went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these men were dead. So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh.

 There is a poem by the English poet George Gordon, Lord Byron, called the Destruction of Sennacherib. He describes the slaughter as follows:

The angel of death spread its wings on the blast;

And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;

And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill;

And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still.

And then, after a few additional images of the destruction in the camp, Byron ended the poem as follows:

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail;

And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;

For the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword;

Hath melted, like snow, in the glance of The Lord.

 There are many poems that I appreciate for the beauty of their language or for their pinpoint images. But what I love about this poem is not actually the poem itself. What I love is that Byron did the same thing I did when I read Isaiah 36.

 When I read these two verses I thought -- WOW!! 185,000 men dead with a wave of the Lord's hand. These aren't just two obscure verses buried in the Old Testament. This is an awesome display of power. Try to imagine the scene and the human drama that played out. Truly we serve an all-powerful God.

 And then, I am humbled. How can the all-powerful God have enough regard for man to sacrifice His son to redeem us from our own folly and sin? I do not fully understand the answer to that question. But I am eternally grateful that Christ did come to earth; that He went to the Upper Room with His Apostles; that He suffered the taunting and abuse at the hands of the soldiers; that He surrendered His life on a Roman cross; and that He rose again triumphant on the third day. I try to show my gratitude each week when I partake of the Lord's Supper and partake of the emblems of Christ's great sacrifice.

**FORREST GUMP - THE SPOTLIGHT**

 One of my favorite movies is *Forrest Gump*. I think it is a brilliant show. And one of the things I love most about it is how Forrest is used as a foil to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the times and in the people around him.

 Forrest is purity itself. He is an innately good man. He is too simple to have any guile. And he cannot understand, or even apprehend, the evil in others. When people, and even events, are set up next to his spotless purity, they look shabby and sordid in comparison. Their faults and selfish motives are exposed. Forrest is like a spotlight exposing hypocrisy, prejudice, sin and wickedness as he moves around.

 In that way, Forrest is a Christ-like figure. Christ was certainly not simple. But he was pure and sinless. The sins and shortcomings of those with whom he came in contact were exposed in vivid contrast when set up next to Christ's spotless purity. The motives and hypocrisy of the Pharisees and teachers of the law were laid bare when they attempted to argue with him. Christ was a spotlight exposing hypocrisy, prejudice, sin, and wickedness as he moved around. And his philosophy of love and forgiveness stood in stark contrast to the rule-bound and heartless religion of the Jews of the day.

 I have no illusions. I certainly could not withstand such scrutiny. Christ's cloak is pure and sparkling white. My cloak is tattered and stained by sin. If I stood next to Christ the contrast would be glaring. I am a sinful man and I stand before my Creator with no excuse.

 But I have hope because Christ took on the sins of the world through his sacrifice at the cross. I stand before God justified and pure because I am wearing Christ's borrowed cloak that was purchased at the cross and washed clean by His blood. We have all been washed clean through Christ's great sacrifice. Through His efforts, our sins are forgiven and we have the hope of salvation.

 Let us honor Christ now by remembering what he has done for us as we partake of the feast that commemorates the great and terrible events of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

**GALATEA**

 In college at Abilene Christian University I had a buddy named Lance Caughfield. Lance had the uncommon good sense to marry Adrienne, a lovely and extremely intelligent young woman. Lou Ann and I lived in Austin for two years when we were newly married and during that time Lance and Adrienne were our running buddies. Currently, Adrienne is a professor at Collin College. She is also an author and a poet. One of Adrienne's poems that is particularly meaningful to me is called *Galatea.*

 In Greek mythology Galatea is the name of a statue carved by Pygmalion of Cypress. Pygmalion fell in love with his statue. He prayed to the goddess Aphrodite, who heard his prayer, brought the statue to life, and united Pygmalion and Galatea in marriage.

 Well, Adrienne is first and foremost a Christian. And so, in her poem, she adapted this story to convey a Christian message. The poem is written in the first person. God is the master sculptor and she is the sculpture. The poem talks about how she wants God to sculpt her heart, bring it to life, and make it His own. What really touches me about the poem, though, is her description of the sculpting process.

 She talks about how raw stone has no luster or appeal. It must be sculpted by the craftsman. Moreover, the process is violent. It requires generous use of the rasp, the hammer, and the chisel to knock and scrape away imperfections. That is the only way to free the beautiful form beneath. The poem concludes as follows:

Each blow strikes deep and pierces to the heart,
but still I can but bless the instrument
that aids the master to create his art -
the method justified by his intent.
Into your hands I give my heart of stone;
shape it, bring it to life, make it your own.

 Christ gave His life on the cross of Calvary to redeem us from our sins. That was the central act of history that gives us all hope. The work did not end there, however. God is not finished with us.

 I know my many faults and how far I fall short of Christ's example. I pray that the master sculptor will continue to work on my heart to make me more Christ-like. I understand that the process may be unpleasant. Change is difficult and it seems I only grow as a result of bitter experience. I may feel pain as God applies the rasp or hammers the chisel. But the process is necessary and the goal is worthwhile.

 If you wish to honor Christ for His sacrifice on the cross, then submit your heart to the sculpting hands of the master craftsman. Let Him bring to life in you a heart that conforms to Christ's great example.

**THE GREAT MISCALCULATION**

 In the 1930s Japan sought to imitate the European colonial powers by carving an empire for itself out of the territory of its neighbors. This led to a brutal war against China. As Japan's war against China widened, its territorial ambitions in Asia increased. For instance, in 1940 Japan attacked French Indochina and it cast its eyes on the oil-rich Dutch East Indies.

 The biggest threat to the Japanese policy of expansion in the Far East was American control of the Philippines and the United States Pacific Fleet anchored in Pearl Harbor. If Japan continued on its course a showdown with the United States seemed inevitable.

 Attacking the United States was a chancy proposition, though. The United States had a significantly larger population and vastly superior resources and manufacturing capacity. In a long war of attrition and production Japan must, ultimately, be defeated.

 But Japan believed that Americans were weak and pampered and had no stomach for a fight. The Japanese leaders calculated that one sharp blow would dispirit the Americans. Faced with the difficult, bloody and expensive effort that would be required to challenge Japan, the United States would quickly sue for some kind of face-saving peace.

 And so, Japan launched the sneak attack at Pearl Harbor. Tactically the raid was a triumph. Japan achieved complete surprise. Over 2,400 U.S. servicemen were killed, some twenty-one ships were sunk or damaged, and more than 185 U.S. aircraft were destroyed. The Pacific Fleet was devastated.

 Strategically, though, the Japanese leaders had made a grave miscalculation. They had misjudged the situation and the American character. The sneak attack so incensed the American people that it shocked them out of their pacifistic lethargy. Japan had wounded American pride and awakened the sleeping giant. It was a miscalculation of epic proportions. America rallied itself and then unleashed a fury that was not spent until Japan lay in ruins.

 The Jewish leaders made a similar miscalculation. They perceived Jesus as a threat to their position and plans. They calculated that if they could maneuver the Romans into crucifying Christ they could end the threat. His followers would melt away and Jesus would be forgotten.

 At first, their plan seemed a success. The fickle crowds turned against Jesus. They successfully manipulated the Romans into killing Jesus. And Jesus' followers were indeed demoralized.

 But the Jewish leaders had misjudged the situation. Killing Christ did not end the threat. Instead, the Holy Spirit came and energized Christ's apostles. The martyrdom of Christ became a rallying cry and a proof that prophecy had been fulfilled. His followers contended that Christ had risen again and would be coming back. The movement grew exponentially and could not be contained. The Jewish leaders had unwittingly played into Jesus' hands and helped launch a new faith that very quickly eclipsed Judaism itself.

 Christ's crucifixion was the culmination of God's plan to redeem his people. Nearly two thousand years have gone by and we are still celebrating Jesus Christ's great sacrifice and all that it means for us today. That is something we do every week when we come together. It is ironic to think that it was all brought about by the miscalculation of the Jewish leaders who were working so hard to thwart Christ and his message.

**SOCIAL MEDIA**

 My son Seth would like to be an engineer. So, a few weeks back, Seth went to Fort Worth to talk to my cousin Craig, who is an engineer at Lockheed Martin. Craig works on the Joint Strike Fighter program and he was kind enough to take Seth on a tour of the assembly line facility. The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is a highly advanced military aircraft and Seth thought the tour was great. In fact, I wish I could have joined them.

 Craig also gave Seth some advice about Facebook and other social media. If any of you do not know, Facebook is an electronic forum where the more computer literate among us post pictures, or information about themselves, or messages that are instantly accessible to friends or the public at large. It is the new forum for gossip, but it is far more dangerous because it leaves a visual and written record. As any parent will tell you, monitoring their childrens' Facebook accounts is a true window into their world.

 Anyway, Craig told Seth to be very careful about what he posted because sophisticated employers such as Lockheed Martin investigate the social media of any potential applicant. He told Seth that if he put something stupid or criminal or improper in his account he would not be hired by a company like Lockheed Martin. Finally, Craig related that his company took a dim view of the concept of "youthful indiscretions." He told Seth that if he believed that college was a time to sow his wild oats and that inappropriate posts made while he was in college could be dismissed as "youthful indiscretions," he would be sorely disappointed.

            I appreciated Craig's words because I think it is important for my children to hear this message from someone other than just me.  And I believe it is good advice for all of us.  Before you post anything to Facebook or Twitter or some other social media, you should first think -- how would this look to my current, or a potential, employer?

            More fundamentally, though, you should ask yourself -- what would Jesus think if he reviewed my Facebook page?  If it is truly a window to the soul, what would it say about you?

            While we were yet sinners, Jesus Christ left Heaven and came to this fallen world.  He was born of a virgin.  He lived a sinless life as an example to us all.  He preached a message of repentance, morality, and, most of all, -- love.  And then, He allowed Himself to be arrested, beaten and mocked.  Finally, He surrendered Himself to the most barbaric punishment in the Roman world -- death by crucifixion.  He did not undergo this terrible ordeal because of any sin or fault of His own.  Rather, He sacrificed Himself to pay a debt that we had incurred by our sin.  The ceremony we are about to perform commemorates that sacrifice.

            The good news, though, is that Christ's story did not end there.  On the third day Christ rose again, breaking open the bonds of death.  Through His sacrifice and His resurrection Christ delivered to His followers the gift of eternal life in Heaven.  To live on this earth is Christ, and to die is gain because Christ will bring us home.

            As Christians, Jesus' great sacrifice and this message of hope should define who we are.  It should be the most salient thing about us.  It should be reflected in all that we do and it should bubble out in all of our interactions with people.

            If someone reviewed your Facebook account, would they even know you are a Christian?  If Jesus looked at your Facebook page, what would He find?

**RED POPPIES**

 Back in August, Lou Ann, the boys and I were visiting England. At that time the British were commemorating the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War. America participated in the First World War, but only at the end and only with a small fraction of its national effort. For that reason, it is difficult for Americans to appreciate fully the impact and significance of the war to the European combatants.

 In England, the losses--both physical and spiritual--were enormous. The nation was financially devastated and an entire generation of young men lay dead. There was scarcely a family in Britain that had not lost someone. Moreover, the foundations of the world, as they knew it, were cracked beyond repair. And, while they did not know it at the time, the seeds of the Second World War were already sown.

 Anyway, to the British, the symbol of the Great War has clearly come to be the red poppy. I presume that is because of the famous poem scribbled by Lt. Col. John McCrae in 1915 in the back of an ambulance near a dressing station by the Ypres battlefield:

 In Flanders Fields the poppies blow

 Between the crosses, row on row

 On the day that we visited the Tower of London the walls and outer courtyard were festooned with red poppies. They were not real. They were ceramic; shaped, fired, and then painted red. We were told that there were some 800,000 of them scattered around the grounds. This was their tribute and how they sought to remember this pivotal conflict that is such a significant part of their heritage.

 As Christians, we also seek to remember the pivotal event that makes us who we are and that changed the world forever. Our symbol for that event is not a red poppy. Rather, for us, the emblems of that event are the bread and the wine which symbolize the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ sacrificed on a Roman cross.

 I do believe that it is important for the British people to remember always the great sacrifices of the First World War. It reminds them of who they are and what was required to acquire, and is required to maintain, the freedoms they enjoy.

 But I believe that it is more important that we, as Christians, remember always the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. That is why, every Sunday, when we come together, we perform this ceremony. We stop. We focus our minds. And we remember -- not only the act, but the significance of the act. Let us now resolve to continue this practice, in keeping with our Lord's command, until He comes again.

**THEY DEMAND THEIR INDEPENDENCE**

            In the book *The Shack*, the young daughter of a man named Mac is taken and killed, or worse, by a child molester.  The terrible crime takes place in a run-down shack deep in the woods.  Sometime later this embittered father is lured up to the shack by a mysterious note.  God is waiting for him there and over the course of a weekend spent with God Mac learns lessons about love, about forgiveness, and about the nature of God.

            The burning question on Mac's mind is, of course, how could God have let this happen to his little girl.  More generally, this is a question we all must face.  If God is good and loving, how can there be such evil and suffering in the world?

            Whenever I address this question I generally talk about love and free will.  God did not intend for man to be robots who are incapable of emotion and who merely do what they are programmed to do.  Rather, God wanted man--His creation--to love Him.  For this love to be real, though, man would have to have a choice.  A man can choose to love God, or not to love God.  A man's choice to love God is only meaningful, though, if it is a “free will” choice.  Moreover, the more God interferes in this world, the less meaningful this choice becomes.  For instance, if, on this earth, God overtly and directly punishes those who reject Him, and overtly protects and rewards those who choose Him, a lot more people would choose Him.  But they would do so out of self-interest and not out of love.  Accordingly, God cannot build a hedge around His followers.  Rather, He must allow the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike.

            William Paul Young, the author of *The Shack*, does address this idea as a justification for why a loving God would allow evil in the world.  He also offers another explanation that I had never really explored.  This explanation was summarized in the following statement:

            They demand their independence and then complain when I give it to them.

            When man was in the garden, he was in the presence of God.  God protected him and nothing bad happened to him.  But man was innocent and dependent upon God.  When Adam and Eve bit into the apple, what they were really doing was demanding their independence. They wanted to be like God.  They wanted to make their own decisions.  They wanted to control their own destiny.  And indeed, that is the basic story throughout history.  Man has always demanded his independence from God.

            God knew what that choice meant.  He knew that evil would enter the world if He granted man his independence.  Men would make bad decisions based on foolish, vain, and selfish motives.  There would be consequences.  Even so, God loved man enough to grant him his independence.

            Man fiercely wants his independence and is unwilling to give it up.  Man wants to make his own decisions and choices.  But when his own decisions cause him to run amok and something evil and terrible happens, man shakes his fist at God and cries out -- how could you let this happen?  Man cannot have it both ways.  He cannot declare his independence from God and then complain when God does not step in to ameliorate the consequences of his foolish choices.

            God knew something else when He granted man his independence.  He knew that this would destroy the relationship between God and man.  Sin and evil would enter the world and the fellowship between God and man would be severed.  By man's own choice, man would separate himself from God.

            God still loved man, though.  And so, He created a pathway for men to find their way back to His presence.  That pathway was paved by His son Jesus Christ when he sacrificed Himself on a Roman cross as an atonement for man's sin.  Jesus bridged the gulf between God and man, and through Jesus we can return to the presence of God.  Without this great act, we would be forever separated from God.  Let us now praise God, and His son Jesus Christ, by partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine which commemorate this tremendous act of redemption.

**MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.**

 In the early 1960s, America was a deeply divided nation. The Civil War had ended nearly a century ago, but the living conditions for black Americans were still extremely poor. Racism and hatred ran rampant and discriminatory codes such as the odious "separate but equal" were enshrined in our laws. Race relations in our nation had reached a boiling point, and something had to give.

 There were a plenitude of voices crying out on racial issues at that time, and many of those spread messages of hatred, violence, division, and revolution. Fortunately for all of us, the most eloquent and moving of those voices was that of a young Christian preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr.

 Dr. King was an astonishingly brilliant speaker and an inspiring leader. He challenged white Americans by confronting them with the import of the words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. He challenged Christians by lacing his speech with Biblical quotations and calling on them to be true to Christian values and morals. He made brilliant arguments that could not be easily refuted or ignored. And he did not sully his message by resort to any violent means or tactics.

 Moreover, he had a beautiful vision. While many civil rights agitators at the time were advancing messages of separation, militancy, and empowerment of one race or the other, Dr. King had a more beautiful, and inclusive, dream.

 In his famous speech on the national mall, Dr. King cried out that he had a dream that America would live up to its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal." He dreamed of the day when "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners [would] be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood." He dreamed of the day when his children would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character and when "little black boys and black girls [would] be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."

 Dr. King made a difference. In 1964 he stood behind President Johnson as he signed the Civil Rights Act. The following year, the Voting Rights Act passed. Neither of these landmark statutes would have been possible without Dr. King and his movement. We still have a long way to go to accomplish Dr. King's dream, but he made America a better place and helped our nation through some very turbulent times.

 Dr. King challenged the status quo. He spread a revolutionary morality that convicted people of their racial guilt and called on them to do better. That made many people uncomfortable and, on a terrible day in Memphis in 1968, he was assassinated by a sniper. America lost a great man that day, but no one should have been surprised because that seems to be the way of things with crusading men of principle who challenge the social order.

 Christ challenged the status quo of the day. He charged that the heartless, rule-bound Judaism espoused by the religious leaders of the day was misguided. He taught a revolutionary morality that exposed the hypocrisy of men and threatened the existing social order. He called on people to repent. He made people uncomfortable. And He, too, was martyred for His troubles.

 Reverend King's accomplishments, while significant, pale in comparison with those of the God that he served. Reverend King made our nation a bit more just. Jesus Christ revolutionized the world and changed the hearts and lives of billions throughout history.

 More importantly, though, through His death, Christ atoned for the sins of His followers and brought hope to the world. Because Christ rose again, overcoming death, He delivered the gift of eternal life in heaven to those who accept Him.

 We are about to partake of the emblems that remind us of Christ's great sacrifice. As we do so, let us remember the great message of love and morality that Christ preached, the price He paid for it, and the significance of His sacrifice to all of us today.

**THE THREE MUSKETEERS**

 I have always loved Alexander Dumas' great work *The Three Musketeers.* In the story, d'Artagnan, a young provincial with an overdeveloped sense of chivalry, travels from his impoverished home in Gascony to the capital of Paris. Shortly after arriving his prickly sense of honor and some bad luck cause him to accept challenges from three of the most famous royal musketeers to separate duels all in the same day. As the duels are about to begin, men loyal to Cardinal Richelieu attempt to arrest the duelists because the Cardinal has decreed that duels are forbidden. This leads to a general melee between the musketeers and the Cardinal's men. D'Artagnan joins in on the side of the musketeers and it is discovered that he is a fabulous swordsman.

 By way of background, the musketeers were the personal guard of the King, Louis XIII, and were the armed symbol of the monarchy. However, Louis XIII was a very weak king and an ambitious churchman named Cardinal Richelieu had assumed control over much of the apparatus of the state. The Cardinal had his own personal guard and his power and influence actually eclipsed that of the monarchy.

 At any rate, d'Artagnan becomes the bosom friend of the three musketeers. The leader of the group is Athos; a man of title, towering reputation, unparalleled bravery, and unyielding integrity. Athos is a royalist to his core and he hates the Cardinal for challenging the authority of the throne.

 D'Artagnan wishes to join the musketeers and he tries pattern himself after Athos. To that end, he joins with the musketeers in various squabbles with the Cardinal's men and, because of his great talent with the sword, he begins to develop a fearsome reputation. Despite his humble background, it is only a matter of time before he is accepted as a musketeer.

 Before that happens, though, the Cardinal comes to recognize d'Artagnan's worth and concludes it is better to try to buy d'Artagnan off than see him join the musketeers. So, the Cardinal makes d'Artagnan a very generous offer. He asks d'Artagnan to become an officer in his personal guard. This is an exalted position that promises great patronage, advancement, wealth and respect. It is far more than a poor boy from Gascony could reasonably expect. Moreover, there is nothing actually dishonorable about it. D'Artagnan is not yet a musketeer and the Cardinal is, after all, a high official nominally in service to France.

 But d'Artagnan knows that if he accepts the offer then Athos would no longer give him his hand. D'artagnan might gain the whole world but, to him, to lose the respect of Athos would be to lose his soul. It is this consideration that causes d'Artagnan to reject the Cardinal's offer; a decision which very easily could have proven fatal to him. D'Artagnan just could not disappoint Athos.

 In a small way, Jesus Christ is our Athos.

 Christ left paradise and was born as a man into this fallen world. He lived a sinless life as an example to all of us. He preached a revolutionary message of repentance, morality, and love. Then, He allowed Himself to be taken by the soldiers; to be mocked, beaten, lashed, and finally crucified. He suffered this punishment not for any transgression of His own, but rather as an atonement for our sins. Through His sacrifice, Christ paid the price for our sins and they are washed away. Moreover, because He rose triumphant from the grave, He overcame death itself and delivered to His followers the gift of life eternal.

 We owe Christ every honor. We owe Christ our loyalty. Christ is the only means by which we have forgiveness and hope.

 Whenever you are faced with a questionable choice, I want you to do as d'Artagnan did. For truly it does you no good to gain the entire world if you lose your soul. So ask yourself: if you take this action, will it disappoint Christ and damage your relationship with Him? That should be the standard that informs all your choices. For if your choice will separate you from Christ, then whatever is to be gained is simply not worth it.

**LOBSTER**

         When I was in high school I worked in the meat department of a supermarket.  One corner of the meat counter was a big water tank where we kept live lobster.  The lobster were supposed to have thick rubber bands around their claws to hold them shut, but those always seemed to break or work their way off.

         One night a Japanese man came up to the counter and wanted to purchase a lobster.  There were two or three in the tank and none of them had their claws properly contained by the rubber bands.  I told the gentleman to wait just a second while I went hunting for the big tongs we used to grab the lobster.

          I turned around and started rummaging through a drawer.  When I found the tongs and turned back around, I saw that the man had his left hand in the tank in front of the biggest of the lobsters. The lobster was hunched back up against the glass with both claws up preparing to strike at the hand that was waving back and forth in front of him.  Before the lobster struck the man thrust his right hand into the tank along the glass, grabbed the lobster just behind the arms, and lifted the lobster out of the tank.  A bit nonplussed, I offered to get the man a bag.

          Clearly this was not this gentleman's first rodeo.  He knew how to distract the lobster, how to grab him, and where to hold him to ensure that the lobster could not reach back and pinch him.  The man knew what he was doing, but I still thought his actions were a bit showy and foolish.

          We are here to celebrate the ceremony of the Lord's Supper.  This is not our first rodeo, either.  We do this every time we come together.  We are very familiar with the physical actions -- passing the trays, breaking the crackers, sipping from the little cups.   If all we are doing is going through the motions or checking a box, then we are just making a show and our actions are foolish and without meaning.

          The physical actions of this ceremony are not what is important.  They are merely tools to focus our minds.  What is important is that we take this time to stop and remember the suffering and sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.  We must never forget that we were lost in our sins and without hope.  Then Christ came.  Although He was innocent, He offered Himself as an atonement for our sins.  He was mocked, beaten, flogged, and then crucified.  He took the punishment we deserved.

         Yet He is God and death could not hold Him.  Christ rose again and in so doing He broke open the gates of death and delivered to His followers the gift of life eternal.

         This is not our first rodeo.  We are very familiar with the ceremony we are about to perform.  Look past the forms, though, and focus on the substance.  Forget the trays and the plastic cups and remember the man suffering on the cross.

**NOT WITH A BANG BUT A WHIMPER**

 There is a very dark and disturbing poem by T.S. Elliot called *The Hollow Men.* It discusses a descent into a twilight realm filled with frightening images of disembodied men and evil, shadowy forces. It is very depressing, and it ends with a haunting image of final destruction:

 This is how the world ends

 This is how the world ends

 This is how the world ends

 Not with a bang but a whimper.

 The earthly ministry of Jesus Christ lasted only about three years, but in those three years He had a tremendous impact. Huge crowds followed Him and were amazed by His teaching. He performed astounding miracles. He confounded the many attempts by Pharisees, scribes, and teachers of the law to trap or stump Him. Near the end, He entered Jerusalem in triumph riding on a donkey with the people shouting Hosanna and laying their cloaks and palm fronds down in His path.

 Jesus' popularity reached such a height that it frightened the Jewish leaders and they conspired to kill Him. They succeeded. They arrested Him on trumped-up charges and managed to turn the fickle crowds against Him. Then they pressed the Roman authorities to crucify Him. When Jesus died the ignoble death of a criminal on a Roman cross, the Jewish leaders likely concluded that this troublesome man's ministry had ended with a whimper.

 But they were terribly wrong. The cross was not a whimper. The cross was a bang. It became a symbol, a rallying cry, and a fulfillment of prophecy. It ended one era of human time, and began another. It is the central event in human history.

 Moreover, while it did, more or less, coincide with the ending of Christ's earthly ministry, it was not the end of Christ or His influence. For Christ came back from the dead, prepared his followers for the birth of the church, promised He would return, and then rose on high. In an astoundingly short period of time, Christ's followers, animated by the Holy Spirit, would carry His message all across the Roman world.

 So this morning, as we partake of the Lord's Supper, appreciate that we are not commemorating a whimper. We are commemorating the BANG!! that began our church, brought us forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life, and revolutionized the world.

**THE GODS MUST BE CRAZY**

 The movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy* tells the story of a primitive and isolated tribe of people living along the fringes of the Kalahari desert in southern Africa. One day, a man flying a small airplane drops a Coke bottle out of his window and it lands, intact, in the middle of their little village. The people believe that this strange object which has dropped from the heavens must have come from their gods.

 Indeed, the object is wondrous. It is smooth and transparent and perfectly-formed. They find many uses for the object. It carries water and does not leak. It is harder than any other substance they have and with its round shape it is perfect as a rolling pin to crush things like berries into powder or a paste. Some tribe members discover that if they hold it in front of their eyes at a certain distance, it can help them see better. And they can make music with it by blowing across the top of it. It becomes a much sought-after item.

 The problem is that there is only one of these objects, and everyone wants it. Before this Coke bottle dropped from the sky their village was peaceful and harmonious. With this object, though, has come selfishness, envy, jealousy, and covetousness as everyone wants to possess the bottle, or take it from whoever has it. This leads to violence as the villagers fight over it. One little Coke bottle has a tremendously negative impact on the village, changing it forever. The village elders conclude that this is a monstrously evil object and, in the hopes of returning the village to its innocent state, they commission one of their hunters to carry the bottle to the edge of the earth and throw it off.

 In the movie, a Coke bottle was the means by which evil came into the village society and drastic action was necessary to purge the village of this evil. In the Garden of Eden, an apple was the means by which sin and evil came into the world.

 God created a wondrous garden for Adam and Eve. It was filled with every good thing, including access to the tree of life. Most wonderful of all, though, was that in the garden Adam and Eve had the privilege of communing directly with God. The garden was a paradise and there was only one rule -- do not eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. Unfortunately, man could not follow that one rule.

 Man rebelled against God and bit into the apple. In doing so, man lost his innocence. Sin and evil came into the world, and the consequences were enormous. Man's direct fellowship with God was severed. He was driven out of the garden and became subject to death and decay.

 After biting into the apple, man's passions were loosed. In jealousy, Cain slew his brother Abel. In arrogance, man attempted to build a tower to reach into heaven. In lust, King David took another man's wife. The list goes on and on. Man's sin was, and is, great and without drastic action to purge man of his sin he could never return to a direct fellowship with God.

 God could have washed His hands of His creation, but He did not. Instead, God took drastic action by sending His son Jesus to this earth to experience life as a man. Jesus lived a sinless life, spread a gospel of repentance and love, and then sacrificed Himself on a Roman cross to pay the debt incurred by man's sin. Through Christ's sacrifice our sins are forgiven and we have the promise that the fellowship that was severed when Adam bit into the apple will be restored in Heaven. Let us give thanks this morning for the drastic action taken on our behalf by remembering Christ's great sacrifice as we partake of the bread and fruit of the vine.

**IS THIS APPROPRIATE?**

 In our service today we will do many things. We will pray, sing, read scripture, and hear a lesson. All of those are good things. I believe the most important thing we will do, however, is partake of the Lord's Supper.

 In the Upper Room, on the night He was taken by the soldiers, Jesus told his disciples that the bread and the wine would be the symbols of his broken body and spilt blood and that they should partake of each, whenever they came together, in remembrance of Him. The ceremony of the Lord's Supper that we perform each week is our attempt to honor Christ's words and remember His great sacrifice. It should be the focal point of our worship service.

 However, because we perform this service every week there is a danger that in repetition it will lose some of its significance. That is one of the reasons that we have instituted the practice of these communion focus messages. The idea is to present a novel thought or idea that will make each service a bit different and more memorable. Today, I have brought a few visual aids.

 (Funny hat) -- I may have succeeded in getting your attention and making this morning's service memorable. Even so, you may be thinking that levity is really not appropriate. We are, after all, commemorating Christ's death and the emblems of this service represent Christ's broken body and shed blood.

 (Crown of thorns) -- If you did not like that hat -- is this hat appropriate? Of all of the physical trauma Jesus suffered during his ordeal, the crown of thorns was probably the least significant. Even so, it is representative of the spiritual and emotional trauma Jesus endured for it is a symbol of mockery. Jesus was mocked by the High Priest, by Herod and his soldiers, and by the Romans. He was deserted by His friends. The crowds turned against Him, shouted that He should be crucified, and called for the release of Barabbas instead of Him. Christ's physical ordeal was fearful, but His spiritual ordeal was also terrible.

 (Whip) -- Is this appropriate? We can talk about how Christ received 39 lashes, but do any of us really want to see a whip? The whip used on Christ probably did not look like this, but it is sufficient to make the point. A whip is a brutal instrument for meting out pain. Church is about singing and praising and upbeat sermons, right? Is displaying an actual whip in a church service appropriate?

 (Mallet and spike) -- Is this appropriate? We can talk about how Christ was crucified, but do we really want to see the physical instruments by which He was so painfully affixed to the cross? Does it upset you that I would present these things to you from the podium in a church service?

 I will grant you that the funny hat was inappropriate. I submit to you, however, that the other objects are not inappropriate. In order to cleanse us of our sins Christ suffered a very real, brutal, and terrible ordeal. If we sanitize Christ's crucifixion by divorcing it from the earthy reality and cloaking it in ritual and flowery language, we will diminish His sacrifice. Christ did not shy away from the whip, the spikes or the crown of thorns, and neither should we.

**ASK NOT**

 In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, President John F. Kennedy uttered a phrase that has always resonated with me.

 My fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you -- ask what you can do for your country.

 It was a different time. It was a time when most of us still believed in the greatness of our nation. Fifteen years earlier we had triumphed over the Axis powers. Less than a decade earlier we had led an international coalition which had checked the spread of communism on the Korean peninsula. We were optimistic, strong, and united. Significant problems lay under the surface, but we were proud of our country and we believed it meant something to be an American.

 When President Kennedy uttered these words, he captured a common sentiment that each citizen should attempt to enhance the greatness of our nation by contributing more to our common cause than he took out. This attitude was celebrated, noble and patriotic.

 Much has changed since then. Race riots and political turmoil in the 1960s. Watergate. Vietnam. The Iranian Hostage Crisis. 9/11. The voices we hear today, from the internet and the 24-hour news cycle, no longer extol the virtues of American society and values. Instead, it sells more copy, and yields more hits on a blog, to tear down America and belittle traditional values.

 We have lost our optimism. We are divided. Our faith in our government and our other institutions has been shaken. The idea of an individual laboring or sacrificing for the common good seems passé. We have become a nation of takers. No longer do we think about what we can do for our country. Rather, far too many of us are fixated on what we can get from the public dole. We are not the better for it.

 We cannot let this happen in the church. It is too precious. Christ died a horrific death on a Roman cross to wash away our sins, to make brothers of Jew and Gentile, and to launch His church. The Bible describes the church as the bride of Christ and, like a bride, we must keep ourselves pure and holy for Him.

 We cannot lose our faith in the church. We cannot let ourselves become divided by bickering over trivial issues. We cannot lose our optimism.

 I am not blind. The church has serious problems. We are flawed people and we have come together to make a flawed institution. We often fail to live up to Christ's example. Too many people focus on the church's flaws and fall away from organized religion. I believe in many cases what they are actually doing is fleeing accountability and responsibility.

 But we cannot do that; we cannot run for the doors at the first sign of trouble. It is our job to make the church better by our efforts, not to withdraw from the process if something happens that we do not like.

 To make the church better each of us must display the volunteerism and self-sacrifice President Kennedy encouraged. Do not ask what the church can do for you. Instead, ask what you can do for the church. Be proactive. Find ways to serve. Sitting on a pew is not enough. Make the church better by your efforts.

 Christ died to launch His church. Serve and honor Him by identifying what you can do for His church, and doing it.

**THANKSGIVING**

 We live in a settled, civilized nation, but it was not always so. Try to imagine what it must have been like for the Pilgrims. They set off with limited supplies in small, cramped, wooden ships. They faced a harrowing and dangerous journey, across the forbidding Atlantic Ocean, at the mercy of wind and waves. All they had was what they could bring with them.

 Some died in the crossing. Those who survived faced a very uncertain future in a harsh and alien land filled with terrible dangers. Hostile indians. Savage beasts. Bitter conditions with only the shelters they could build with back-breaking labor and the tools they had brought. The survival of the colony was far from certain. The only thing that was certain was hardship and toil.

 At first, it was a daily struggle just to survive. Many died of disease, of exposure or hunger, or in conflicts with the indians. Even so, they persevered. They built a compound, sought friendlier relations with the natives, and planted crops. Until those first crops came in, though, the survival of the colony remained in significant doubt.

 By God's grace, the harvest was bountiful. They had food and would survive the winter. Moreover, by that time, they had established good relations with many of the local indians and they had fashioned sufficient shelters to face the coming snow on that cold New England shore. Daily survival was no longer such a struggle. After all the terrors, hardship, and uncertainty, they had won through and achieved a measure of security. Indeed, they had great cause for thanksgiving and their harvest celebration is the basis for our Thanksgiving holiday today.

 We have even more reason to be thankful. We were separated from God and lost in our sins. We were without hope. Our ultimate and final destination was the grave.

 That all changed when the eternal Christ left paradise and was born as a man. He experienced life as a child and was obedient to His parents. He passed through adolescence and puberty and became a man. Through it all, he lived a perfect life without sin. Then, He began a ministry that would revolutionize the world. He taught a message of morality, repentance, and love. Finally, He laid down His life as a sacrifice and atonement for our sins. In so doing, He saved us all.

 Through courage, hard work, a good harvest, and friendly indians, the Pilgrim colony was saved from physical death and destruction, and they were thankful. Christ saved us from more than physical death. He saved us from spiritual death. Even more, He brought us forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life in paradise with God. That is so much more for which we should be thankful.

 This morning, let us observe our own Thanksgiving celebration as we partake of the Lord's Supper to commemorate how Christ saved us.

**THE S.E.P. FIELD**

 I am a great fan of Douglas Adams' farcical science fiction series that begins with the book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.* The storyline in these books is very silly and is really not the point. Rather, what is special about these books are the outlandish scenes, the entertaining dialogue, and the intriguing images. This morning, I want to share with you one of my favorite images from the books--the S.E.P. Field.

 S.E.P. stands for "somebody else's problem." An S.E.P. Field is a hypothetical field that covers a problem or irritant that is arguably not your direct responsibility, and for which you certainly do not wish to take responsibility. If something is covered by an S.E.P. Field it is actually invisible to you because your eyes just gloss over it and it does not register.

 I can tell you that I have passed by many a sink where the dirty dishes that were piled up were covered by an S.E.P. Field and I just did not see them. For my boys, I believe that the clutter in their room is cloaked by a semi-permanent S.E.P. Field. I often apply this idea to any thorny problem that I do not want to address or think about right now. I just say it is covered by an S.E.P. Field and turn my attention to easier, more immediate problems I can solve, or I go back to watching the *Rockets* game.

 There is only one man who could legitimately claim that sin was somebody else's problem. That man was Jesus Christ. He and He alone lived a sinless life. Sin was, in fact, not His problem because He committed no sins.

 That is not something that any of rest of us can boast. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We all stand convicted before God and deserve eternal punishment. We cannot save ourselves by adherence to the law because none of us can follow the law. Without Christ we are without hope.

 Christ could have justly considered other men's sins to be somebody else's problem. He could have covered them with an S.E.P. Field and have left man to suffer his deserved fate. Indeed, that must have been more and more tempting with every stroke of the lash and as He was nailed to the cross.

 Fortunately for us, Christ did not look away from the sins of other men. Instead, He took on responsibility for the sins of the world by His sacrifice on the cross and by so doing He brought atonement. Through Christ's death, burial, and resurrection our sins have been washed away and we have the promise of eternal life in heaven.

 Christ could have cloaked the sins of other men--our sins--in an S.E.P. Field and abandoned man to his fate. As we partake of the Lord's Supper this morning, let us be thankful that He did not.

**THE JOURNEY OF THE MAGI**

 *The* *Journey of the Magi* is a poem by T.S. Eliot about the wise men in the Bible who see the star and travel from the East to see the baby Jesus. The narrative is from one of the wise men recounting the journey he had made long ago. Most of the poem is devoted to the rigors of the journey. These men put together a caravan, leave their comfortable homes, and set off on a trek that would take months to reach Judea. The weather is horrid because they are travelling at the wrong time of year. The cities and towns along the way are hostile and unfriendly. Innkeepers and merchants try to cheat them. The camels are sore-footed and difficult. And the servants are exasperated. They do not understand why they are out there trudging along in the dead of winter.

 Almost nothing is said in the poem about the actual meeting with Mary and the baby Jesus, except to say that it is satisfactory.

 What is meaningful about the poem, though, is what happens after the wise men return from the journey. Remember, the wise men appear to have been the only ones to whom the significance of the star had been revealed. No one else in the East seems to have been let in on the secret. The wise men make this journey and see the truth; the hope of the world personified in this writhing infant. They are forever changed.

 But then they return home and look around and everything is different to them. What was important and significant to them before is suddenly meaningless. The pagan temples and rites. The bustle and chatter in the marketplace. Squabbles about politics and society. None of their neighbors can possibly understand and Christ won't even begin his ministry for another three decades. In short, they are home, but they must resign themselves to living out the remainder of their lives among people who are now alien to them and who are clutching false gods and prattling on about inconsequential things.

 The narrator then muses about whether they were led all that way to Judea for a birth or a death. Certainly there was a birth -- Jesus was physically born. But there was also a death; a spiritual death. What had died was their old lives, the people they were before the journey. They are completely changed men and now they are completely out of place and unhappy back in their homeland; so much so that the narrator begins looking forward to the release of his physical death.

 We are about to partake of the emblems that commemorate Christ's physical death, not his physical birth. But, Christ's physical death, too, occasioned a spiritual birth. Christ physically died on the cross. But by His sacrifice, His church was spiritually born. By His sacrifice, Jesus washed away our sins and gave birth to our hope of life eternal.

 Moreover, when we are baptized into Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, there is both death and birth. Our old lives of sin spiritually die and are buried and we are resurrected and born again as new creatures sanctified by Christ's blood. And, just like the magi, everything should be changed for us.

 We should see with new eyes and what was important and meaningful to us before may no longer seem as significant. As changed people, we may no longer be comfortable with the society around us that does not understand Christ and worships at the altars of vanity and materialism. But take heart, our time here among an alien people is short and when we eventually face physical death our ticket to Heaven has already been purchased by Christ via His blood sacrifice on the cross.

**LINCOLN'S LETTER TO MRS. BIXBY**

 In November of 1864, President Abraham Lincoln hand-wrote the following letter to a Massachusetts mother named Lydia Bixby:

Dear Madam,

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

A. Lincoln

 This is one of the most beautiful letters ever written. The writing is exquisite. The tone and sentiment are perfect. It is truly a work of art.

 What I love about this letter, though, is not the beauty of its composition. What truly touches me is the simple fact that President Lincoln felt impelled to write it.

 President Lincoln had the weight of the world on his shoulders. By late 1864, he had presided over more than three years of bloody civil war. Hundreds of thousands lay dead or were maimed. During those years of war he had struggled through vicious political infighting, disappointing generals, and an unrelenting and unfriendly media. His son Willie had died two years earlier from typhus and his wife Mary Todd never really recovered from that trauma. And the demands on him to maintain the government and preserve the union were tremendous.

 Despite his personal struggles, and the myriad weighty matters pressing down on him, President Lincoln was touched by the terrible grief of this one, obscure mother. He stopped and wrote this letter to commiserate with her in her grief, even though there was no political advantage in doing so. That he did so says much about the heart of the rail-splitter president.

 There was a great gulf between Abraham Lincoln, the president of the nation, and Mrs. Bixby, a common citizen. President Lincoln bridged that gulf when he wrote his compassionate letter and showed his concern for her as an individual. There is an even a greater gulf between Jesus Christ, the incarnate deity, and us, common sinners. Jesus bridged that gulf by His sacrifice on the cross which showed His concern for each of us as individuals.

 As part of the Godhead, Christ is the author and creator of the universe and His concerns are exalted and cosmic. We were merely a rebellious and disappointing part of the creation. Even so, Christ showed His love for us when he left Heaven, experienced life as a man, and then sacrificed that life as an atonement for our sins. What greater act of love could there be?

 I would like to think that, even in her grief, Mrs. Bixby appreciated the expression of concern from the President. This morning, as we partake of the emblems of Christ's great sacrifice, I hope that we are all infinitely more appreciative of the concern Christ displayed for all of us on the cross.

**STANDING IN THE GAP**

 There is a Biblical image I have always loved from the 22nd chapter of Ezekiel.

 I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one.

This was from a time when it was necessary to build walls around cities to protect the people from external threats. A gap in the wall was a weak spot where enemies could come in and a man who would stand in the gap was one who was brave enough to stand in the path of the enemy to protect those behind him.

 In the book of Nehemiah, there was great opposition to rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. The intrepid workers had to hold a trowel in one hand, and a sword in the other, until they could close all the gaps in the wall.

 Anyway, we no longer live in a society where we build physical walls around cities, but this image still has great force. I see it as something of a generalized metaphor for anyone who uses their strength and courage to shield another from harm. We may no longer face, on a regular basis, roving bands of armed marauders, but there are still many dangers out there, both physical and spiritual.

 As a father, I feel a great responsibility to stand in the gap between a harsh world and my children so as to protect them until they are ready to stand on their own. As an elder, I feel a responsibility to stand in the gap to protect this church from harm. I also recognize, though, that there are times, and areas, where I am weak and susceptible to temptation and I need someone to use their strength to shield and protect me. In the end, we should all feel a responsibility for each other.

 Jesus Christ modeled this behavior by His sacrifice on the cross. In 1 Peter 5 we are told that "your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Indeed, sin would overtake and devour all of us except that Christ is standing in the gap.

 Christ's action in taking up His post in the gap cost Him dearly. He was mocked, beaten, whipped, and then crucified. But, despite it all, He stayed in the gap to shield us from danger. Moreover, by overcoming death and rising up again, Christ remains in the gap today protecting us from harm.

 As we partake of the Lord's Supper this morning, let us give thanks to Jesus for standing in the gap for us.

**FATHER, FORGIVE THEM**

 As Jesus hung on the cross, He looked down at the hostile crowd. The people who had so recently hailed His name as He rode into the city in triumph were looking on with approval at his crucifixion. The rulers and leaders of the people were sneering and saying "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." They were dividing up His clothes and casting lots for them and the soldiers offered him only vinegar to drink. Even so, Jesus spoke out in compassion -- "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."

 I have often marveled at this display of love and concern. Jesus had been betrayed by one of His own apostles. He had been deserted by all of the others. The crowds had turned on Him. He was mocked by the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers. And, He was in the midst of a fearful physical ordeal. Within the last few hours, He had been whipped near to death and then forced to carry a very heavy cross until he collapsed under its weight. He was nailed to the cross and then lifted into place. Despite this, and in the midst of His pain and suffering, He showed care and compassion for the very people who were tormenting Him. Christ's plea to God on their behalf uttered in the throes of His distress demonstrates His great love.

 But, this morning, I want to focus on the last portion of Jesus' utterance -- "for they know not what they are doing." That is probably, in large part, true. The crowds likely believed that Christ's arrest and fall from glory proved that He was, in fact, not the Christ, but instead a heretic. The Jewish leaders probably told themselves that they had silenced a dangerous man who was leading the people astray and stirring up trouble that might have led to bloody reprisals by the Romans. The Romans likely believed that they were pacifying the locals and preventing further unrest. Few, if any, of those standing at the foot of the cross believed that Christ was the Son of God, the Chosen One of Israel. Most probably believed that their actions were, at the very least, expedient, and perhaps even righteous. For most, it could be legitimately said that they acted out of ignorance.

 When I consider my own sins, I do not have any such excuse. I have faithfully attended church all my life. I have a fair working knowledge of the Bible. I believe in God and have a reasonable understanding of what is right and what is wrong. My sins are not generally the product of ignorance. Rather, my sins are the product of my weakness, or outright defiance. When I sin I cannot legitimately claim that I did not know what I was doing. Honestly, that is probably true for all of us here today.

 Perhaps you feel that those who were involved in the crucifixion of Christ were the worst of all possible sinners. I am not so sure. Such thinking may be too simplistic.

 The good news, though, is that the forgiveness Christ purchased for us by His blood sacrifice on the cross is enough for all our sins. It can cover our sins of ignorance, of weakness, and even of willfulness, if we will accept Christ into our lives. We are all sinners. But, however great our sins, Christ's great redemptive work on the cross, which cost Him so dearly, can still cleanse us. Let us praise Jesus this morning as we partake of the emblems of His great sacrifice.

**SONNET XXIX**

 Shakespeare's Sonnet XXIX describes a man who is at his lowest point. He is "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes..." He feels outcast and hopeless. He curses his fate and is jealous of his neighbors believing them to be richer in hope, in friends, in appearance, and in skills. Nothing can make him content, until he thinks about the woman he loves. The poem concludes as follows:

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

 I am not here to quote sappy love poetry, but I believe there is a parallel here. There may be times when all of us are in distress and at a low ebb. Hope is hard to find and it seems as though the world is against us. We begin to despise ourselves and we are jealous of our neighbors who *seem* to be doing so much better.

 At those times, as Christians, we should turn our thoughts to God. We should remember that He loves us so much that He sent His only son into this world and allowed Him to be sacrificed on a Roman cross as an atonement for our sins. God did this even though we were unworthy. Because of Christ's great sacrifice, we have the promise of eternal life in heaven. Remembering God's sweet love, and our promise of reward, should make our spirits soar and emphasize that we are fortunate and special.

 Whatever the difficulties of the moment, we are blessed and loved by God. We should not seek to change our state with our non-Christian neighbors, regardless of how well it appears they are doing, because with God's love we are wealthy indeed. There is no reason for us to be envious.

 Life is a roller coaster and our fortunes, emotions, and immediate circumstances are ever-changing. God's love is eternal. So, whenever life gets you down, and you hit a low point, cling to God's love, demonstrated by Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and take heart.

**ON HIS BLINDNESS**

 John Milton was a towering figure in his day. He was highly-educated, well-traveled, and a greatly-respected author. He spoke six or seven languages and served as an important minister in the British government. But he was struck blind in his early 40's. This traumatic event had a transformative impact on his attitudes and thinking, and his understanding of God.

 This transformation is probably described best in one of his most famous poems entitled *On His Blindness*. At the beginning of the poem, the focus is on Milton himself. He thinks his blindness is unfair and a tragic waste. He sees himself as an important figure with real talent. He believes that he can use this talent to do great things for God. But, he thinks--how can I do all of these great things for God when I am blind? Surely God must have made a mistake.

 Then the poem transitions to focus more on God. Milton thinks -- how is it that God will judge his efforts? Will God truly exact day labor from him, light denied?

 Finally, this leads Milton to think about what it is that God really needs and wants. His conclusion forms the end of the poem, which is as follows:

But patience to prevent

that murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need

Either man's work or his own gifts.

Who best Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best.

His state Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,

And post o'er land and ocean without rest;

They also serve who only stand and wait.

I believe that last word -- "wait" -- is not a reference to time, but rather is like a waiter who waits on a customer. In other words, one who willingly stands ready.

 The poem chronicles Milton's spiritual growth. Prior to his infirmity, Milton was a prideful man who believed he had a lot to bring to the table. He measured his worth to God by what he could do for God. Figuratively, Milton saw his worth as a matter of the hands -- what he could do -- and what he could accomplish for God was limited by his blindness.

 After his blindness, Milton came to realize that God really did not need his talents and industry to accomplish His grand purposes. God's arm is not too short. God's state is vast and He has no lack of minions to accomplish His bidding. Nothing Milton could do with his hands could not be done by someone else.

 In the end, Milton realized that his worth to God is not a matter of the hands, but rather a matter of the heart. It is a matter of attitude. God wants us to be willing to bear His mild yoke, and to have the attitude of a servant who stands ready. The people with that attitude are the ones who serve God best and that was something unaffected by Milton's blindness.

 When you consider your relationship with God and your salvation, you may be prone to rate your own role too highly. You may make biased comparisons of your relative righteousness vis-a-vis your neighbors and come to the conclusion that, on the whole, you are pretty good person. Or, you might think about what you put in the collection plate, or some work or ministry you are proud of, and conclude that you do a lot and God is lucky to have you. Yes sir, you may convince yourself that you are doing plenty to earn your ticket to Heaven.

 Well, I am here to tell you that such thinking is grounded in the hands, and not the heart, and is misguided. I hope that it does not take you going blind to realize it. We owe our salvation to Christ and His sacrifice on the cross of Calvary, not our own efforts. We cannot work our way to Heaven. By His great sacrifice, Christ brought forgiveness of sins, victory over death, and the promise of eternal life. All we must do is respond in love and accept Christ as our savior.

 In short, what God really wants from us is our hearts, not our hands. He wants our love and devotion, not our labors or our talents. God can accomplish what He needs to accomplish without us. So, do not place unwarranted value or pride in what you have done, or may do, for God.

 Please don't misunderstand me. I applaud you for all of your works of service and ministry. They are the product and evidence of your love for God and your gratitude for the grace extended to you. Indeed, a true love for God finds expression in acts of service. The two should go hand-in-hand and James is here to tell us that it is difficult to credit a man's faith and love for God when he has no works. Make no mistake, though. We are saved by God's grace, and our loving acceptance of that grace, and not because of our own efforts or merits.

**THE GIFT OF THE MAGI**

 William Sydney Porter, known by his pen name O. Henry, wrote a touching short story entitled *The Gift of the Magi* about Jim and Della, a poor, struggling couple tightening their belts to make ends meet. It is the day before Christmas and each wants to do something special for the other, but their bills are piling up, and there is just no money.

 Della has long, beautiful hair that is the envy of all. Her hair is her pride and joy, and it marks who she is because it extends down almost to her knees.

 Jim's prize possession is a gold pocket watch. It has been handed down from his grandfather, to his father, to Jim and it is exceedingly dear to him.

 Wishing to honor Jim, Della goes to a wig shop, cuts her hair and sells it to purchase a beautiful gold chain to hold and display Jim's watch. Seeking to honor Della, Jim sells his pocket watch and purchases a beautiful set of combs designed to hold up and display Della's hair. All is revealed on Christmas morning and the couple sigh, then smile, and then go on with their lives.

 The author muses that the magi from the east invented the practice of giving Christmas gifts, and, being wise, they no doubt made wise choices in their gifts. The author allows that some might consider Jim and Della to have been foolish in their choice of gifts, but he disagrees. He believes that of all who give and receive gifts, Jim and Della are the wisest. They are the magi.

 I agree with the author. Jim and Della each received from the other the greatest gift that can be given. It was not the physical objects themselves. Those were immaterial. Rather, it was the love, devotion, and self-sacrifice that the gifts represented.

 That is the same spirit of love, devotion, and self-sacrifice that we should offer to our savior. Jesus Christ left paradise and was born of a woman into this world. He lived a sinless life as an example to us all. He taught a message of love and repentance. Finally, He sacrificed His life in a brutal ordeal that ended on a Roman cross. He did this not because He personally bore any sin or guilt. Rather, He did this as expiation for our sins. Because Christ did this, and because He rose again breaking open the gates of death, Christ delivered to His followers -- to us -- forgiveness of sins and the promise of life eternal.

 Christ did all of that for us and we owe Him a response. A proper response is not just some tangible gift -- a contribution or some physical acts of service. Those are good things, but they are like the watch chain or the combs. They are not really the point. Rather, the proper way for us to respond to Christ is with the same love, devotion, and self-sacrifice that Jim and Della showed to each other. That is the greatest gift of all and that is what Christ deserves.

**ISAAC AND ISHMAEL**

 God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. But, Abraham and Sarah were old, and the years kept rolling by, and they had no children. So Sarah decided to take action. She encouraged Abraham to sleep with her servant Hagar, who conceived and gave birth to a son named Ishmael. When Ishmael was born this immediately caused Sarah to be angry and jealous and to despise Hagar and Ishmael. Finally, some 13 years later when Sarah did finally give birth to Isaac, she put her foot down. Sarah vowed that that slave woman's son would never share in the inheritance with her son Isaac and she demanded that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael from the camp.

 Abraham was saddened by this, but even so, he did as Sarah asked. Not wanting to see Hagar and Ishmael die, Abraham gave them a supply of bread and some water and sent them away. Hagar and Ishmael entered the wilderness and quickly exhausted their supplies. Near death, Hagar cried out to God and God heard her. God led her to water, provided for her and her son, and promised that He would make a great nation from Ishmael.

 As you can probably guess, this shared history led to significant enmity between the houses of Isaac and Ishmael. Moreover, this enmity has been long-lasting. Isaac is the father of the Jews, and, although there is some debate here, tradition has it that Ishmael is the father of the Arabs. Their conflict rages to this day.

 The Bible does add one additional detail to this story that is worth mentioning, though. When Abraham died, Isaac and Ishmael came together to bury their father. Whatever their differences, they were able to set them aside to honor their common progenitor. It is that spirit of unity I want to focus on today.

 The Christian world is significantly fractured. There are Eastern variants of Christianity with which most of us have very limited familiarity. There are Coptic Christians and Nestorian Christians and the church immediately to our west is a Greek Orthodox church tracing its lineage back to the Byzantine Empire. There are also many divisions within the Western variants of Christianity. There are Roman Catholics and a bewildering array of protestant groups.

 In the two thousand years since Christ's death, people who claim to be Christians have had sharp disagreements on matters of dogma and tradition. Sometimes, these disagreements have led to separation, estrangement, and hard feelings between Christian groups. All too often, however, such disagreements have led to violence and death as one group of Christians sought to coerce another group to accept their tradition or interpretation of scripture or stamp out what they considered to be heresy. I find that to be very sad.

 This morning, I would like for us to remember that we all have common roots -- the cross of Calvary. The vast majority of Christians believe that Christ lived a life without sin; that He sacrificed that life as an atonement for our sins; that He suffered a brutal ordeal culminating in His death on a cross; that He rose again breaking open the gates of death; and that by so doing He brought forgiveness and the promise of eternal life to His followers. As Christians, that is our common heritage.

 I don't mean to gloss over two thousand years of history and tradition. Nor am I willing to sacrifice my good-faith conclusions drawn from the scriptures. But, this morning, as we partake of the Lord's Supper, I would like to call us to a spirit of unity among Christians. We are all children of the cross. We may have different worship styles. We may have organized ourselves differently. And we may have reached different conclusions as to the meaning of certain scriptures. But we all trace back to the cross. Christ cannot be happy with the squabbling among His children. And so I urge you to let go of any bitterness and reach out in love and good feeling to all those who call on the name of Christ and seek, in good faith, to serve Him. Focus on what we have in common and find ways to minimize our differences so that we can limit divisions and work in peace, harmony, and cooperation with all those who trace their heritage back to the cross and the death of our common progenitor -- Christ.

**CASABIANCA**

 *Casabianca* is a poem about a 13-year-old boy who is the son of the Admiral of the Orient. During the battle of the Nile, the admiral's ship is set ablaze and the crew takes flight. The boy does not flee. His father had told him to stay at his post, and he will not desert his post until his father gives him leave. Unfortunately, the admiral lays dead below decks.

 As the poem unfolds, the flames inch closer to the boy. He cries out -- Father, is my task yet done, may I yet be gone? There is no one to answer, and the flames come closer. He cries out again -- Father, must I stay? Again, there is no answer, but the boy will not leave his post. There is a loud boom, and the poem concludes as follows:

The boy--Oh! where was he?

--Ask of the winds, that far around

With fragments strewed the sea;--

With shroud, and mast, and pennon fair,

That well had borne their part,-

­But the noblest thing that perished there

Was that young, faithful heart.

 In the garden, Christ asked a similar question. Christ knew what was coming. In the next few hours, He would be arrested. He would be mocked and beaten. He would be lashed. Finally, He would be crucified. Christ was in such distress that His sweat was like drops of blood falling on the ground. And in anguish He asked His father -- can this cup be passed from me? In the end, Christ was faithful and said -- let thy will, not mine, be done.

 Christ was faithful. At a fearful cost, He stayed at His post and played the part His Father had set for Him. Because of that, we have forgiveness of sins. We have hope. We have the promise of eternal life. Let us praise Christ this morning for His faithfulness.

 And, as you partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine, I would like you to ask yourself -- how faithful are you? You have been redeemed at great cost. You are forgiven. You are saved. But that does not mean that you will not face hardships and trials in this world. You will almost certainly be tested by adversity. Will you stay at your post?

**LIFTED UP**

 In Numbers 21, the Israelites wandering in the desert had once again become dissatisfied and were grumbling against God. "Why have You brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" they cried. Frustrated, God sent fiery serpents among the people who bit many, and they died. Then God told Moses to make a fiery serpent and set it up on a pole. Whenever a person was bitten, they could look up at the serpent on the pole, and they would live.

 The symbolism was clear. The people could not save themselves. They had to stop looking down at the mud, or staring at each other, and look up to see God's provision for them. Only by focusing on God and entreating Him for His saving power could they be delivered.

 In the same way, Christ was lifted up -- on the cross. Moreover, the symbolism is the same. We cannot find redemption from our sins within ourselves. We cannot provide it, produce it, or procure it. To be saved, we must stop looking in the mirror, or at our fellow men. Instead, we must focus our gaze upward -- to the cross -- and accept the provision God has made for us. For it is through the sacrifice of His son Jesus Christ on the Cross that God extends grace and forgiveness. If we trust in God's love, and cling to the cross, then we will not perish, but rather live eternally.

 We are gathered here to partake of the Lord's Supper. This is the time we set aside each week to rise above our daily cares and concerns, to stop staring at the ground, and focus our gaze upward to the cross. So look up and see how God, in His infinite love, has provided for us.

**THE PACIFIC**

 Lou Ann and I recently watched a production called *The Pacific* that followed the stories of a number of U.S. Marines in the Second World War. It chronicled their experiences as they fought at Guadalcanal, Pelelieu, Okinawa, and Iwo Jima. One of the things that struck me about this show, however, was how these men came to join the Marine Corps.

 After the attack on Pearl Harbor, these men volunteered in a patriotic fervor. Freedom was under attack. Our way of life was under attack. And these men wanted to do their part to defend our liberties and restore order in a world gone mad.

 One young man initially had difficulty enlisting because he had a heart murmur. He was crushed. He watched as his friends donned uniforms and went off to fight while he stayed behind. I believe that he feared the day, many years off, when people would ask him -- what did you do in the war? When that day came, he wanted an answer he could be proud of, and not an excuse.

 Christ came into this troubled world and lived a life as a man. He set an example for all of us and preached a revolutionary morality. Then He sacrificed His life on a Roman cross as an atonement for our sins. We are gathered this morning to partake of the emblems of that sacrifice. The bread symbolizes Christ's broken body and the fruit of the vine symbolizes His shed blood. We observe this ceremony when we come together to remember Christ's great sacrifice and its significance.

 We are in a war with the forces of sin. Through His tremendous sacrifice, Christ guaranteed the outcome of this war and the ultimate reward for His soldiers who fight it. But the war rages on. I look out at our world today and it seems as though God's church is under attack. Our way of life is threatened. Souls are at stake.

 We should be like those young men after the Pearl Harbor attack--seeking to enlist so that we can do our part. We may all have different parts. Some may teach. Some may evangelize. Some may care for the body. Large numbers of us will be participating in our VBS program that starts today. There is work for all and we each have a responsibility. I put it to each one of you -- get up off the pew, find the work that you can do, and do your part. Because one day you will stand before the seat of judgment and you will be asked -- what did you do in the war?

**KILL ALL THE LAWYERS**

 As an attorney, I often hear quoted in jest, or at least I hope it is in jest, the line from William Shakespeare's play *Henry VI* that reads as follows:

 "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

When people quote this phrase today, they are generally suggesting or complaining that the legal system is bloated and complex, a drag on society, and that lawyers grow fat off the misery of others. But that is not the import of that phrase from Shakespeare's play.

 In the play, the phrase is uttered by a violent henchman to Jack Cade, a pretender to the throne who is contemplating a revolution. The proposal to kill the lawyers is made because they want to eliminate all those who might stand in the way of the revolution. The lawyers they want to kill are seen as protectors of the society they are trying to upset, not shady characters who were undermining society.

 Today, the more apt quote might be "let's kill all the Christians."

 As Christians, we are children of the cross. Christ purchased us through the sacrifice of His blood. He redeemed us from our sins and secured for us the promise of eternal life in Heaven. We are here this morning to commemorate Christ and His great work of salvation. In gratitude, we should live our lives for the glory of God and according to the precepts of scripture.

 There was a time when America might have accurately been described as a Christian nation. The founding fathers were careful to make the freedom of religion, and the free exercise of religion, basic rights and Christianity was the unchallenged religion of the nation at the time. The 10 commandments were the inspiration for much of our legal system, and societal values and mores were drawn from Christian principles.

 In more recent times, however, large numbers of people have found traditional values too stifling. They reject conventional morality. They want to live for themselves, and not for God, and they seek ever more imaginative ways to satisfy their appetites. They want to experiment with new models for the family, new forms of sexuality, and all manner of stimulants. They reject anything which might be a curb on any excess in which they might indulge. The word on their lips is "tolerance," which is code for don't try to stop me, and most of all, don't try to make me feel guilty.

 Indeed, there are those who wish to radically change our society. They may see Christians as guardians of traditional values who must be marginalized, or silenced, or worse. So, at least figuratively, there may be some who want to "kill all the Christians."

 This attitude, which seems to be growing in our society today, may lead to persecution of Christians. However, we must cling to the cross, come what may. Christ never promised us ease and comfort. In fact, Christ Himself told us He came not to bring peace, but the sword. We must be prepared, for Christ's sake, to bear our own cross, whatever form that may take, and remain faithful. But take heart, no persecution that our enemies might visit upon us could compare with the comfort, joy, and fulfillment that comes from a relationship with Christ, or with our ultimate reward in Heaven above.

**YELLOWSTONE**

 I recently went on a family vacation to Yellowstone National Park. Yellowstone is a beautiful place with majestic mountains, forests, rivers and waterfalls, and abundant wildlife. But that is all on the surface. And those are all things that can be seen in many other places. What is truly unique about Yellowstone is what is happening beneath the surface and how that affects the landscape.

 I have always been aware that Yellowstone is considered a super-volcano. It is a geologically-active region where the earth's crust is thin and there is a significant pool of hot magma close to the surface. Even so, I never truly appreciated the reality of it before I went there.

 It seemed like everywhere I looked there was steam rising from the ground. In some places, there were geysers where pressure would build up until huge spouts of boiling water would be ejected skyward. In other places, there were steaming pools fed by hot jets of water from below that would make the pool boil and roil. In some cases, the water was subterranean and never reached the surface. Even so, I could hear it gurgle and boil and steam shot up through fissures in the ground. In other cases, there were big mud pots where it looked like the mud itself was alive as it burbled and gave off steam. The landscape was riddled with these soft spots where the heat below found a way to vent to the surface. I have certainly never seen anywhere else like it.

 Overall, I was left with the impression of a seething cauldron below the ground pushing to get out and being imperfectly restrained by a thin covering that cracked and leaked. The heart of Yellowstone is the fire below the ground, and not the thin skin of the mantle.

 That should be an apt description for a Christian as well. What is significant about a Christian is what dwells inside him or her, and not his or her appearance, or skin.

 In Corinthians, Paul says: "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you." At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came on the Apostles with power. The Bible describes a great rushing of wind and tongues of flame appearing above the heads of the Apostles. Then these ordinary men arose and the words of God flowed through them, in languages they did not speak, to the assembled masses.

 Christ sacrificed His life on a Roman cross to redeem us from our sins. In so doing, he paved the way for the Spirit of God to come into the world and indwell the hearts of His followers. God's spirit should be the boiling cauldron in the heart of every Christian. It should shine through us so as to be a light to the world.

 Our lives are greatly enriched and made meaningful because the Spirit of God dwells within us. This morning, we are gathered to commemorate the sacrifice made by our Lord Jesus Christ that made it all possible.

**THE DAY IS DONE**

 There is a poem I love by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called *The Day is Done.* It talks about a man walking along at dusk who begins to be overcome by melancholy. He describes it as

 A feeling of sadness and longing,

 That is not akin to pain,

 And resembles sorrow only

 As the mist resembles the rain.

 The man asks his companion to read to him a poem. He does not want to hear some complicated, cumbersome poem from a grand master poet. Such poems, he says, suggest

 Life's endless toil and endeavor;

 And tonight I long for rest.

 Rather, the man asks that his companion read a simple poem from some humbler poet, whose songs gushed from the melodies in his heart. What he wants is a poem

 That shall soothe this restless feeling,

 And banish the thoughts of the day.

The poem concludes as follows:

Then read from the treasured volume

The poem of thy choice,

And lend to the rhyme of the poet

The beauty of thy voice.

And the night shall be filled with music,

And the cares, that infest the day,

Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,

And as silently steal away.

 I appreciate the image of someone being able to train his mind on a thought or an idea that will carry him away from his immediate circumstances, ease his cares, and fill him up with something joyous, such as music.

 We are gathered here to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It is my hope that participating in this ceremony has a similar effect on you.

 It may be that you are feeling down. Perhaps you are struggling at work. Maybe you have been squabbling with a spouse, or children, or friends. Your allergies might be bothering you or you may be suffering from some other health issue. We all have cares and concerns.

 But when you approach the Lord's Supper each week it should remind you that God loves you so much that He sacrificed His own son to save you. Christ took the punishment that should have been yours and in so doing He atoned for your sins. You are loved. You are forgiven. You are saved. You have the promise of eternal life. Praise God!!

 Whatever may be getting you down, as we participate in the communion service this morning, let it lift your spirits, banish your cares, and fill your heart with joy.

**AN EXASPERATED GRANT**

 When Ulysses S. Grant was called from his command in the west and placed in overall command of the Army of the Potomac, he inherited a group of junior commanders who had long experience in fighting against the Army of Northern Virginia and its commander, Robert E. Lee. Despite significantly greater numbers, and vastly superior supply, they had suffered humiliating defeats at Lee's hands at places such as Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. Moreover, while they had turned Lee back at Gettysburg, Lee had escaped back into Confederate territory with his army battered, but still intact.

 General Lee had a myth or an aura about him that infected the hearts and minds of these junior commanders. This became evident when they spoke to their new commander, General Grant, about what they thought General Lee might do. Eventually, General Grant became exasperated and blurted out a retort that has become famous:

 Oh, I am heartily tired of hearing about what Lee is going to do. Some of you always seem to think he is suddenly going to turn a double somersault, and land in our rear and on both of our flanks at the same time. Go back to your command, and try to think what are we going to do ourselves, instead of what Lee is going to do.

 Sometimes I fear that Christians today are too much like the junior commanders in the Army of the Potomac. We bellyache about how secular forces in our society are on the march and aggressively seeking to marginalize Christians and Christianity. We grouse about people saying "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas." We fixate on stories about legal fights to remove displays of the Ten Commandments from courthouses. We get worked up over gay marriage issues.

 Let's stop worrying so much about what the secularists in our society are going to do and start planning what we are going to do; what we should be doing.

 We have the good news! God loves us so much that He sent His son into this world to be a sacrifice for us. Christ died on a Roman cross to pay the debt for our sins. Because of that sacrifice, we have forgiveness. We have hope. We have the promise of eternal life. These are the words that all men need to hear. That should be our focus.

 So stop fixating on what secularists are going to do, and let's start making them nervous about what we are going to do. Let's get out there and share the gospel. Moreover, we need to reinforce the power of our words with the power of our example. We must live lives beyond reproach. We must show that being a child of God makes a difference in our lives, filling us with love and joy and hope. And we must show love, respect and compassion to all -- even those who oppose us.

 In the end, we will not change the world by clever legal maneuvering or shrill arguments. Rather, we will only change the world by the power of the gospel.

**THE SERPENT IN THE SANCTUARY**

 When I was in junior high, my family lived in Southern California -- or SoCal for the initiated. We attended the Conejo Valley Church of Christ. One Sunday morning, during worship service, a snake slithered up the center aisle of the sanctuary. It was just a common garden snake, and it was not very large. It certainly was not dangerous and one of the men picked it up and carried it outside. It was a minor event, but I have always been struck by the symbolism.

 Even in the sanctuary of God, surrounded by the saints, in the midst of worship, the serpent finds admittance. In my personal experience, I have ever found that ever to be true.

 Relatively speaking, our worship service is long, and I have the attention span of a goldfish. Despite the quality of our preaching, the heartfelt prayers, and the participatory singing, my mind tends to wander and I lose focus. I often feel hypocritical when I scold children for their inattention in worship. In truth, I have the same tendency. It is just that, over the years, I have grown better at hiding it.

 All too often, when I should be focused on the glory and the majesty of God, I tune out and begin to daydream. And when I daydream, my thoughts tend to run amok. When I should be praising God, I find myself fixating on inappropriate, and even sinful, thoughts. It is as though some serpent has found its way into the sanctuary and is actively trying to pull me back from the throne of God so that, even in the midst of a worship service, I will wallow in the mire of sin.

 It is probably the case that none of you suffer from the same problem. You are probably capable of unflagging concentration and focus. But if there is anyone else out there in the audience who is like me, I would like to call you back from whatever mindless revelries in which you may be mentally engaged. For we have reached the heart of our service.

 So let us all stop and remember

* Christ in the upper room as He washed His disciples' feet;
* Christ in the garden as He prayed that the cup pass from Him;
* Christ before the High Priest, and Herod, and Pilate as He was mocked and beaten;
* Christ as He suffered under the lash;
* Christ as He was made to carry His cross;
* Christ as He was nailed to the tree;
* Christ as He prayed "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do"; and
* Christ as He breathed His last and surrendered His spirit.

Indeed, it is a somber story of brutality and sacrifice. But the story does not end there. Let us also remember

* That Christ rose again;
* That the tomb was found empty;
* That Christ appeared again to His followers;
* That Christ rose on high; and
* That because of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, we have forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life.

Christ's victory over sin and death was a triumph. I0t is what makes us who are as Christians, and it has made all the difference. Even if your mind wanders during the rest of the service, make a special effort to focus on these things as we partake of the emblems that commemorate this wondrous event.

**TAKING SETH TO COLLEGE**

 Lou Ann and I recently took our oldest son, Seth, to Austin where he has begun his studies at the University of Texas. The night before we left, I could not help but feel melancholy. I kept thinking -- this is the last night when Seth will sleep under our roof as a child in our house. Certainly he will be back, but it will never be the same.

 I wandered around the house. Lou Ann was pregnant with Seth when we moved into the house. It is the only home he has ever known, and every nook and cranny bears memories of him. In my mind's eye, I could see him as a toddler climbing up the outside of the stair railing to bypass the gate we had installed; then he was a young boy swimming in the pool; and then he was a teenager camped out in his favorite wicker chair in the corner of the living room.

 As we drove off for Austin, those memories were bittersweet. I am happy for Seth. He is launching into an exciting new phase of his life. He is smart and hard-working, and his future looks very bright. And when I think back fondly on my college years, I know that this can be a very wonderful and special time of growth and discovery for Seth. This is a good thing, but as a parent, it is sad to see him go.

 God also watched His son, Jesus Christ, go. But Christ was not heading off to college and, thereafter, the hope of a rewarding career and a productive life. Instead, when God launched Christ into the world, He knew what awaited Him. Christ would face mounting opposition from the religious and political leaders of the Jews. Eventually, Christ would be betrayed. He would be arrested. His friends would desert Him. The fickle crowds would turn against Him. He would be mocked and beaten. He would be lashed. And then He would suffer the cruel death of crucifixion.

 It was difficult for me, as a parent, to watch Seth leave our house, even though I have the expectation that this will be a tremendous experience for him. I cannot even imagine how difficult it must have been for God to watch Christ leave Heaven knowing what awaited Him in this world.

 And yet, God was willing to let Him go, and Christ was willing to go. For us, that has made all the difference. Because Christ lived and preached, we have the example of a life lived without sin, a model of love, and the benefit of His revolutionary moral teaching. Because Christ died as an atonement for our sins, and then rose again defeating death, we have forgiveness of sins and the promise of life eternal. 1

 This morning, we are gathered to commemorate Christ's great sacrifice on the cross. The bread represents His broken body. The wine represents His shed blood. As we partake of these emblems, I would like you to focus on something just a bit different than usual. Instead of focusing on Christ Himself and His sacrifice, I would like you to think about God, the father, and how difficult it must have been for Him to let Christ go knowing how it would all end. And when you do so, marvel at the love God showed for men--His unworthy creation.

**LOU ANN'S GRANDMOTHER**

About two years ago, Lou Ann's grandmother passed away. She was 94 years old and had lived a full life. She was survived by two children, seven grandchildren, seventeen great grandchildren, and four great great grandchildren. She lived alone until about a year before her death, and even thereafter she was able to live in her own home with some help. Her final hospitalization was short, and she kept her faculties until the very end. Her passing was sad, but she was surrounded by family and her death was peaceful.

 This morning, we are gathered together to remember the passing of a man whose death was anything but peaceful. Jesus Christ died in His early thirties, and He left no progeny. Moreover, He suffered the violent and ignominious death of crucifixion.

 Prior to His death, Christ suffered tremendous indignities. He was betrayed by one of His closest associates. He was arrested on false charges. His friends deserted Him. He was mocked by Herod and his soldiers. He was scourged by the Roman authorities. The crowds, who had so recently hailed Him, turned against Him. He was made to carry His own cross to the place of His execution. Truly it was a messy death.

 So why are we here, 2,000 years later, focusing on the grisly events of that night? Because this was the culmination of God's plan to reconcile with His creation.

 After Adam and Eve bit into the apple, man was separated from God and his sins increased. In Old Testament times, God instituted a system where men could expiate their sins by making blood sacrifices of innocent animals. Symbolically, the animals took the punishment that they deserved. But these sacrifices were imperfect, they needed to be repeated again and again, and they could never suffice to bridge the gap between God and His creation and restore the fellowship that was broken in the fall of man.

 What was needed was a perfect sacrifice. Jesus Christ was that sacrifice. He was not a dumb animal -- a sheep or a goat. He was the son of God Himself. And yet, He volunteered to play the part of the innocent lamb. He would be the perfect sacrifice that would, once and for all, expiate the sins of man and provide a pathway for man to return to a direct communion with God.

 The process was difficult. Christ suffered greatly. But when His sacrifice was complete, Christ delivered forgiveness of sins to His followers -- to us. Christ delivered the promise of eternal life in direct communion with God in Heaven. We were lost, and, because of Christ and His sacrifice, we are now saved. That is why we remember Christ's messy death. And that is why, each week, we honor Christ and His sacrifice.

**ANNIVERSARIES**

 I remember one day I was having lunch with two attorneys from my office. I mentioned that my anniversary was fast approaching, and they asked me what I had planned. I told them that Lou Ann and I had never put much of an emphasis on anniversaries and birthdays, and that I really did not have anything special planned. Both men stressed how that was a big mistake. They went on and on about how I needed to purchase a large gift and plan some romantic dinner. They kept at it until I had heard enough and told them how much I appreciated marital advice from two divorced men.

 Well, Lou Ann and I recently celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary. That was at least enough of an occasion that I did get a card and buy some flowers and a Massage Envy gift certificate for Lou Ann. But I will never be confused for a romantic and I would bet that many of you, and possibly even Lou Ann, would chastise me for not making a bigger effort on anniversaries.

 It is not that I believe wedding anniversaries are unimportant. My marriage is one of the central events in my life. Every year, on the anniversary of that event, I do stop and give thanks for the great blessing it has been and for the love of a wonderful wife. I do take the occasion of each anniversary to recommit to my marriage. I am proud to have reached the plateau of 25 years, and I pray that God will grant us both health and commitment to reach 50 years.

 But when I took my marriage vows, I committed to being a good and faithful husband every day. I cannot make up for daily failures by making a big effort on an anniversary. And I often observe that those who feel the need to do something big and splashy on an anniversary may, indeed, be trying to make up for something. What is important, though, is the man I am on the other 364 days of the year, and not the man I am on the day of my anniversary.

 We are gathered here this morning to celebrate another anniversary of sorts. This is the anniversary of the triumph of our Lord Jesus Christ over sin and death by His sacrifice on the cross. That event was so important that we celebrate its anniversary 52 times a year and not just once a year. It is altogether fitting and proper that, each week, we stop and remember that great event, the suffering Christ endured, and the immense blessing it has been in our lives. Anniversaries are important and we should make our weekly observance of the Lord's Supper a periodic event when we renew and reconfirm our commitment to God.

 But what is more significant is who we are every other day of the week, and not who we are on Sunday morning. While our observance of this anniversary of Jesus Christ's crucifixion and subsequent triumph over death is important, it is not sufficient if it is merely one high point and does not reflect who we are every other day of the week. As you partake of the Lord's Supper this morning, resolve to be a faithful child of God every day, and not just on anniversaries.

**"REAL BAD!"**

 Way up high on the wall in the hallway to church building, near the stairwell, there is a button that, when pressed, activates a loud, shrill bell. One of Brad Hinrichs’ many duties is to press that button at the end of the class time to alert the teachers that the class period is coming to an end. Brad told me that one day, as he was pressing the button, he saw that he was being watched by young Christian Bird. Knowing Christian well, Brad asked him -- "You really want to press that button, don't you?" Christian's very forthright answer was -- "Real bad!"

 I, for one, appreciate Christian's drive and enthusiasm. Knowing his resolve, I fully expect that one day soon he is going to figure out a way to reach that button and satisfy this particular desire.

 We should all take a lesson from Christian. There are things we should all want to do "real bad." One of those things should be to follow the instructions and directions of our Lord Jesus Christ. Among the clearest of those directions in the scriptures is that we should observe what we have come to call the Lord's Supper.

 On the night He was betrayed, Jesus met with His apostles in the Upper Room. He took the bread and He broke it. He told His disciples that the bread represents His body that would shortly be broken on a Roman cross. Then He took the wine and told His disciples that it symbolizes His blood that would soon be shed. Finally, He told His followers that they should partake of these emblems, whenever they came together, in remembrance of Him and His sacrifice.

 This morning, we are gathered together in His name. In keeping with His instructions, we are about to partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine. We do this because He told us to do so. We do this to remember Christ and His great sacrifice. And we do this to further our appreciation of the significance of this act, and what it means to us. For all of these reasons, this is something we should want to do "real bad!"

**MICHAEL COLLINS**

 I would bet that all of you remember the name Neil Armstrong. He was the commander of the Apollo 11 lunar flight and the first man to set foot on the moon. We can probably all recite his famous line: "that's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." In addition, probably most of you remember the name Buzz Aldrin, who also landed on the moon alongside Neil Armstrong. But how many of you remember that there was a third member of the Apollo 11 mission. His name was Michael Collins.

 We tend not to remember Collins because he did not accompany the others to the lunar surface. Rather, he stayed on the command module orbiting the moon while Armstrong and Aldrin made their landing. His contribution to this historic mission may not have been as glamorous as the landing made by Armstrong and Aldrin, but his role was no less critical to the mission's success. He, too, is an American hero.

 As Christians, I believe we should aspire to be Michael Collins. We should strive to serve God diligently, effectively, and quietly. But we should not seek the praise or adulation of men for our service. In fact, seeking the praise of men for our efforts only gets in the way of our service. For if we are seeking to advance our own personal glory, we are not giving all glory to God, as we should.

 Indeed, all glory is owed to God and His son, Jesus Christ. The ceremony of the Lord's Supper, in which we are about to partake, is meant to honor Christ for His great sacrifice. This morning, as we partake of the bread, and as we partake of the fruit of the vine, let us give all honor and glory to Jesus Christ.

 Even though He bore no personal guilt, Jesus took responsibility for the sins of all men. He suffered a bitter ordeal culminating in His death on a cross. His blood sacrifice paid the debt for our sins. And then He rose again breaking open the gates of death and delivering to His followers -- to us -- the promise of eternal life in Heaven. Because of Christ's actions, we are forgiven, and we have hope.

 I hope that, in response to Christ's great sacrifice, you are called to a life of service. When you serve, you should offer your best efforts and seek to be effective. But all your efforts should be expended in an effort to advance God's glory, and God's mission, and not your own.

**THE PROCESS**

 Christians observe the Lord's Supper in many different ways. For instance, in Catholic churches, I understand that the parishioners file up to the front and the priest places a wafer on their tongue. When I conduct services over at the Belmont retirement home, many of them hold their hands out and together cupping them into a bowl for me to place the bread into their hands. I do not actually like the symbolism here because it suggests that a clergyman has some special authority to dispense religious benefits to the laity. But, this is what many of the folks at Belmont are used to, and I do not see it as an important issue.

 As for the fruit of the vine, many Christians use wine, and indeed that is what Christ Himself passed around in the Upper Room. We use grape juice. I suppose that is in deference to temperance advocates. Maybe we are overly sensitive here to the evils of fermentation. But again, I do not see this as a significant issue.

 Some Christians are dogmatic about the use of just one cup and everyone drinks from that same cup. Indeed, the Scriptures talk about how Christ took "the cup" and passed it around. And there is some symbolism of unity if we are all drinking from one cup. Most Christians, though, raise sanitary concerns and conclude that when Christ talked about the cup, he was talking about the contents of the cup, not the actual cup itself.

 I attended a service a few years ago at Bering Drive where I participated in their communion service. They had us all file up to the front where we were personally greeted by those serving communion. We broke bread from a loaf, dipped it into a big cup of wine, or maybe it was grape juice, and then ate the bread. I liked the ceremony. It was personal. It symbolized unity. It was an event. But it did take a long time.

 I believe we should all be quick to confess that our practice has nothing particular to recommend it except that it is functional, practical, and sanitary. We have specially-made trays, specially-made bread, and specially-made cups. We even have a special tool that makes the process of filling the cups easier and dispenses the right amount of liquid in each cup. The process is efficient. If we don't dilly-dally, we can complete the whole ceremony in just a few minutes and help ensure that we can beat the Baptists to the cafeteria after services. But this ceremony certainly looks nothing like what happened in the Upper Room with Jesus and His disciples and I confess that by industrializing the process, we run the risk of losing some of the ceremony's meaning.

 Anyway, churches have split over the manner of partaking of communion. I believe that is very sad. I see all of these practices as really just matters of form. What is important is not the forms, but rather the significance we place on the ceremony. Whatever the actual, physical motions we go through, do we treat the ceremony as important and imbue it with meaning through our words and through our reverence? That is one of the reasons I am a proponent of these communion focus messages. I believe that they can help us reach the right frame of mind and add special significance to our weekly observance of the Lord's Supper.

 Forget the forms. Just stop and consider. Jesus loves us so much that He took the punishment that we deserve. For our sake, He was betrayed, He was arrested, He was beaten and mocked, and He was lashed. Then He was taken to Golgotha where His arms and legs were nailed to a tree and He died a slow, painful death. In all this, He acted on our behalf as a sacrificial lamb. But because He was God, the grave could not hold Him. He rose again on the third day breaking open the bonds of death. Because of His great sacrifice, and because of His resurrection, we have forgiveness of sins and the hope of life eternal.

 That is what the Lord's Supper is meant to commemorate. Each week, we partake of the Lord's Supper to stop and remember, and to focus our minds, on Christ's love, and sacrifice, and the tremendous significance of the cross. It is a time of reflection. It is a time to honor Christ. If you do this, then you have participated in the meaning of communion, whatever the form of the physical ceremony.

**REMEMBER THE ALAMO**

 In the heart of downtown San Antonio there is an old Spanish mission called the Alamo. In 1836, during the Texas War of Independence, fewer than 200 Texas revolutionaries defended the mission against the approach of Santa Anna and his army of several thousand men. Sam Houston, the newly-appointed commander-in-chief of Texas forces, argued that the Alamo could not be defended and should be abandoned. Even so, the Alamo's defenders--men like Jim Bowie, William B. Travis, and Davy Crockett--dug in and refused to leave.

 The defenders of the Alamo held the Mexicans at bay for nearly two weeks and inflicted heavy casualties before they were overwhelmed. Enraged at the costs of this victory, Santa Anna ordered that no prisoners be taken. The defenders were slaughtered almost to a man.

 While the garrison at the Alamo was annihilated, and the mission was taken, the Alamo can hardly be considered a defeat for the Texas revolutionaries. Very much to the contrary, the sacrifice of these brave men became a symbol of heroic resistance and a rallying cry in the Texas struggle for independence.

 Just a few months later Sam Houston's men attacked and captured a significantly larger Mexican force about thirty miles to our east at San Jacinto. It was in this battle that Texas revolutionaries achieved their independence. As the Texans charged it was with the cry "Remember the Alamo" on their lips.

 Slogans can be useful in helping us remember important events. Ceremonies can serve the same purpose. This morning, we are gathered to participate in the ceremony of the Lord's Supper. This ceremony commemorates a much greater and more meaningful sacrifice--the death by crucifixion of the Son of God.

 Christ was innocent. We were sinners. And yet Christ agreed to be the scapegoat to redeem us from our sins. Though He was God, Christ humbled Himself and took the form of a man. He experienced life as a man, but did not sin. And then He suffered as He was betrayed by those closest to Him, He was mocked and beaten, He was scourged, and finally He was crucified. His sacrifice was gruesome, but it forever changed the world.

 The sacrifice by the defenders of the Alamo inspired the Texas soldiers to fight harder for independence. Christ's sacrifice should inspire us, as Christian soldiers, to fight harder for the cause of Christ.

 So while the Texas history buffs among you can "Remember the Alamo" with pride. As Christians, however, our mantra should be "Remember the Cross."

**THE SURE THING**

 This morning I want to share with you a thought from a movie from the 1980s. This movie was hardly a classic, and it was a bit morally-ambiguous. So I don't want to give the movie a plug, or even identify it by name. The movie centers around a college student from a university on the east coast who sets off on a trip to Los Angeles over spring break. He does not have the money to fly, and so he signs up for a ride-share arrangement with some fellow students who were driving. Suffice it to say that this does not go well and his cross-country trek becomes a comedy of errors. But this drawn-out saga of travails on the road is merely the build-up for the great moment of moral decision the man will face when he reaches his destination.

 The movie ends with the man back at his eastern college. He has written an essay chronicling his road-trip odyssey and the resolution of his great moral choice. His English professor is sharing his essay with the class. To me, the only really worthwhile thing about the movie is the description in the essay of the weighty thoughts that were passing through this man's mind as he approached this great moment of decision. This was a crossroads moment in his life and his actions and decisions on that day would go far to define the type of man he was and would have significant implications for his future. As he approached this momentous decision, thoughts raced through his mind:

 Did she love him?

 Could he lie?

 Is there a God?

 Who invented liquid soap and why?

 I believe that this little vignette captures a truism about the human mind and our ability to concentrate and focus. At least in my experience, no matter how important the issue, no matter how immediate the circumstances, and no matter how much I should be focusing and concentrating, there are always little, meaningless irrelevancies dancing around in my mind. It is human nature. Our powers of concentration are limited.

 Even though it is human nature, we can and should make an effort this morning as we turn our minds toward the Lord's Supper. Try to clear your minds all of the cares and concerns that are tugging at you. Try to squeeze out any irrelevancies. Focus on Christ in the Upper Room washing His disciple's feet. Picture Christ in the garden as He pours out His heart to God and prays "let this cup pass from me, if it may." Think about what it must have been like for Christ to have been betrayed by one of His own apostles. Imagine the pain of the lash, and the greater pain, and indignity, of the crucifixion.

 These are the things that should occupy our thoughts when we partake of the emblems that represent Christ's broken body, and shed blood. But we should also remember that this is not the end of the story. For Christ rose again in triumph. By His death, Christ atoned for our sins and brought us forgiveness of sins. By His resurrection, Christ overcame death and brought us the promise of life eternal.

 Perhaps, like me, your powers of concentration are limited and stray thoughts may intrude to sap your focus. But this is important and I call on you this morning to make the best effort you can to focus on the love Christ showed for all of us by His great sacrifice, and the eternal significance of that great act.

**CONQUEST**

 I would like to share with you a poem by a woman named Ella Wheeler Wilcox entitled *Conquest.*

Talk not of strength, until your heart has known
And fought with weakness through long hours alone.

Talk not of virtue, till your conquering soul
Has met temptation and gained full control.

Boast not of garments, all unscorched by sin,
Till you have passed, unscathed, through fires within.

Oh, poor that pride the unscarred soldier shows,
Who safe in camp, has never faced his foes.

I take great wisdom from this poem. We should not boast of our virtue until we have withstood real temptation. Our strength and our courage are suspect until we have faced the enemy. Our supposed convictions are just words until they have been tested.

 Christ faced His great moment of temptation in the garden. He knew what was coming. He would be

* betrayed by one of His own;
* arrested on false charges and convicted in a farce of a trial;
* deserted by His friends; and
* mocked and beaten.

He would be whipped and made to carry His own cross. Finally, He would suffer the brutal and ignominious death of crucifixion. Christ saw it all coming, and He did not want it.

 In anguish He cried out to God. His grief was so great that His sweat was like drops of blood. He pleaded, let this cup pass from me, if it may.

 But in the end, Jesus passed His test. He concluded His prayer -- let Thy will, not Mine, be done. Jesus played the part God had set out for Him. He was the scapegoat; the innocent lamb sacrificed to atone for our sins. Christ's virtue, courage, and convictions were all validated in the face of a dreadful ordeal. We partake of the ceremony of the Lord's Supper this morning to remember Christ's ordeal and to bless Him for His steadfastness. For it is only because of Christ's sacrifice that we have hope.

 We will all face temptation. Christ faced His greatest temptation in the garden and He remained faithful in the face of a horrific trauma. The tests to our virtue and convictions are relatively minor by comparison. And yet, far too many of us crumble the first time we are truly tempted. If you wish to be a person of character, one who lives by a set of convictions, then let Christ's example of fidelity in His great moment of trial in the garden be your inspiration as you face your moments of trial.

**AWOL FROM HIS WIFE**

 When I was a young man I served in the Texas Army National Guard. One weekend a month I would don an army uniform and go play soldier. There was one man I served with who resigned from the National Guard. I suppose he decided that he had served his country long enough. But about nine months after he quit we received a call from the man's wife. She needed to speak with him and it was Guard weekend so she assumed he was there.

 Apparently, this man had neglected to tell his wife that he was no longer in the National Guard. Instead, when Guard weekend rolled around, he would don his uniform, kiss his wife goodbye, and go -- somewhere. The woman was a little startled when we told her that her husband had not been with us for quite some time.

 This man seemed to believe that he was entitled to a weekend off where he could escape his family and his responsibilities and engage in some secret, and probably illicit, activity. Maybe he convinced himself that he would never be found out and that there would never be any consequences.

 If there was ever a man who could never escape His responsibilities, it was Jesus Christ. It is completely accurate to say that the fate of the world rested on His shoulders. Moreover, Jesus could never do anything in secret. He was constantly watched. Many looked to Him for hope and salvation and followed Him wherever He went. The Jewish leaders saw Him as a menace and looked for ways to bring Him down. They sought to trap or stump Him. And Satan's efforts to snare Him certainly did not stop with the temptations in the wilderness.

 Christ's greatest burden, though, was probably His sure knowledge of how it would all end. Christ knew why He had come into the world. He was to be the sacrificial lamb. He always knew, for a certainty, that His life would end, relatively soon, in betrayal, in abandonment, in humiliation, and in excruciating agony. That was a knowledge He could never escape.

 In the garden we can see a glimpse of how much that weighed on Him. As His time approached, Jesus knelt in prayer. His sweat was like drops of blood. In anguish, He cried out -- Let this cup pass from me, if it may. He was human. He knew what was coming, and it terrified Him. But His resolve held. He finished His prayer -- let thy will, not mine, be done.

 Christ could have run from responsibility. We sing a song about how Christ could have called 10,000 angels to destroy the world and set Him free. That song may indulge in a little poetic license, but it does tell a basic truth. Christ could have stopped the process. He could have refused to go to the cross. But He did not. Christ played the part that had been laid out for Him. He went to the cross. For us, that has made all the difference. Because of Christ's sacrifice, and His subsequent resurrection, we have forgiveness of sins. We have hope.

 This morning, let us bless and praise Christ because He never ran from His responsibilities.

**I KNOW THE LORD WILL FIND A WAY**

 My beloved mother died too young at the age of 56. It was a great tragedy that changed my life forever. It was over twenty years ago and yet I still feel the pain of her loss. Sometimes, when I think of her, I think of a particular song from our hymn book that was one of her favorites. She used to sing it to me and to my siblings when we were little. The song is *I know the Lord Will Find a Way for Me.* Singing that song always gives me a warm and nostalgic feeling.

 It is a simple song, with a simple, but profound, message.

 I know the Lord will find a way, for me,

 I know the Lord will find a way, for me,

 If I walk in Heaven's light,

 Shun the wrong, and do the right,

 I know the Lord will find a way, for me.

 Our job is to walk in the light. To keep way from sin, and do what is right. But even if we do that, it is not enough. It is the Lord who will have to find a way to save us. We cannot save ourselves. God must find a way.

 The Lord did find a way. He sent His Son into the world to provide an example to us and to preach a message of love and repentance. But most of all, He sent Christ into this world to act as the perfect sacrifice; to be an atonement for our sins. We are gathered this morning to remember that great sacrifice. We are here to partake of the emblems of that sacrifice. The bread, which symbolizes Christ's broken body. The wine, which symbolizes Christ's shed blood.

 It was through this great sacrifice that the Lord found a way for me. For you. And for my dear mother.

 So Praise God as you partake of the Lord's Supper this morning. Then, when you leave this place, walk in Heaven's light. Shun the wrong. Do the right. And be confident in the knowledge that God will find, indeed He has found, a way for you.

**CHRIST STOOD UP WHEN THEY CAME**

 After the conclusion of the Second World War, a German pastor, Reverend Martin Niemoller, made the following statements in apologizing for the guilt and complicity of German Protestant churches in allowing the suffering caused by the rule of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party:

First they came for the Communists,

 and I didn’t speak up,

 because I wasn’t a Communist.

Then they came for the Jews,

 and I didn’t speak up,

 because I wasn’t a Jew.

Then they came for the Catholics,

 and I didn’t speak up,

 because I was a Protestant.

Then they came for me,

 and by that time there was no one

 left to speak up for me.

 I have always been moved by this passage because I believe it tells many truths. The truth I want to focus on this morning is that, more often than not, people are selfish and craven. All too often we are afraid or unwilling to speak up for the rights of others, particularly if the ones suffering are people we do not like, for fear that we will bring trouble on ourselves. As Reverend Niemoller points out, sometimes that can bring us great trouble because an evil that remains unconfronted when it is small can grow and consume all.

 We are fortunate that Christ was neither selfish, nor craven. We were lost in our sin. We had rebelled against God. God, and Christ, had great reason to be angry at us. We deserved the punishment that was coming our way.

 Christ was innocent. He was not subject to the punishment due us. Figuratively, He did not have to speak up for us.

 But He did. By His sacrifice on the Cross, Christ spoke up for sinners. By doing so, He saved us from the eternal consequences of our sins. He brought us forgiveness. He brought us hope. Christ knew that doing this would come at a great personal cost, but He did it anyway. Christ suffered a brutal ordeal and died an ignominious death. He sacrificed Himself to save others -- to save us. Let us honor Christ this morning for this great act that changed the world forever.

**WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE**

 When I was a small boy, one of my favorite books was *Where the Wild Things Are.* It is about a little boy named Max who is sent to bed without his supper. In his room, he retreats into a fantasy world of dark jungles and strange monsters. The monsters come up and roar their terrible roar, and gnash their terrible teeth. And Max says -- Be still!! Obligingly, the monsters obey and are tamed. Max becomes their king, they have great adventures, and Max has a grand time.

 Hollywood made a movie from the book. Because the book was very short, the movie takes a lot of liberties. In fact, the movie is dark and depressing. It is not a light-hearted children's story.

 In the movie, Max has a very sad life. He lives in a broken home with an absent father. His family is scarred. His mother and older sister have a poisonous relationship, and Max is neglected and forgotten. They are poor and struggling, and the people in Max's life are moody, jealous, and mean-spirited.

 So Max retreats into his room and then escapes into his fantasy world. At first, it is wonderful. Max and the monsters have great adventures and great fun.

 But as time wears on, the problems from Max's real life begin to intrude into his fantasy world. The monsters become jealous and moody. There is strife and division. Max's fantasy characters begin to take on the characteristics of the people in his real life. Eventually, his fantasy world becomes oppressive and he longs to return home.

 In the end, I was depressed. Poor Max. His real life is dark and depressing, and now his fantasy life is as well.

 Max may not be alone. There are many people who live sad and depressing lives. They are without hope and all seems dark.

 As Christians, that should not be our lot. Whatever our immediate circumstances, we do have hope. We do have joy. Why? Because while we were yet sinners, Jesus Christ consented to be a sacrifice for all of us.

 We are special. We are greatly loved. Christ loved us so much that he paid the blood price for our sins. Through His death on the cross the gates of death were thrown open. We are now forgiven. We now have the promise of eternal life. Praise God!

 This morning, let us all stop, and pause, and reflect on all that Christ did for us, and the terrible cost of our salvation.

**SO LONG, WADE**

 This is something of a sad day for us. This is the last Sunday Wade will be with us at church. Next weekend he will be heading off to Florida to begin his studies at Embry Riddle Aeronautical University. If you have appreciated his song leading, please let him know. As a father, I have been very proud to watch as he has grown in confidence and stature.

 Last year, Seth left us to go off to the University of Texas. That was melancholy. But somehow, Wade leaving seems a bigger issue. Lou Ann and I are staring empty-nestdom straight in the face, and it appears bleak. It seems the end of an age. No longer will we have minor children living under our roof.

 Lou Ann and I will need to establish new patterns, new routines. Life may be rich. Perhaps the best is yet to come. But it will be different.

 Christ's death and resurrection was also the end of an era, and the beginning of a new age. It was the end of the old covenant. It was the beginning of the Christian age. The transition was difficult. Christ suffered a horrific death on a Roman cross to usher in this new age.

 But this new age is wonderful. Because of Christ's great sacrifice, we have forgiveness of sins. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have the promise of eternal life.

 This morning, we are gathered to partake of the emblems of Christ's great sacrifice. The bread symbolizes Christ's broken body. The wine symbolizes His shed blood. As you partake of these sacraments, stop and remember the significance of Christ's great sacrifice, and be thankful that he has ushered in the Christian age.

**THE DREAM**

 In Matthew 27:11, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought Jesus before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, seeking to convince the Roman authorities to crucify Jesus. Pilate questioned Jesus and was amazed at both at His answers and His silences. Pilate knew that the Jews had brought Jesus before him out of envy, so he sought to frustrate them. It was the Roman custom during Passover to release a prisoner and so Pilate appealed to the crowd--which prisoner should I release, Jesus or Barabbas?

 Apparently, while the crowd was mulling this over, Pilate received a note from his wife. Matthew 27:19 reads as follows:

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream, because of him.”

 This incident is found only in Matthew's gospel, and there is nothing more in the Bible about Pilate's wife. In later church tradition she is named as Claudia Proculus. Also, there are apocryphal writings and other literature that suggest she became a Christian and that speculate as to the content of the dream. But none of this material seems very reliable. The truth is, we really do not know anything more about this dream.

 What we do know is that the note did not change anything. The crowd called for the release of Barabbas and the proceedings against Jesus continued. God's plan would not be thwarted. Christ was crucified. He was the perfect sacrifice that, once and for all, atoned for the sins of men and brought us forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

 I certainly have no special knowledge as to the content of this dream. But I have often wondered why Matthew chose to include this detail in his inspired gospel. Surely it was more than just an interesting anecdote with no greater significance.

 In the end, I believe that this story gives us an insight into the impact of Christ and His message. Also, it emphasizes the great significance of the unfolding events. Finally, I believe that it foretells the great spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world.

 Rome was the greatest empire the world had yet seen. Its reach and its might were vast. And yet, the message of a simple carpenter from a small town in a backwater province could reach into the very bedchamber of Imperial Roman power and cause nightmares.

 When Pilate ordered Christ's execution, he was secure in his authority and power from Rome. He did not realize, though, that the execution he ordered would be the spark that would start an unquenchable fire that would subvert the Roman Empire itself and change the world forever. Truly, his wife's dream was prophetic.

 It is in an interesting exercise to speculate about the content and purpose of this dream. But right now, as we prepare to partake of the Lord's Supper, I would like you to focus your mind on the subject of the dream. Remember our Lord Jesus Christ, His willingness to sacrifice Himself for us, the great suffering He endured, and the significance of His great act to all of us today.

**BENEDICT ARNOLD**

 Benedict Arnold was a distinguished American general during the Revolutionary War. He was one of the leaders of the expedition that captured Fort Ticonderoga in 1775. His strategy and heroics during the Battle of Valcour Island on Lake Champlain in 1776 delayed a significantly larger British Force and bought the Americans time to prepare the defenses of New York. He led key engagements during the Battles of Saratoga in 1777, where he suffered serious leg wounds.

 Despite his successes, Arnold was passed over for promotion. He began to feel unappreciated as he saw other men, that he believed were lesser men, advanced ahead of him. Rivals brought charges of corruption against him, although he was acquitted. And, he disagreed with major policy decisions, such as the alliance with France and the spurning of a British compromise. Eventually, Arnold became frustrated and decided to switch sides, opening secret negotiations with the British.

 In 1780, he was appointed the commander of West Point on the Hudson River. His plan was to surrender West Point to the British and he agreed to a sum of money for his treachery. His plot was discovered, though, and Arnold had to flee. He would later receive a commission as a Brigadier General in the British Army where he led troops against the Americans. Benedict Arnold's name has now become a byword for treason.

 I believe we need to study this story to understand the motivations that led this American patriot to commit treason because those same motivations can arise in other contexts. Importantly, Christians are not exempt from these issues. I have seen Christians, on fire for the Lord, fall away, or even become openly hostile to God and religion, for some of the same reasons.

 In the end, Benedict Arnold's problem was pride. He believed too much in his own worth and importance. When his fellow Americans did not afford him the respect and honor he believed he deserved, and when they did not listen to his counsel, he became angry. That led to his betrayal.

 I would counsel you all to avoid the sin of pride. If you are puffed up by pride, you are far from God. The Bible tells us that the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Cultivate an humble spirit.

 Moreover, if the reason you are serving God is to obtain the approbation of your fellow Christians, then you are not here for the right reasons. And, you will be disappointed.

 As an elder, I strive to create a church community where each member of the community is valued and appreciated. A place where we all of us have full scope to practice our religion, and make a difference. But I know that I am flawed, and the church as an organization is flawed. I would caution each of you. Do not put your trust in men to seek your fulfillment.

 Instead, put your trust in God, and in His son, Jesus Christ. Only by drawing closer to God can you find true fulfillment. Men may disappoint you, but God is faithful.

 One way to draw closer to God, and to stay there, is to observe the feast instituted by His son on the night when He was betrayed. Stop, each week, and remember Christ's love, and His great sacrifice. Let the service, and the physical motions of the ceremony, place you in the right frame of mind. Use this time to let go of the let go of the cares and concerns of the week, and draw you back to the foot of the cross.

 We learn in the Bible that pride goeth before a fall. That was certainly true for Benedict Arnold. But if you are at the foot of the cross, staring up at the crucified form our Lord, it is impossible to feel the kind of pride that could lead you astray. Next to Christ's sacrifice, all of our efforts are small. At the cross, it is only possible to feel awe, and wonder, and love, and gratitude. So this morning, draw close to the cross.

**WELLS FARGO**

 I was troubled recently by news reports of a scandal at Wells Fargo Bank. As I understand it, the incentive system at the bank was tied to the number of new accounts, and the number of new credit cards, a bank manager sold. Because of overall industry trends, there were fewer new banking customers seeking these services. And so, to meet their numbers, to keep up with the Joneses, and to secure their bonuses, many banking managers would cheat.

 Without customer approval, they would open up new accounts in an existing customer's name, going so far as to transfer money from existing accounts into these new accounts. And they would issue new credit cards in the customer's name without their approval. This would lead to higher fees being charged to the customer, and might occasionally lead to a customer bouncing a check. But most customers do not scrutinize their bank statements carefully and so this could go unnoticed for some time.

 Eventually, Wells Fargo leadership discovered what was happening and took action. This led to the firing of 5,300 bank managers across the country. It is the number of bank managers involved that astounds me -- 5,300. This was not a few bad apples in a few isolated locations. This was thousands of managers all across the country selling their integrity in a systemic way.

 In fact, this number of bad actors may be a large enough sample size to support a generalization about people in general. This type of incentive system unmasks the evil in the hearts of men. I hope that there are exceptions. But when push comes to shove, people are greedy, jealous, deceitful, and lacking in basic integrity. In short, we are all sinners.

 That is true today, and it was true 2,000 years ago when Christ came to this Earth. And here is the amazing thing; even though we were sinners, even though evil lurked in our hearts, Christ consented to be a sacrifice for us. Though He was sinless Himself, He paid the debt for our sins through His death on the cross.

 I am a Christian. But that does not mean that I do not still struggle with sin. Oftentimes I lose that struggle. I sin. I disappoint God. But because of Christ and His great sacrifice, I have been forgiven. I have hope and the promise of eternal life. So do you. Let us praise Christ this morning for agreeing to be the sacrifice for our sins.

**JABBERWOCKY**

 Twas brillig and the slithy toves

 Did gyre and gimble in the wabe

 All mimsy were the borogroves

 And the mome wraths outgrabe

 Beware the Jabberwock my son

 The jaws that bite, the claws that catch,

 Beware the jubjub bird,

 And shun the frumious bandersnatch.

 These are the first two stanzas of a famous poem by Robert Louis Stephenson called Jabberwocky. The remaining stanzas are similar. The language sounds ominous. And there are a few understandable words to give it some direction. But really, it is just gibberish.

 All too often, I feel as though that is what Christians and non-Christians hear when they attempt to talk to each other.

 To many in our secular society, the only absolute is that there is no absolute. They do not care what you do or believe so long as you do not suggest by word or deed that anything that they do, or believe, is wrong, or abnormal, or shameful, or sinful. They do not wish to be inhibited, or even made to feel guilty, by any antiquated religious codes or social customs. They recognize no morality external to themselves.

 And this is where they differ fundamentally with Christians. We believe there is an external code of morality. There is a right and a wrong, as established by God. It applies universally and is not dependent on how we feel about it.

 We view the world in incompatible ways. And so, when we attempt to speak to each other, it can sound like gibberish.

 This morning, we are about to participate in a ceremony that would probably seem like gibberish to non-Christians. We are about to commemorate, even celebrate, the brutal execution of the founder of our movement.

 At the time, it did not seem like much to celebrate. Indeed, Christ's followers were horrified, demoralized, and directionless. It took the coming of the Holy Spirit, in a great miracle, to make them understand, and to get them moving.

 But now we do understand. Christ's sacrifice was a necessary part of God's plan of salvation. Because He played the part of the perfect sacrifice, once and for all, our sins have been forgiven. By His resurrection, the gates of death were thrown open and we have the promise of eternal life.

 While this may seem like gibberish to non-Christians, it is the center of who we are. As we partake of the emblems of that great sacrifice, let us honor Christ for his willingness to lay down His life for us. And, let us proclaim proudly, even if non-Christians do not understand it, that we are children of the cross.

**ALEXANDER THE GREAT**

 Alexander the Great ascended the throne of Macedon at age 20. He was a soldier and he spent almost all of his reign on military campaigns. These campaigns were wildly successful. With a relatively small army, he defeated every foe in his path. He led one of the most successful military campaigns in history. By age 30, he had stitched together a huge empire extending all the way from Greece to India. He died of illness at age 32.

 Alexander's reign lasted only 12 years. But he never stopped moving. He led his troops in the defeat of much larger armies and he laid low several different empires. Most notably, he conquered the mighty Persian Empire. Alexander changed the world.

 I recall a book that I read about Alexander and his campaigns. I don't remember many of the details from the book, but the final description of Alexander, right at the end, has always stuck with me. The author wrote that Alexander lived in the saddle and slept in a tent, his bed was a cot, he dressed in moments, and he ate soldier' rations.

 The author was clearly drawing a distinction between Alexander and his principal adversary, Darius III of Persia. The Persian Court was legendary for its opulence, its decadence, and its bureaucracy. The Persian Empire was vast and seemingly invincible, and yet it was taken down by the energetic and focused Alexander and his disciplined army.

 I fear that we may have more in common with Darius than Alexander.

 Jesus Christ began the Christian movement by His great sacrifice on the cross. His body was broken, and His blood was shed. We are here this morning to partake of the emblems that symbolize that sacrifice. We do this so that we will never forget who we are, and where we come from, and who we have to thank. But this is not the only thing we are called on to do.

 Christ was resurrected. He spent time with His disciples, and then He ascended into Heaven. The last thing He told His disciples, that he told us, was to go and make disciples of all men. That is our task.

 But in that task, ask yourself - do you have the dedication, drive, and focus of Alexander? Are you changing the world? If not the entire world, how about your little corner of it? Like Alexander, do you travel light and with a purpose? Or, have you grown comfortable and complacent and laden down by all of the stuff you have accumulated. Does your desire to fit in, and to be accepted, and to not make waves trump your zeal for God?

 Consider this as we participate in this ceremony and you contemplate the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**BEING OBSERVANT**

 When the kids were little, perhaps 7 and 5, we went on a cruise to Alaska. It was the first time I had ever been on a cruise and I was very impressed with the ship. It was huge -- like a floating city. One of the things we enjoyed doing for the first few days was just to go exploring to see what all was on the ship, and how it was laid out. We wanted to get our bearings. In doing this, the kids, and in particular Seth, seemed to be a quicker study.

 I was good enough at the straight memorization. For instance, I would remember that a certain eatery was on a certain deck and I would remember that it was either aft or forward. What I had trouble with, though, was orientation.

 This was particularly the case when we would go back to our room. The passenger rooms were on the lower decks of the ship, which consisted of long rows of doors on both sides of the vessel. Our cabin was, as I recall, on the starboard side of the ship, forward. But when the elevator doors would open I would never know which way we were pointed, and thus I would not know which side of the ship was starboard, and which side was port. So every time we got off the elevator I would head straight for the diagram on the wall that had the room numbers and the arrows. It was just my routine because I would always be turned around and without the little diagrams with the numbers and arrows, I was at a loss.

 One day we were heading back to our room and when the elevator doors opened Seth just took off down one of the hallways. I called to him -- "Seth, how can you be certain you are on the right side of the ship." Without slowing down he said -- "All the doors are green on this side and blue on the other." I felt a little silly when I looked at the doors and saw he was right.

 The ship's designers had created the paint scheme on the doors to guide confused passengers like me, but it was a detail that I had just missed.

 We partake of the Lord's Supper every Sunday morning. It is also a guide. It orients us back to where we all started -- the cross of Calvary. It pulls us back to the straight and narrow path by reminding us of Christ and His great sacrifice. Think of it as a weekly course correction. Finally, it highlights the path forward to the Heavenly home prepared for us.

 The Lord's Supper is a guide, and be careful not to miss the key details. Jesus Christ loved us so much that He sacrificed His own life as an atonement for our sins so that we could be forgiven and receive the gift of eternal life. Follow that great admission of faith, hold on to it as an anchor to keep you from straying off the path, and you will find your way home.

**WORLD CHANGING EVENTS**

 There is a story in the Gospel of Luke that immediately follows the birth of Jesus. There are shepherds watching their flocks at night in the countryside near Bethlehem. An angel appears to them, and glory of the Lord shines round about them. The angel tells them of the birth of the savior and then suddenly there with the angel is the multitude of the heavenly host praising God. They sing “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” Then the angels just disappear and the shepherds go into the city to investigate.

 I have often wondered what the purpose of this story is. Why give personal notice of the birth of Christ to a few random and nameless shepherds in the hills, *and to no one else?* Why put on a light show in the heavens that apparently no one else saw?

 My best conclusion is that the plan was never to broadcast, at the time of His birth, that Jesus had come into the world. Had that been widely known it would have caused great problems. We know this because when King Herod subsequently learned he had all of the infants in the city killed hoping to stop in the cradle what he perceived as a threat. So Christ’s birth had to be kept largely a secret at the time.

 And yet, it was still a momentous event that would change the world. Such events cry out for some kind of commemoration; some kind of fanfare. And because this was a joyous event, the angels singing and the heavenly light show was equally joyous. In the end, the point of this story is not the random shepherds in the hills. It was to acknowledge that a great and world-changing event had just transpired.

 Matthew Chapter 27 tells the story of Jesus’ death. Immediately after Christ dies, Matthew relates that the huge temple veil is torn in two from the top to the bottom. There is an earthquake. The graves are opened and many bodies of the saints which slept arise. They go into the city and are seen by many.

 I believe these events have a similar theme. Something momentous had just occurred which would change the world forever. This great and terrible event cried out for commemoration to mark what had just happened. Christ’s death was somber and dark and thus the events that accompanied it were equally dark and ominous.

 Today is Christmas morning. Today is the day that we have set aside to remember the first of these great and world-changing events. It is a time for celebration.

Right at this moment, though, we are gathered together to partake of the Lord’s Supper in acknowledgement of the second great event. Now is the time when we pause to contemplate Christ’s death. It is a time of somber reflection. As we partake of the emblems of Christ’s suffering and death, I want you to think about how much that momentous event has forever changed the world at large. And then, on a more personal level, I want you to think about how much it means to you personally. You were lost in your sins and separated from God. But because of Christ’s great sacrifice, you have been forgiven. You have been redeemed. And you have the promise of life eternal.

**THE BIG BANG THEORY**

 There is a television program that I have watched in the last few years called *The Big Bang Theory.* It is a popular comedy program and I would bet that many of you are familiar with it. I enjoy it because it is funny and entertaining, but the writers of the show may succeed in driving me away because they so often go out of their way to belittle Christians and Christianity. It is a typical Hollywood offering that seems to see the avoidance of any possible offense to any group other than Christians as a moral imperative, but has no qualms about denigrating Christians.

 The main character in the show is a Cal-Tech physicist named Sheldon Cooper. The show’s assault on Christianity comes in the form of the character of Sheldon’s mother. She is a caricature of what the show’s writers put forth as a prototypical Christian. She is harsh, judgmental, and even spiteful. She is hypocritical. She is simple, uneducated, and anti-science. Finally, she is from that backwards state known as Texas. Whenever she appears in an episode I am tempted to turn the channel because I know that she will be the butt of every joke.

 I believe that the show’s presentation of Christians is unfair. The character of Mrs. Cooper is a crazy amalgam of the worst traits *some* Christians may display to *some* extent amplified to a ridiculous degree for comedic effect, without any amelioration for any positive qualities. In short, she does not fairly represent any Christians I personally know, and is certainly not typical.

 But the sad thing is – this perception is out there. It is a strawman created by people hostile to Christianity for many different reasons. It may have little contact with reality, but it is a perception we have to confront and overcome.

 We need to flip the script. When people outside the church think of Christians, I don’t want the first words that come to their minds to be “judgmental,” “sanctimonious,” or “narrow-minded.” Rather, I would hope that the words that come to their minds would be “loving,” “respectful,” “service,” or “self-sacrificial.” The question is – how do we change the narrative?

 Well, I believe that there is a right and wrong that applies to all men. There is such a thing as sin. I do not wish to condone or promote sin. But I do not believe that the focus of our efforts should be to seek out and condemn sin in all of its many forms and rail against those who are committing sin. Rather, I believe that our primary role is to focus on the love and self-sacrifice Christ showed to all men, and to emulate that behavior.

 That is what we are here to commemorate this morning, and it is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. The story of the crucifixion is a story of love and self-sacrifice. Even though men were sinners, Christ loved them so much that He gave is life for them in a great act of redemption. He prayed to His father to forgive the very men who were tormenting Him. He paid the ultimate price for the sins of others.

 That is the spirit we should emulate. Our job is not to condemn sinners, it is to love them; to serve and sacrifice for them. We should not revile or disrespect those who disagree with us or sin against us. Rather, we should work to think kindly of them and pray to God to forgive them. Finally, we have no basis for sanctimony for we, too, are sinners even though we claim to know the truth.

 This morning, as you contemplate Christ’s great sacrifice, this is what I want you to do. Think about someone who disagrees with you, does not like you, or ridicules you because of your religion. Then I want you to ask yourself – what can I do to show love to that person? To serve that person? Then I want you to do it.

**MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL**

 One of the funniest movies I have ever seen is *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The story is centered around a search for the Holy Grail by King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. In one scene, Arthur asks a peasant for information and tells him that he is the king. This leads to the following colloquy:

**PEASANT:** Well, how did you become King, then?

**ARTHUR:** The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water signifying by Divine Providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur.

That is why I am your king!

**PEASANT:** Listen. Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.

**ARTHUR:** Be quiet!

**PEASANT:** Well, but you can't expect to wield supreme executive power just 'cause some watery tart threw a sword at you!

**ARTHUR:** Shut up!

The scene goes on like this for a while, Arthur strikes the peasant, and the peasant cries out that he is being repressed by the violence inherent in the system.

 Anyway, Christ is a king—the king. But He does not claim to be an earthly king wielding political power. Instead, His kingdom is spiritual and not of this world. But importantly, He did not become king because some other person gave Him some kind of talisman, like a sword, and *declared* that He was king. Instead, His claim to kingship stems from His own righteousness, and His own actions.

 He was righteous because He left His home in Heaven to experience life as a man. Despite great temptation, He lived a sinless life. He inspired the people by teaching a revolutionary new morality based on love and not on a heartless and slavish adherence to a hidebound set of rules. His righteousness alone is worthy of kingship.

But Christ’s main claim to kingship rests on His great act of sacrifice on a Roman cross. Christ played the part of the great and perfect sacrifice that once and for all absolved the sins of His followers. Through His great act, Christ led His people through the barriers of sin, death, and the grave by delivering hope, forgiveness, resurrection, and eternal life.

 This morning, as we partake of the emblems of Christ’s great sacrifice, I want you to consider why Christ deserves the title “king,” and what his kingship means to you.

**BURTON COFFMAN**

 Those of you who have been around here for a while will certainly remember Burton Coffman. You may still have the T-shirt from when we celebrated his 100th birthday. Burton was a long-time member here at West University who was outspoken and irascible. He was a theologian who wrote commentaries on every book in the Bible. We have a set of the Coffman commentaries here in the church library. I have a set in my library at home and I refer to them during class preparation. The Coffman commentaries are a standard reference set.

 I have many memories of Burton, but perhaps my favorite memory is a remark Burton made one day that only he could have made. He said “I really appreciate the Bible because it sheds such light on my commentaries.” I am relatively certain that Burton’s statement was in jest.

 But it is certainly human nature to take pride in our own accomplishments. All too often, consciously or otherwise, we get confused about the value of our role in the process of salvation.

 It is important to be clear. You cannot earn your salvation. You cannot accomplish enough. You cannot work hard enough. You cannot be good enough. No one can stand before God and claim a right to salvation based on his or her own merits. I do not wish to put a damper on any fervor you may have for acts of righteousness or service. They are to your credit and they are their own reward. But undue pride in your supposed accomplishments is not helpful.

 Because what we all need is grace. Without it, we are all lost. And that grace flows from the cross. Christ performed the great work of salvation two thousand years ago by His great redemptive act on the cross. His was the perfect sacrifice that, once and for all, atoned for the sins of His followers. We are saved because of the grace that flows from the cross, and not because of our own merits or worth.

 What we are called on to do is to accept God’s grace, and to believe. If we accept God’s grace and love in the right spirit, it should impel us to proper actions. But never let yourself believe that it is your proper actions that are the cause of your salvation. Always remember that your salvation is based on Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. That is what we are here this morning to commemorate.

**THE EMPTY TOMB**

 On the morning after Jesus died, his mother, Mary Magdalene, and a few other women took spices they had prepared and went to Jesus’ tomb. Luke describes what happened in Chapter 24 of his gospel.

 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. [**2**](http://biblehub.com/luke/24-2.htm)They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, [**3**](http://biblehub.com/luke/24-3.htm)but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. [**4**](http://biblehub.com/luke/24-4.htm)While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. [**5**](http://biblehub.com/luke/24-5.htm)In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? [**6**](http://biblehub.com/luke/24-6.htm)He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: [**7**](http://biblehub.com/luke/24-7.htm)‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ ” [**8**](http://biblehub.com/luke/24-8.htm)Then they remembered his words.

After that, the women ran back to tell everyone.

 We are gathered here this morning to commemorate Christ’s great sacrifice on the cross. Generally, we think of this as a time for somber reflection. And that is fitting. The emblems of this service represent Christ’s broken body, and His shed blood. Indeed, those are symbols of Christ’s pain and suffering. But that is not what I want to focus on this morning.

 Rather, I want you to remember that Christ’s death is not the end of the story. Christ rose again! The tomb was empty! The angels said – “Why seek the living with the dead? Christ was not defeated by the cross. Instead, the cross was a stepping stone to His great triumph! We serve a living savior, not a dead martyr.

 The story of the crucifixion is certainly tinged with sorrow. But in the end, the full story is one of triumph, and even joy. That is what I want you to focus on as you partake of communion this morning.

**VENI, VIDI, VICI**

 After Julius Caesar achieved victory in a short war against Phanaces II of Pontus at the Battle of Zela he sent a short letter to the Roman Senate in which he tersely stated “veni, vidi, vici.” That phrase, in Latin, means I came, I saw, I conquered. Julius was not exactly noted for his humility. Anyway, this phrase has become famous.

 A few weeks ago, Seth’s robotics ream competed in a region-wide competition. I was working and so I could not go, but Lou Ann was able to attend. She kept me posted throughout the day via text. Seth’s team won! When Lou Ann texted me the happy news, I tried to respond by text with the iconic phrase “veni, vidi, vici.” Unfortunately, the autocorrect spellchecker took over and what I actually sent was something like “Vinnie visits Vickie.” My message suffered in translation and lacked the punch I was hoping to achieve.

 We always run the risk that our communications can become garbled. So it helps to be clear. So let me be clear.

 God created the Heavens and the Earth. He created man in His image and, originally, man communed with God directly. But man sinned and rebelled against God, thereby breaking that fellowship; that communion. God could have abandoned us, but He did not. God loved us so much that He endeavored to reconcile with man.

 He created the nation of Israel as a light unto the world. He gave us the law and the prophets. But that was not sufficient.

Finally, God sent His own son, Jesus Christ, into the world. Christ experienced life as a man. He lived a life without sin to provide us with an example. He taught a revolutionary morality based on love. Finally, Christ played the part of the perfect sacrifice that once and for all atoned for the sins of those who followed Him.

By accepting Christ, and following Him, we can now reconcile the relationship with God that was broken in the garden after man’s sin. Through Christ, and by His sacrifice, we have the promise of eternal life. This morning, we are here to remember, and commemorate, Christ’s sacrifice, which was the culmination of God’s great plan of reconciliation.

**THE STELLAR MASS IN DALLAS**

 When I was in college in Abilene, I took an astronomy course. At the front of the classroom there was a huge chalkboard that stretched out over the entire wall. It was perhaps 40 feet wide. On the first day of class, the professor had drawn a scale model on the board. The sun was depicted on the extreme left of the board. Mercury was perhaps 8 inches to the right; Venus was about 20 inches; Earth was maybe 3 feet to the right, Mars was about 6 feet, Jupiter was perhaps 18 feet; and so on. There was a legend at the bottom left of the board which stated that 1 inch represented so many miles. Finally, on the far right, at the bottom of the board, was a statement that the nearest star was 180 miles.

 A few minutes into class a young woman raised her hand to ask a question. As I recall, she was blonde, but I do not draw any conclusions from that fact. Anyway, she asked –“if the nearest star is only 180 miles away, why aren’t we all burning?” Perhaps it is true that there is no such thing as a stupid question, but it seemed to me as though this young woman had missed something fairly basic to this diagram.

 We are gathered to commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is very easy for non-Christians to miss something basic about this historical event. To the Romans, and to the Jewish leaders, and indeed to the masses crying out for the release of Barabbas, this was just the public execution of a criminal.

 Today, we see the cross as a symbol of reverence. Many of us wear a cross on a chain around our necks. Some of us have crosses tattooed on our skin. But at the time the cross was a symbol of shame associated with crime and criminals. To underscore the point, it would be as though one of us wore a chain around our neck that had a noose on it, or an electric chair.

 But if all non-Christians see when they consider the crucifixion is the carrying out of a criminal sentence they will miss something basic. Jesus was not a mere criminal. He was, He is, the son of God. And He was not being crucified because He had committed a crime. He was innocent, but He willingly suffered this ordeal to atone for the crimes of others. Because Christ was the perfect sacrifice, He once and for all delivered forgiveness of sins to His followers.

 But most importantly, non-Christians would miss something if they focused only on the cross and not on its aftermath. For while Christ died on the cross--He did not stay dead. He rose again! Christ overcame death itself and, in so doing, He blazed the path for the rest of us. Through His great sacrifice, Christ gave us the promise of eternal life in Heaven.

 While non-Christians may miss these things, we do not. That is why we are gathered here this morning. And that is what I want you to focus on as we partake of the Lord's Supper.

**WELCH'S**

 You may remember, a few months back, when, for whatever, we ended up with a bottle of grape juice, that we used in the communion service, that was clearly not Welch's. It had kind of a funny, jarring taste to it that, I will admit, was distracting. Many people commented on it. I would even go so far as to say some folks complained. A number of people said, hopefully in jest, that it was downright unscriptural to use this off brand of grape juice.

 Well I had great sympathy for these comments. Because, after all, that is what communion is all about. The taste of the grape juice is really the key element in the service, that is what we should be focusing on, and if we get that wrong, nothing else matters.

 I hope that you all recognize that now I am speaking in jest because that is not what communion is all about.

 Our communion service is meant to remind us that, while we were yet sinners, God loved us so much that he sent His only son into the world to act as the perfect sacrifice to atone for our sins; to keep the faith with Christ's plea in the Upper Room to take this in remembrance of Him; to impress us with Christ's humanity as He poured out His heart in the garden and cried "let this cup pass from me, if it may," and yet could still say "let Thy will, not Mine be done"; to confront us with the horror of the crucifixion; and, finally, to cause us to rejoice at Christ's resurrection and all that means for us today. That is what communion is all about.

 And that is what I want you to focus on this morning. Don't be distracted by the physical elements of the service--the cracker and the grape juice. And please make allowances for my poor diction and halting delivery. But as you participate in this service remember the man Jesus, His love, His suffering, and His triumph.

**THIRSTY**

 (Put vinegar on sponge and hold it up on a stick). Are any of you thirsty? Perhaps you would like to suck the vinegar out of this sponge. Does that sound appealing? It does not to me. But that was the only comfort offered to Christ as he hung on the cross.

From the cross, Jesus cried out--"I am thirsty!" A soldier took a sponge filled with vinegar, put it on the tip of a spear, and put it up to Christ's mouth. That is a meaningful image of the cross.

 In our fellowship, we are very wary of icons, or talismans, or anything that smacks of idolatry. We may display a cross, but it is just a bare shape of a cross. It is just a symbol. In Catholic Churches, you will often see crucifixes with the figure of Jesus hung on it complete with blood flowing from his wrists and ankles and from the crown of thorns at his head.

I am a good Church of Christ boy. I do have something of an aversion to talismans. And I find the Catholic crucifix a bit gruesome. But that may be the point. And our Catholic brethren may have some insight here.

 The cross is not a piece of wood. It is not a symbol, or at least not just a symbol. It was the site of a great human drama. A place of great suffering.

 There is another thing that the cross is not. It is not artistic. (show image). We have all seen images like this. We see a hill, three bare crosses, and sunbeams shining through clouds. It is beautiful. It is reverent. It is haunting. But there is something missing. There is no Jesus. There is no man writing in agony.

 This morning, I don’t want you thinking about the shape of a cross, or a piece of wood, or sunbeams through clouds. Think about Christ, the man. The thirsty man who asked for water and was offered vinegar. The suffering man bleeding from so many wounds. The soul-sick man who felt abandoned and cried out--"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The dying man who gave His life to atone for our sins. Remember Christ the man.

**GRANDDAD’S SONG**

 My name is James Kennedy Taylor. I am named after my grandfather, my mother’s father, James Kennedy. He died when I was two years old. I have no memory of him.

 (Slide) But there is one thing that I do have. This song. Granddad wrote this song not long before his death. We sing Granddad’s song at every large family gathering. Last weekend was the Kennedy family reunion. It is a big family and there were 80 or so of us gathered. When we get together, one of the things we love to do is sing, and we all sang Granddad’s song.

 It is basically a communion song, and I would like to lead it now, or at least the first verse. And no, I do not get a royalty if the song is sung. You would honor me by joining in.

 



If I only have one thing to hold on to, or to associate with, my grandfather, this song is a pretty good thing. It tells about who he was, what he believed, and what was important to him. It is something that can be shared. It is better than a pocket watch. It will never break, and it is something I will never lose.

It tells the essential message of the cross, Jesus’ sacrifice, and what it means to us. I sometimes let this song run through my mind during the communion service. It makes me think of my earthly family. But it also makes me think of my Christian family that Jesus created for me by His great sacrifice. And it reminds me of the freedom I now enjoy in Christ. I am not bound by the law, but rather I am saved by grace.

My Granddad’s song may not have the same sentimental value for you that is has for me. But I hope that you will take to heart its central message. Christ died to make us free.

**AND THE BAND PLAYED ON**

 In April of 1912, the RMS *Titanic* set off on its maiden voyage. This was a time of great optimism. The industrial revolution had transformed the world. New inventions were pushing men forward – steam power, the wireless radio, the automobile, the airplane. There was a sense that men were conquering nature and that man’s potential was limitless. The First World War would break out two years later and do much to shatter that smug self-assurance. But in April of 1912, all things seemed possible.

 The *Titanic* rode the crest of that sentiment. It was arguably, to date, man’s greatest achievement. It was the largest moving object ever created. It was imposing and ridiculously opulent.

In their arrogance, men dubbed it unsinkable. As if in divine response to this boast, the ship struck an iceberg in its first Atlantic crossing and sank in under three hours. 1,500 people died.

It was a terrible tragedy. But even in the midst of tragedy, there can be inspiration; there can be beauty. For instance, while the passengers queued up to the lifeboats, the *Titanic* band famously gathered and continued to play to help keep the passengers calm. Survivors recounted that the brave band members kept playing until they were overcome by the water and drowned. Purportedly, the last song they played was *Nearer My God to Thee.* That seems a truly fitting sendoff.

I do not claim any great depth of courage and I can only hope that I could face death so bravely. And when I die, I pray that it is with the conviction that it will bring me nearer to my God.

For this hope, and for this conviction, I place my faith in the cross.

Before Christ went to the cross, we were lost in our sins and separated from God. But Christ came into the world, taking the form of a man, and taught us what it means to love and modeled for us how to live. When Christ concluded His earthly ministry, He allowed Himself to be taken. He was mocked and beaten, and then He suffered and died on a Roman cross. Christ played the part of a sacrificial offering in order to atone for our sins and reconcile us with God. When Christ rose again, He broke open the gates of death and blazed a trail for us to follow. Now, physical death brings us nearer to God because we have the promise of eternal life in Heaven.

The leader of the *Titanic* band was named Wallace Hartley. He was a devout Methodist. Interestingly, the violin he was playing at the time of his death appears to have been recovered and is one of the most meaningful pieces of *Titanic* memorabilia to have survived. At any rate, Wallace Hartley stayed true to his convictions to the end. By placing my faith in Christ’s great sacrifice on the cross, I hope to do so as well.

**BLAME**

 I take my shirts to be laundered at a local dry-cleaners in our neighborhood. On the wall behind the counter there is a plaque which reads: “To err is human, to blame it on someone else shows management potential.” That is a lesson man learned early.

 There was only one rule in the Garden – don’t eat the fruit of the tree in the center of the Garden. But man could not keep that one rule. And when God confronted Adam, he went into full blame-shifting made. He said: “the woman, You gave me, gave me the fruit and I ate it.” Clearly Adam had management potential.

 Jesus Christ essentially lived out the inverse of this aphorism. He was without sin, and yet He bore the blame for all the sin of the world. He was the scapegoat.

 That word—scapegoat—has Biblical footings. Leviticus 16 describes how the High Priest, Aaron, was to take two goats and bring them before the entrance of the tent of meeting. He was then to cast lots for the two goats. One goat would be sacrificed to God. The other goat would be sent off into the wilderness. The sins of the people would be symbolically laid on the goat and a man appointed for the task would lead the goat off to a remote place. Figuratively, this would cleanse the people of their sins. The man who led the goat off had to undergo a ceremonial washing before he was allowed back in the camp.

 But Jesus was not a goat. Although he played the part of the scapegoat, He was the son of God. His sacrifice was perfect. When He went to the cross, our sins were symbolically laid on Christ, though he was guilty of no sin Himself. And when our sins were figuratively nailed to the cross along with Christ, we were cleansed of our sins once and for all. No more goats need be sacrificed or led off into the wilderness.

 Playing this role came at a great personal cost to Jesus. He was arrested on false charges. He was abandoned. He was mocked. He was beaten. He was whipped. And finally, He suffered the most brutal death in the Roman arsenal – death by crucifixion. Through it all, He did not call for divine aid, which would have been at His beck and call, to end His ordeal. And, He did not seek to blame others.

Instead, He suffered all of this to benefit men who were selfish, unfaithful, petty, and ungrateful. In short, they were sinners. In short, they were us. Even though we were sinners, Christ loved us enough to die in our stead to redeem us from our sins. Let us remember that this morning as we partake of the emblems of that great sacrifice.

**FOURTH OF JULY**

 This Tuesday we will celebrate the Fourth of July. It is the day that we set aside to celebrate the birth of our nation. To remember our common history. To acknowledge our common heritage. This is the day that we focus on what it means to be an American.

 We live in turbulent times. It seems increasingly difficult to identify just what common values we are supposed to share as Americans. Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet just seem--dated. All of our traditions, all of our institutions, seem to be under assault. More and more, we believe in less and less.

 But even if our common bonds as Americans seem to be fraying, there is a more important common bond that we share as Christians. Right now we are at the point in our service where we pause and remember the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

 It was through this great act of sacrifice that Christ redeemed His people, and launched His church. That is our common heritage. It is where we began as a brotherhood. It is our most important common bond.

 I am proud to be an American and I will celebrate the birth of our nation this Tuesday. But first and foremost, I am a Christian. And this morning, and indeed on every Lord's day, I stop to commemorate the birth of the church.

 So right now, let us all marvel at Christ's great love that He demonstrated by His great sacrifice. Let us remember His broken body. Let us remember His shed blood. Let us remember His great anguish. But let us also remember His great triumph and all that it means to us today.

**WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT**

 In 1844, Samuel Morse held a demonstration of his new invention, the telegraph, for members of Congress. He transmitted a message from the capitol to a railroad station in Baltimore, which was then transmitted back. The message read: “What hath God wrought?”

 That is a quote from the 23rd chapter of Numbers. It was uttered by the non-Hebrew prophet Balaam in a strange story in the Wilderness period where a pagan king, Balak, was trying to pay Balaam to issue a negative prophecy about the Jews. But whatever its Biblical footings, I love the phrase and the context of its use in the telegraph test.

 Morse understood that the natural world God had created was amazing. Morse’s invention, which allowed near instantaneous communication over great distances, was a monumental leap forward. But Morse knew that, in creating his invention, he was merely revealing some of the marvels of what God had done in the creation. It was God who deserved the glory. That was revealed when Morse keyed out, in great wonder, “What hath God wrought?”

 This morning, I would like for us to approach the ceremony of the Lord’s Supper with a similar sense of awe. Because whenever I stop to consider Christ’s sacrifice, I am struck with wonder and amazement.

 The history of the Bible up to that point is a repetitive cycle of man disappointing God. Adam began this cycle when he bit into the apple. Then man became so evil that God wiped him out with a flood. Then God chose a people to be His special nation, but they disappointed Him again and again. Almost immediately after God brought them out of Egypt by an incredible show of power, they melted down all their jewelry and made a golden calf. God became so angry with the people that He killed off that entire generation before allowing the next generation to enter into the Promised Land.

 But even after the Jews entered the Promised Land, the cycle of disappointment continued. The book of Judges contains story after story of the people falling away from God, resulting in oppression from some neighboring kingdom. Then the people would cry out to God and He would raise up a champion to rescue them. Things would be good for a time, but then the cycle would start again.

 This cycle continued into the period of the kings. Some kings would be good, but most were bad. Again and again, the people forsook God and turned to idolatry. Eventually, this led to punishment and captivity.

 In short, by the time of Christ, man was a great disappointment. We were fickle. We were faithless. We were sinners. God had been patient and longsuffering, but we had disappointed Him time and again. God could have forsaken us.

 What is amazing is that He did not. Instead, He sent His own son into the world to suffer and die to redeem His sinful and ungrateful children. Despite all we had done, God still loved us. I find that wondrous. I find that incredible.

 As you partake of the symbols of Christ’s great sacrifice, I hope that you will feel just a little bit of wonder and awe at the depth of God’s love. When you consider the cross, how it changed the world, and all that it means for us today, I hope that you marvel on the phrase: “What hath God wrought?”

**THE FORCE**

 Many years ago, Lou Ann, the boys and I went on a trip to California. While we were there, we purchased two toy light sabers for the boys. When we were flying home, the sabers were tucked away in our carry-on luggage. We had to wait in what seemed like an endless line to reach the security checkpoint, and when we did the TSA agent rooted the sabers out of our bags. He told us that they could not go through security and we would have to go back and check them in.

 This seemed like an unpalatable option since it would mean we would have to wait in the security line again. So I tried to explain to the agent that the light sabers were not actually real. As you might imagine, the agent was unmoved. And so, I tried a different tactic. I stared at him intently, waved my hand, and said: "We don't need to check in these sabers." Shockingly, this did not work either.

 I was 10 years old when *Star Wars* was released to theaters. The movie was wildly popular, and I can still remember that occasionally people would actually say: "May the Force be with you." Over the years I have sometimes mused that this is about as much mysticism as Hollywood can handle. The only god Hollywood is comfortable with is some kind of neutral and impersonal force that surrounds us and binds us together and gives the comforting feeling that there is some kind of order and purpose to the universe. But Hollywood has no interest in a personal God that cares for us individually, seeks our love and devotion in return, and has expectations of us.

 The God that we serve is not a nameless and impersonal force. Our God is Yahweh. He loved us so much that while we were yet sinners He sent His own son into this world to serve as the perfect sacrifice to redeem us from our sins. Christ was born into this world as a man. He lived a sinless life as an example for us all. He taught a revolutionary morality. And finally, in a great and terrible act of sacrifice, He laid down His life on a Roman cross to bring forgiveness of sins and the promise of salvation to His followers.

 Our God does have expectations of us. He expects and deserves our gratitude, our love, our honor, and our devotion. He expects us to live moral lives, to love our neighbors, and to obey His commandments. One of the things we do to show our respect is to follow Christ's exhortation made in the Upper Room to partake of the emblems of His great sacrifice when we come together to remember Him and what He did for us. So join me this morning as we pause to remember our lord Jesus Christ as we observe the ceremony of the Lord's Supper.

**THE BIG BEAR**

 I recently attended a funeral for Wanda Stacy, a long-time family friend, and a particular friend of my mother. Mrs. Stacy had a daughter named Sherrie who was my age, had bright red hair, and was very cute. I had a crush on Sherrie for a long time.

 When I was twelve or so we were living outside of Los Angeles and the Stacys came to visit us. We went to Disneyland and Sherrie and I were just old enough to run around on our own. Early in the day, we stopped at a ring-toss booth and I plunked my money down. My hope was that I would win a stuffed animal that I would gallantly give to Sherrie who would be so grateful that … well, I only had the vaguest idea of what I hoped would happen next.

 Would you believe it, I won! In fact, I won big! I did not just win some miniature, no frills teddy bear. No sir. The stuffed bear the attendant handed me was huge! I kid you not—this thing was at least four feet tall and big and fluffy!

 This might sound like a good thing. But the problem was, it was about 10:00 in the morning and we were not supposed to meet our parents until 6:00 in the evening. Now I had to carry this thing around, or figure out something to do with it. Was I supposed to use another ticket on the bear so it could ride next to me on *Pirates of the Caribbean*?

 Anyway, the moral of the story is – go to the ring toss at the end of the day, not at the beginning.

 While that may be good advice for the ring toss, it is not good advice for your walk with Christ. That is something you want to start early.

 Christ is our savior. While we were yet sinners, He consented to be the perfect sacrifice to atone for our sins. We are gathered this morning to partake of the emblems of that great sacrifice. Because of Christ, we have the hope of eternal life. We have joy.

 The sooner you let Christ into your life, the sooner you will know the peace that comes from being a child of God. The sooner you will come within His loving embrace.

Moreover, even if you are already a Christian, perhaps you feel as though you have wandered away from God. If so, start early in rededicating your life to Christ and let this ceremony draw you back into the fold.

**DUNKIRK**

 In the Spring of 1940, the German Wehrmacht crashed through northern France and the Lowlands. Nothing could stand in its way. The British Expeditionary Force was pushed back to the North Sea port of Dunkirk where almost 340,000 men were trapped on the beaches. Home was only 75 miles away, but that 75 miles crossed the choppy seas of the English Channel.

 The order was issued to rescue as many of the men as possible. For reasons that have never been clear, the German panzer units held back making an evacuation possible. All across England, the call went out, and a fleet of over 800 vessels, many of them private yachts, merchant vessels, and fishing vessels, set sail. These were their boys; their sons; their husbands; their brothers. They were only 75 miles away, and they needed help.

Over 300,000 men were rescued. This was the Miracle of Dunkirk. It makes for a heartwarming story, that has made for a recent blockbuster movie.

But I want to focus on a more narrow story. When the soldiers were trapped, and there was hope that they would be rescued, but it was still very uncertain, a British naval officer cabled a three-word message to the command in London: “But if not.” He gave no further context to the message, and just expected it would be understood.

I do understand it. It is from the book of Daniel. The Babylonian king had built a huge statue and passed a law that said that everyone had to bow down and worship the statue when the trumpets blew, or they would be thrown into the fiery furnace. Daniel’s friends, Shadrach, Meschach & Abednego, refused to bow down. When they were brought before him, King Nebuchadnezzar gave the men one last chance to bow down, but they refused. They told the king that their God had the power to save them, and that He would deliver them. “But if not,” they would still not serve other gods, but would remain faithful to Yahweh.

And so the British officer at Dunkirk was saying–we hope we will all be rescued. But if not, we will remain faithful to the end and continue to resist to the best of our ability.

What I find interesting about this story is the idea that the officer knew that he could communicate all of this with just these three words because he could count on the Admiralty understanding the reference. At the time, the Bible was still the common heritage of western nations. It was our source of shared stories and shared values. It bound us together and was a rallying point uniting the people.

That is no longer the case. So many of our countrymen have turned away from the Bible. In fact, just reading certain passages from the Bible is considered hate speech by many. The Bible is no longer something that binds us all together.

That saddens me. And it worries me. It is not just because I am a Christian. I am also concerned that without this common heritage and common source for basic values and morality, we really have nothing to hold us together as a nation.

We are fracturing badly. If we ever again face a dire need requiring us to make and sustain a national effort, as we did in the Second World War, I just don’t see how that would be possible now. We cannot agree on anything. How could we possibly maintain a national resolve--sufficient to withstand hardship, suffering, or reverses--over any sustained period of time?

There are any number of storm clouds on the horizon that could result in a national crisis that would require true unity of purpose and effort to withstand. Unfortunately, we seem incapable of such unity these days.

But I am a Christian first, and an American second. And this morning we are gathered to commemorate Christ’s great sacrifice on the cross at Calvary. Even if the cross is no longer the common heritage of the bulk of Americans, it remains as our common heritage. It is, or at least should be, what binds us in fellowship and makes us brothers and sisters.

We do not all agree on all religious points, and that has led to significant fracturing in the Christian world. I find that unfortunate and, in many instances, unnecessary. I believe that there is room in our fellowship for diversity of thought and opinion among Christians. I can find common ground with most any Christian who believes and acknowledges that Christ sacrificed His life on a Roman cross to atone for the sins of men and rose again in triumph. As Christians, that is our most basic commonality, and much of the rest that we often trip over is just details.

As you participate in this communion service, focus on what is important to our Christian heritage – Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection – and let that be a unifying force and our rallying point to define all Christians and unite us in common cause and common fellowship.

**THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT**

 This has been a turbulent week in our nation. There is a lot of anger. There is a lot of angst. It is not my purpose, here from the pulpit, to become embroiled in any political discourse. But this topic seems unavoidable, and I feel I should address, in a very general way, how we, as Christians, should respond.

 First, I want to emphasize that God is not within the exclusive province of any political party, or any political movement, or any national, ethnic, or racial group. God loves all men, and all women.

But mostly, I want to remind us all of Galatians 5:22. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such, there is no law.”

 We cannot control the convulsions that seem to be rocking our nation at the moment. All we can control is ourselves. In doing so, I believe we should measure our actions, our speech, our thoughts, and our attitudes, by the standard of Galatians 5:22. Are we exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit?

 As you interact with your fellow citizens in this troubled time, I want you to ask yourself – are you exhibiting love? It is easy to love those who look like you and think like you. But we are called to a higher standard. We are called on to love even those who revile us. And this love should pervade and direct not only our actions, but also our thoughts and our attitudes. So whatever side of an issue you may be on, ask yourself if you are exhibiting a Christian love for the person on the other side of the issue.

 How about peace? In your speech, and in your actions, are you promoting peace, or are you promoting division and dissention? Remember that as Christians we are called on to be peacemakers. I believe that an important aspect to peace is understanding that we can live in peace even if we do not always agree.

 Patience. Are you showing patience toward those with whom you disagree? Or are you writing them off, concluding they are evil and/or unreachable, and hardening your heart against them?

 Kindness and gentleness. These seem to be in short supply in our modern political discourse. Instead, what we see is rage. Shouting. Harsh slogans. Even violence. As Christians, we must rise above these impulses. And again, it is easy to be kind and gentle with people with whom we have no conflict. It is difficult to show kindness and gentleness to those who disagree with us. But that is what we are called on as Christians to do.

 Goodness. Probably people on all sides of the political spectrum tell themselves that their actions are good. And I do not believe that goodness is the sole province of any group. But I will say this. I have difficulty seeing goodness being exhibited by those, whatever their political leanings, who are swinging a bat, screaming obscenities, or seeking to harm or intimidate their fellow citizens to make a point in a culture war.

 Finally, self-control. We may not be able to control what is happening in our nation, but we can control ourselves and, as Christians, that is what we are called on to do. Model the fruit of the Spirit. Apply it to your life, even when it is difficult. Set an example.

 I also want us to remember Ephesians 4:2: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient with one another in love.” I reference this passage because it adds the concept of humility. Always remember that you may not always be right and you do not have sole possession of virtue. State your opinions in humility, and honestly listen in humility to what others have to say.

 Let me be clear here. I am not just talking about loving people of other races and/or moderately different political persuasions.  Hopefully, as Christians, this is not an impossible task.  But the recent events in Charlottesville show the true scope of our task. Can you love and pray for the neo-Nazis at that rally? Or the young man who drove his car into the crowd? I abhor what these people stand for, and what they advocate. I believe the young man behind the wheel should be prosecuted and punished. I grieve with the victims of his crime. But the neo-Nazis at that rally are God's children too, and they are desperately in need of our prayers.

 None of this is easy. But these are the attributes that Christ exhibited in even more dark times. Christ lived at a time when his homeland was subjugated to a brutal Roman dictatorship, and his local political and religious leaders were corrupt and misguided. And yet, He displayed the fruit of the Spirit even as he faced persecution that was far greater than anything we experience today.

 That was nowhere more evident than in the events surrounding Christ’s crucifixion. When the soldiers came to arrest Him, Peter cut off the ear of one of the soldiers. But Jesus showed love and kindness to the soldier by healing his wound. As the High Priest and Herod mocked Him, Jesus exhibited great self-control. As He looked down from the cross, He was able to pray, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.

 On Wednesday, Roy played for us a clip of an interview of the father of the young woman who was killed in Charlottesville. He said that as Christ prayed on the cross to forgive those who were crucifying Him, he prayed for the man who drove his car into the crowd and killed his daughter. Can we do that? Christ prayed for those who were crucifying Him. Can we pray for those who are crucifying our nation by their hate?

 We are gathered this morning to honor Christ for His great sacrifice. We honor Him best by emulating His example. Let us do so by exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit in all that we do. This is particularly important today as we interact with our fellow citizens who may disagree with us, may be angry and hurt, and who may resent or even hate us. It is our job to respond in love, and with humility, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control.

**THE SAD STORY OF JC**

 When I was 18 years old, I began attending Abilene Christian University. I arrived a week before classes started to participate in the “Welcome Week” program. One of the first people I met was a young man named JC Clayton. We made for quite a contrast. I was a short, scrawny, pimply-faced Caucasian. JC was a big, strapping African-American who had been recruited and was there on a football scholarship. Despite our dissimilarities, I found JC to be bright, friendly and outgoing. I took a liking to him.

 Over the next several years, I had a lot of interaction with JC. At ACU we did not run in the same circles and we were never really social friends. But JC and I were both in the ROTC program. There were only seven of us from ACU in the program, which was housed at a neighboring institution, Hardin-Simmons University. Through the ROTC program, JC and I had nearly daily contact and we participated in multiple field training exercises and other trips. We were always on very friendly terms and I enjoyed the time I spent with him. I considered JC a friend.

 One day in my junior year I was driving my truck near the campus when I saw a little blue car slide into a stop sign pole in a turning island. Out popped JC Clayton. I stopped and congratulated JC on his fine parking skills.

I had never known JC to own a car. In fact, he had borrowed my truck on one occasion. Even so, I just assumed the car was his. Anyway, I pulled out a tow strap and we dragged the car out of the street and into a nearby parking lot. JC assured me he would handle it from there, and I drove off.

 It was not JC’s car. It belonged to a young school teacher in her late twenties. She had been murdered in a grisly way about twelve hours earlier. The police found the car in the parking lot and witnesses told them that someone in a pickup truck had dragged it there. A private investigator hired by the victim’s family started canvassing the neighborhood and knocking on the door of anyone who had a pickup truck. Eventually, he knocked on my door. He took me to the police station, I identified JC from a picture lineup, and the police arrested him.

 JC was charged with capital murder and I testified at his trial. The jury found him guilty and sentenced him to death. The state did, in fact, execute him about a decade later.

 I am not here to second-guess the decision of the jury. I did not see all the evidence. Moreover, it is not my purpose today to dispute the severity of the punishment. As Christians, we are called on to forgive, but that does not absolve a criminal of responsibility for his actions. The crime committed was terrible and a terrible punishment was warranted.

 But this was the first time in my life when I was personally acquainted with someone accused of a serious crime. It gave me a different perspective and made me question some of my preconceptions. I knew JC as a warm, friendly man. Whatever JC had done, he was still the person that I knew, as well. No one is ever purely evil, or purely virtuous.

When I was sitting outside in the hall waiting to testify, JC’s attorneys approached me wanting to talk. There were also, in the hall, members of the victim’s family and it was clear that they did not like me talking to JC’s attorneys. I sympathized with them, but I could not simply join the lynch mob against JC. So, I agreed to talk to them, although it did not affect my testimony in any way.

Thirty years later, these events still trouble me. This crime was obviously a tragedy for the victim and her family. But I did not know them. I hope that JC’s conviction and subsequent execution brought them some measure of peace, but it is not something that I really feel personally.

I did know JC Clayton. He was a man who had been my friend. This crime was a tragedy for him as well, and I grieve for him to this day.

This experience makes the story of the two criminals who were crucified alongside Christ more poignant for me. I like to think of JC as the criminal who rebuked the ones who mocked Jesus. That man was guilty and admitted that his punishment was deserved. But that did not rob him of all humanity or decency. In his anguish, he reached out to Christ for mercy, and it was granted. And I think, if grace and forgiveness could reach that criminal on the cross, they could reach my friend JC as well.

 And that is what I want you to focus on as we partake of the Lord’s Supper this morning. Marvel at the tremendous power of forgiveness that Christ made possible through His great sacrifice on the cross. If it can save even a condemned criminal guilty of a capital crime, it can save you.

**TARGETS DOWNRANGE**

 My older brother and older sister both started wearing glasses at least by junior high, and they later started wearing contacts. But I did not need glasses as a child. I was happy about it. I never liked the appliance of glasses. They are uncomfortable, they get in the way, and they are just one more thing to lose or break. Also, learning to wear contacts seems like a pain, and it is even easier to lose or break them. Finally, in my youth, I took unwarranted pride in being one of those genetic marvels who have naturally good vision.

 This lasted through high school and college. Unfortunately, things started to decline during law school. Maybe it was all the reading I had to do, although it was my distance vision and not my reading vision that was affected. At any rate, my vision started to deteriorate gradually.

 At some level, I was probably aware that my vision was deteriorating. But that was not a conclusion I wanted to make, or accept. I fought against it, made excuses, and continued to believe, against all evidence, that I had good vision.

 But then I had to participate in marksmanship qualification testing for the National Guard. I always enjoyed the qualification ranges. You would be set in a firing lane that had pop-up targets spaced out every 50 yards out to 300 yards. One of the targets would pop up and you would have to adjust and engage that target with your M-16 before it popped down again 3 or 4 seconds later.

 So on that day I got all set up in my lane. Other shooters were spaced out along the firing line in their lanes. I waited. Then I heard the other shooters firing, but I did not see any target pop up in my lane. I must have had a defective target. Then I heard the other shooters firing again, but still I saw no target. Hmm. Two defective targets. What were the odds?

 By the time the test was over, and I had failed miserably, the last fig leaf was torn away. The targets were not defective. I could no longer deny it. I needed glasses.

 Sometimes, we can become caught up in actions, or even patterns of thought, that do not glorify God. That are, in fact, sinful. But no one likes to admit they have done wrong, or that they have sinned. That is a conclusion that we all fight against. We make excuses to justify our actions or thoughts that, deep down, we know are wrong.

 When I finally broke down and bought some glasses, things were better. Suddenly everything was clearer and sharper. I passed the marksmanship test. I even had Lasiks surgery a couple of years later and that corrected my vision for the next two decades. But first I had to stop denying the problem and confess that I needed glasses.

 Similarly, we need to admit and confess our sins and seek forgiveness. Only then will our consciences be clearer. Only then will things get better. And this is not something we should postpone.

 We are gathered this morning to observe the ceremony of the Lord’s Supper. This ceremony recognizes Christ’s great sacrifice on the cross that brought forgiveness to His followers. This is the perfect time for you to pause, each week, and reflect on the sins you have committed; to confess your need for forgiveness; to repent; and to seek the forgiveness that Christ made available through the very act you are commemorating. That is what I would like you to do this morning.

**WAS SHE STEALING FROM THE FIRM?**

 A number of years ago another attorney and I were assigned a new assistant. She had been hired by our office manager, and neither Michael, the other attorney, nor I had had any role in engaging her. And so, when she first showed up, we were a bit surprised. She was exceptionally beautiful! Truly drool-worthy!

 The problem was she was not a very good secretary. To be fair, I don’t really know if that is true or not. She might have been a fine secretary if she had just shown up. But she just would not show up consistently. In fact, it was worse than that. She would call in in the morning to say that she was having car trouble or something, but that she would be in by noon. Relying on what she said, we would not make any alternate arrangements. And then she would not show up for the rest of the day. Eventually, the problem got so bad that we had to let her go.

 A few days after we did so, one of the senior attorneys in our firm came into my office. He looked at me and said, with great incredulity in his voice – “What, was she stealing from the firm?”

 You see, everyone, or at least all the men, wanted this woman around because she was so attractive. Despite her lack of either a work ethic or professionalism, people wanted to cut her some slack because she was so beautiful. That is the way of the world—from lovely secretaries, to football players, to movie stars. But the Bible teaches us that “what people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.” [Luke 16:15].

 People were not drawn to Christ because of His physical appearance. He was not exceptionally handsome, or a great athlete, or a mighty warrior. And people were not drawn to Him because of His wealth, position or rank. He was not a prince, or a nobleman. He was not an important religious or government official. He was the son of a simple carpenter from a small town in an unimportant province.

 Instead, people were drawn to Jesus because of the revolutionary message He taught. Christ’s message was one of love and morality, not rules and tradition. And people were drawn to Him because of the wonders He performed.

 Finally, Jesus changed the world forever by His ultimate sacrifice on the cross. That is why we are gathered together right now. This is the time we set aside to commemorate the love and devotion Christ showered upon His followers when He took on their sins at Calvary. The bread symbolizes Christ’s body which was so cruelly broken. The fruit of the vine symbolizes His blood which was so liberally shed. Because of Christ’s sacrifice, and His subsequent victory over death, we now have forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

 Let us pause now to honor Christ. Not for His physical appearance. But rather for His love, His wisdom, His teaching, His morality, and His great act of sacrifice.

**I AM A LIGHTHOUSE**

 Lou Ann and I recently took a trip to New England to see the beautiful colors of the fall foliage. We spent one of the days of our trip tooling around the Maine coast. That is a beautiful coastline. But it is remarkably rocky and treacherous.

 While we were there, I remembered an old story I heard in a sermon once. The story was about a naval officer who had been granted command of a huge warship—let’s call it the USS Saratoga. He was very proud of his ship; its immense size and the raw power of its weapons.

 One dark and foggy night, he was in the combat information center when the ship’s radar reflected off something in the distance. They were steaming straight toward it at high speed. Then they received a radio signal instructing them to adjust their course.

 The captain was affronted by this message. Who was this distant radio caller who had the gall to issue instructions to him? His ship was mighty and powerful. His ship’s business was critical to national security. The USS Saratoga should not be the one to adjust its course. So he fired off a radio message –I am the captain of the USS Saratoga. You adjust your course!

 The reply came back – You adjust your course. I’m a lighthouse.

 It is all too easy for us to become too puffed up; to be too full of ourselves. We tend to rate ourselves and our accomplishments too highly, and that can lead us astray. Pride is one of the seven deadly sins for a reason.

And modern social media may exacerbate the problem. If you have a zillion Facebook friends, or you get a lot of “likes” on some post, it can feed into a conclusion that you want to reach – that you are important and that the world revolves around you. It is like being the star of your own reality program.

Humility is often in short supply.

But here is something that should make you humble. You cannot earn your salvation. You cannot be righteous enough. You cannot be good enough. You cannot work hard enough. Salvation can only come through grace.

And that grace was made available by the actions of another. That man was a simple carpenter, who lived two thousand years ago, in a distant land. That man was God’s own son.

Jesus was the perfect sacrifice to atone, once and for all, for the sins of His followers. At fearful cost, Jesus accomplished the work of salvation on the cross. We cannot contribute to it. All we can do is accept it. And this morning, we pause to remember that great sacrifice, which has made all the difference, as we participate in the ceremony of the Lord’s Supper. Let us show proper honor and respect as we do so.

**LET’S GO ASTROS!!!!**

 Wow!! What a World Series! Watching it gave me heart palpitations. It was exciting. It was frustrating. There was drama. There were the highest of highs, and the lowest of lows. It was an amazing roller-coaster.

 When we lost Game 1, and we were down 3-1 in the 8th inning of Game 2, I was certain we were dead. The Dodgers’ untouchable closer was on the mound, and the Dodgers’ seemed poised to take a formidable series lead. And then, inexplicably, we came back from the dead. The ending of Game 2 was unbelievable.

 And then we reached Game 5. If we had lost that game, we would have faced the seemingly impossible task of having to go back to Los Angeles and having to win two games in their park. By the top of the 4th inning, we were down 4-0 with the mighty Clayton Kershaw pitching shutout ball for the Dodgers. We were dead. But then, miraculously, we came back from the dead to score 4 runs in the bottom of the 4th.

 The jubilation was short-lived, though, as the Dodgers scored 3 runs in the top of the 5th. Once again, it seemed as though we were dead. But once again, we came back from the dead. The ending of Game 5 was even more dramatic than the ending of Game 2, and it left me completely drained and exhausted at around 1:00 a.m. in the morning.

 Then came Game 6. This was our moment. Our great ace, Justin Verlander, was on the mound. All the momentum was in our favor. This was the moment we envisioned when we went out and got Verlander from the Tigers. This was the storybook ending we were all waiting for. Only, it did not happen. The Astros lost. The let-down seemed immense.

 And it seemed we were dead again. Now we faced a do-or-die Game 7 in Dodger Stadium. The Dodgers had all the momentum, and the top of our pitching rotation was spent. The task seemed impossible. And yet, by the bottom of the 2nd inning, we were up by 5 runs. We never looked back. Our much-maligned bullpen held up. And then, it was over. We had won! Go Astros!

 That was a moment of pure joy. Not only for the players on the field, but for an entire city still reeling from the effects of Hurricane Harvey. Amazingly, over 17,000 people had gathered in Minute Maid park just to watch the game on the Jumbotron with other fans. They went berserk! The next morning, I wasted far too much of my work day reading articles about the game. As I did so, tears of joy touched the corners of my eyes.

 The triumph of the Astros did deliver a moment of overwhelming joy. But sports glory is fleeting. There is always next year. But what should not be fleeting is the joy we should feel from Christ’s triumph over death on the cross.

 We were dead in our sins. We were lost. But then Christ came into the world.

The last week of His life was full of highs and lows as well. It started with a tremendous high as Christ entered Jerusalem in triumph riding on a donkey with the people cheering and spreading palm fronds in his path. There were lows when Christ was arrested, beaten, and then crucified. The lowest of lows came when He died. It was so jarring that the great veil of the temple was rent from top to bottom.

But then came the highest of highs. Christ rose again in triumph over the grave. His perfect sacrifice brought atonement and forgiveness of sins. His victory over death brought hope and the promise of life eternal. Christ’s resurrection was the highest of highs and the greatest moment of pure joy. And that joy should be everlasting as the effects of Christ’s actions are everlasting.

So celebrate with me the joy of the Astros’ World Series’ triumph while the high lasts. But also celebrate with me this morning, as we partake of the Lord’s Supper, and celebrate with me every morning, Christ’s triumph over sin and the grave at the cross of Calvary. For that is a high that never fades, and it is why we should have eternal joy!

**PHI QUAGMIRE**

 At Abilene Christian University, where I went to undergraduate school, there were no fraternities or sororities affiliated with national organizations. But we did have local social clubs that fulfilled some of the same purposes and followed some of the same practices. In my sophomore year, I pledged to a club called Phi Quagmire.

 This was a new social club that had only existed for a few years. It had been founded by a remarkable group of young men who wanted to form an organization, but they wanted one that had a character that was very different from a traditional fraternity. The very name – Phi Quagmire – was a tribute to the club’s unique character.

Indeed, I never saw myself as a fraternity type. But there I was as part of the second wave of pledges to the club.

Pledging Phi Quagmire was one of the best decisions I ever made. I am now, and forever will be, a Quag. The young men that I associated with were a lot of fun and they have forever changed my life. In my junior year, I lived in a house with 4 other Quags. In my senior year, I lived with 5 other Quags. This was my tribe and my fellow Quags formed the basis for all my social and intramural activities.

 What made Phi Quagmire so special was not that it provided an affirming social structure. Instead, what made it special was that it brought me together with a group of good and decent men. Moreover, this was a Christian school and my fellow Quags were men who were serious about their Christianity.

 In the end, this may have sown the seeds of the club’s demise. I do not believe that there is a Phi Quagmire at ACU today. A significant reason for this, I believe, is the club’s refusal to be exclusive. After all, what is the old saying – “Any club that would admit me as a member is probably not a club worth joining.”

 Anyway, I was the club’s pledge master for my last two years at ACU. We had pledge classes. I designed programs to push the pledges and promote relationship-building between pledges and members. And then, at the end of the pledge period, we had formal meetings of members to decide if any, or all, of the pledges would be admitted to the club.

 At these meetings, there would be some impassioned comments. Good things would be said about each pledge, and negative things would be pointed out. However, while there would be argument back and forth, the result was really foreordained. When all was said and done, we simply could not, as a group, tell a pledge who wanted to join us that we did not want him. As Christians, that just did not seem right.

 Experience has taught us that such a liberal admissions policy is, for whatever reason, detrimental to the long-term health of a university social club. I believe that it contributed to the slow death of Phi Quagmire. But even if we had known that at the time, and we did suspect it, I still don’t think we would have done anything differently. That is because following Christ’s example was more important to us than perpetuating our club.

 Christ came to call all men to repent. His ministry was not limited to people who were interesting, or handsome, or popular, or athletic, or talented. In addition, He reached out to the poor, the downtrodden, the infirm, and the social and religious outcasts. In fact, it was this latter group that was more receptive to His message.

Finally, when Christ made His great sacrifice on the cross, He did so to benefit all men. He did not restrict the benefits of His actions to a favored few.

 Whoever you are, Christ died to save you. He does not reject you because you have sinned. He does not reject you because you are poor, or uneducated, or slow, or ungraceful, or the wrong color. He does not reject you because you are overweight, or because you lack confidence. Very much to the contrary, Christ loves you, and you are welcome in His club. If you accept His grace, you will be made perfect in Him, and you will know the blessing of life eternal. That is the meaning of the cross, and that is what I would like for you to consider as we partake of the emblems of Christ’s great sacrifice.

**THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING**

 There is a movie I remember from my youth called *The Russians Are Coming.* It was released in 1966 – the height of the Cold War. In the movie, a Russian submarine commander wants to get a look at America and so he brings his submarine in close to shore so he can see it through the periscope. Unfortunately, he comes in too close. The submarine runs aground on a sandbar and becomes stuck.

 The Russians are forced to send a party ashore to the local town to find some kind of equipment or a boat to free the submarine. But they know if the people become aware of their presence, and the American military is alerted, they will be in terrible trouble. So they have to be very careful.

 Even so, they are discovered. The townspeople raise the alarm and the folks of this small town rush to defend our shores from the invading Ruskies. What follows is a tense standoff with a motley group of citizens armed with shotguns and hunting rifles arrayed against a small band of Russian sailors armed with submachine guns. Shots are set to be exchanged at any moment.

 Then something unexpected happens. A small boy, perhaps 7 years old, had come out to watch the excitement, and had climbed up on a roof to get a better view. He falls off the roof but is caught in the air by his belt. His position, as he hangs there, is precarious and quick action is needed to save him. Everyone, including the Russians, drop their weapons and rush to his aid. The young, strong Russian crew forms a human pyramid and some of the townspeople clamber up and save the boy.

 After the rescue, the dispute between the townspeople and the Russians seems unimportant. The townspeople accept the explanation that the Russians were just curious and intended no harm. And the townspeople decide to help the Russians free their submarine. All is well.

 But then a local citizen who had not been present at the rescue runs up to announce that he has called the Air Force and they are on their way. The Russian Commander determines that the planes will arrive before his submarine can reach deep water so they cannot escape. The townspeople then decide to take to their boats and form a flotilla around the submarine until it can slip away.

 The Russian Commander tells the people that that will not work. Knowing how his own country’s air force would react, he tells the people that regardless of the other vessels, the planes will simply fire at the submarine.

 The reaction of the townspeople is what truly makes this movie special for me. They look at the commander with incredulity. And they tell him, with absolute certainty, that there is no way that an American Air Force pilot will fire into a flotilla of American boats just to sink his submarine, regardless of what anyone over a radio tells him. And that is what happened. The townspeople, in their boats, lead the Russian submarine away from the shore, and when the Air Force planes arrive and see what is happening, they withdraw without firing.

 The ending of this movie reminds me of the parable of the wheat and the tares from Matthew 13. In the parable, a man, who clearly represents God, sows a field with good wheat seed. While he sleeps, his enemy sows tares among the wheat. When the man’s servants discover this, they tell the man and ask if they should go and gather up the tares. The man says no because he is afraid that if they do so they will uproot some of the wheat along with the tares. So he instructs that they should let them grow together until harvest, and they can be separated at that time.

 I take comfort from this. In the movie, safeguarding the American civilians was more important to the Air Force than sinking the Russian submarine. In the parable, safeguarding the wheat was more important to God than uprooting the tares. This shows how much God loves and cares for the saints, who are represented by the wheat.

 God proved His great love for the saints by sending His only son into the world to act as the perfect sacrifice for the atonement of their sins. To accomplish His task, Christ died a horrific death on a Roman cross, and He was buried. I count myself among the saints because I believe that Jesus made this sacrifice. Moreover, I believe that the stone of His tomb was rolled away, and Christ rose again on the third day, breaking open the gates of death. I put my faith in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection for my hope of forgiveness and eternal life. If you wish to be counted among the saints, affirm your belief in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection as you partake of the emblems of the Lord’s Supper this morning.

**THE SAVIOR IS BORN – WHO GOT THE MEMO?**

 Tomorrow we celebrate Christmas--the day we have set aside to celebrate the birth of Jesus. There is a lesson I like to give at this time of year that I call – “The Savior is Born – Who Got the Memo?”

 This was a pivotal event in the history of the world. And yet, very few people were aware of it at the time.

I would first like to focus on who DID NOT get the memo. No one told Caesar or any Roman in authority. No one told the chief priest, or the Sanhedrin, or any of the religious or political leaders of the Jews. The question is – why not?

Well, God did not tell King Herod, but he did learn second-hand from the wise men. What did Herod do? He ordered that all male children under age two in and around Bethlehem be slaughtered. And he did this not because he did not believe the Messiah had been born, but because he was afraid that the Messiah might truly have been born and Herod saw him as a threat.

Herod’s reaction explains why no one in authority got the memo. They would have reacted negatively, and even violently. The political and religious leaders liked the status quo and they did not want a Messiah coming along and upsetting their apple cart. And this was not opposition that God wanted at this time.

So who DID get the memo, and why? Well, I would initially state that I believe that an important reason for God announcing Christ’s birth to anyone was to encourage Mary and Joseph when they saw their reaction. To that end, the Gospels talk about how Mary “treasured these things in her heart” after the lucky few who got the memo came to see Jesus.

But let’s focus on the specific individuals who got the memo. There are essentially three groups. First, there were two elderly people who were mainstays at the temple – Simeon and Anna – who seem to have been afforded the privilege of seeing Jesus before they died as some kind of reward for years of faithfulness.

Second, there were wise men from the East who saw the star and travelled to see the baby Jesus. We know very little about these men. We are not sure exactly where they were from. We don’t know their names, or even how many of them there were. All we know is that they were from the East, they were wise, they were important enough to get an audience with King Herod, and they could afford expensive gifts.

So why were these men given personal notice? I believe that what is important is that these men were not from Israel. They were likely from modern day Yemen, or at least somewhere completely across the Arabian desert. And the point being made here is that Jesus’ birth had a significance that went beyond the local. It was, in fact, an event that would change the world.

The final group of people who got the memo was a group of shepherds who were sleeping out in the fields watching their sheep. They got to see as a light show in the skies, they were told that the Savior had been born, and then a chorus of angels appeared to sing praises. We do not know anything about these shepherds. We don’t know their names, or even how many of them there were. So why did they get the memo?

In the end, I believe the point of this story is not these random shepherds in the hills. Rather, it was to acknowledge that a great and world-changing event had just transpired. Moreover, it was a joyous event that called for joyous songs. These shepherds were just fortunate enough to see it.

Jesus’ birth, that we will celebrate tomorrow, is a significant event. But what is far more significant is Jesus’ death. Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice of His life on the cross is why Jesus came into the world in the first place, and it is His death that we are gathered to commemorate this morning. Because of His death as an atonement for our sins, and because of His subsequent resurrection, we have forgiveness and we have the promise of eternal life. So tomorrow you can celebrate Jesus’ birth. But right now, as we partake of the Lord’s Supper, I ask you to stop and consider Jesus’ trials and suffering on the last night of His life, His gruesome death, and His triumphant resurrection.

**NEW YEARS’ RESOLUTIONS**

 Today is New Year’s Eve. Today is the day when many Americans will sit down and evaluate their lives. They will identify what think is going well, and areas that need improvement. And they will resolve to do better. We call these “New Year’s Resolutions.” Commonly, people will resolve to lose weight, or start going to the gym, or save more money. Perhaps you are considering making a New Year’s Resolution.

 This is largely a secular tradition, but I believe it is a good one. It is helpful for us to have a recognized time, or milestone, when we are encouraged to take stock of our lives, to identify weaknesses, and to resolve to make improvements. The ending of one year, and the beginning of the next, seems like an appropriate time. Plus, gauging how long our resolutions last into the new year is a useful yardstick to measure an individual’s seriousness, discipline, and willpower.

 I would like to apply this tradition to the ceremony we are observing this morning. We are gathered to remember Christ’s great sacrifice on the cross of Calvary, and all it means to us today. This is the seminal event in human history that demonstrated Christ’s great love for us, delivered forgiveness of sins to Christ’s followers, started the Christian religion, and gave us hope.

This awesome and terrible event came at a great cost, but we did not pay it. Rather, Jesus paid the price by His broken body and shed blood. The bread and the fruit of the vine that are the emblems of the Lord’s Supper ceremony represent Jesus’ broken body and shed blood. We observe this ceremony every week when we come together to help us remember, and to tie us back to, Christ’s actions.

But the Lord’s Supper can also serve another function. It is an occasion that should periodically remind us to stop and take stock of our religious lives. I encourage you, as you participate in this service, to evaluate your walk with God. Identify what you believe you have done well. But also frankly acknowledge where you have sinned and failed God, and what you can improve. And then, resolve that you will do better.

**MARY**

 In Luke’s gospel there is a story where Jesus and at least some of his entourage visit the home of Jesus’ friends Martha and Mary. Martha was distracted seeing to everyone’s comfort-arranging the house, preparing food, clearing dishes, and so on. But Mary sat at Jesus’ feet and listened. Irritated, Martha asks Jesus if He would tell Mary to get up and help her. But Jesus responds: “Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed--or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” [Luke 10:41].

 On one level, I appreciate this story. I think of how much of my life is spent on the mundane; earning a living, obtaining, preparing and consuming food, maintaining a home and a vehicle--all the minutiae of life. And I think, how often do I pause and look up to the horizon and focus on what is truly important--advancing God’s kingdom. Am I a warrior for God, or am I just another person bogged down by all of the messy details of life?

 On another level, though, this story has always troubled me.

 Let me tell you another story. My brother is five years older than I am, but he married later in life. His wife’s name was Susan and she is intelligent, well-read, witty and urbane. She was reared in a different religious tradition, but she knows her Bible well and is serious about her religion.

 Anyway, it was the first time that Susan was with us at a family Christmas. Lou Ann and my sister Allison had gotten up early and were bustling around making breakfast and preparing some deserts. Susan came down relatively late and sat at the kitchen table and began sipping coffee. As she sat in her chair, she looked at Lou Ann and Allison as they toiled away and declared that she was “more of a Mary.”

 If Susan’s goal was to build a rapport with her new sisters-in-law, this quip was a not a good start. But more to today’s point, Susan was misapplying the Martha and Mary story because she was, at least in jest, using it to justify her selfish interests and not for any godly purpose.

 Let us focus this morning on another misapplication of scripture. The Jews misapplied the scriptures relating to the Messiah because they interpreted them in the light of their own selfish interests, and not with a view to God’s broader purposes and plan. Specifically, the Jews expected and looked forward to the coming of a Messiah, but they badly misunderstood who that Messiah would be. They ignored prophecies from scriptures such as Isaiah 53 about how the Christ would be oppressed and afflicted and led like a lamb to the slaughter. Instead, they convinced themselves that the Christ would be an earthly prince who would be a mighty warrior. He would rally the Jews and lead them to glorious victories over their enemies and establish an earthly kingdom with the Jews as His favored people.

 But Jesus’ kingdom was not an earthly kingdom. And Jesus’ role was not that of a military conqueror. Instead, His kingdom was spiritual, and His role was that of a sacrifice to redeem the sins of all men, including the Gentiles.

 Jesus was born into this world as a man. He lived a life without sin as an example to us. He called all men to repent and taught a message of love and morality. And then He allowed Himself to be taken by the soldiers and led like a lamb to the slaughter. He played the part of the perfect sacrifice to once and for all deliver forgiveness of sins. Because of His great sacrifice, all of us have hope. Not just the Jews, but the Gentiles as well.

 This morning, as we observe the Lord’s Supper, let us rejoice that Jesus did not come as an earthly conqueror to vindicate the earthly ambitions of the Jews. Instead, let us celebrate that He came as a spiritual redeemer to bring forgiveness and the promise of eternal life to all men—Jew and Gentile alike.

**TEX-MEX**

 I am a big fan of Mexican food, or at least of Tex-Mex cuisine. What we eat here in Texas is probably very different from the food that real Mexicans eat south of the border. In fact, I have found that there are differences in what is called Mexican food in different regions of America. As I have eaten at Mexican food at restaurants across the nation, I have found that, for instance, what is served as Mexican food in New York is different than what is served as Mexican Food in Texas and is different from what is served as Mexican food in California. They are all good, but I prefer Tex-Mex because it is what I am used to and it reminds me of home.

 My family lived in California for five years and my sister Allison still has some dear friends in California. A few years ago she told me that she was visiting her friend Jane out in Los Angeles and they went to a Mexican food restaurant. Accompanying them was Jane’s daughter, who was probably in her late teens. Allison was telling them that the Tex-Mex served in Texas was different from what was being served at this California restaurant. Jane’s daughter proudly proclaimed that the Mexican food served in California was far superior to the Mexican food served in Texas. According to this young woman, the reason it was so much better, or perhaps just more authentic, was that California shares a border with Mexico.

 Allison is much nicer than I am. She let this statement pass without comment. I would probably have made some acerbic retort belittling this young girl for her fundamental ignorance of geography. But I admit that doing so would have been childish because it would have served no useful purpose and instead would have only fostered resentment.

 This morning, I ask you to consider the Jews living at the time of Christ. They were laboring under a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the Messiah. They believed a messiah was coming, but they did not understand who that messiah would be. They expected an earthly prince; a mighty warrior who would rally the Jews and lead them to glorious military victory.

They could not conceive of a messiah who was the son of a simple carpenter from an insignificant province far from Jerusalem. And they could not conceive of a messiah that would allow himself to be arrested, falsely accused, and executed as a common criminal. But that is the role that Jesus played. He came to be a sacrifice, not a conqueror.

Man’s sin was so great that it required a blood sacrifice to bring redemption. And not just any blood sacrifice. The blood of animals was insufficient. To bring redemption and forgiveness of sins once and for all required the perfect sacrifice of the blood of God’s own son.

At fearful cost, Jesus agreed to be that sacrifice. Because of His great act, we have forgiveness, we have hope, and we have been accepted as sons and daughters of the kingdom. Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection have made all the difference. That is what we are here this morning to commemorate as we partake of the emblems of the Lord’s Supper.

**LOST**

 When Wade was 13, he went to Italy on a trip organized by an intrepid art teacher at his school. We were a bit nervous letting Wade travel so far without us, but it seemed like a tremendous opportunity.

 A few days into the trip, Wade called home very early in the morning, waking us up, and his mother answered the telephone. She was very happy to hear his voice, as this was our first communication with him during the trip. Lou Ann asked him if he was having a good time, and Wade assured her that he was.

 But that was not the reason for the call. Rather, Wade was calling because he had gotten separated from the group and did not know where anyone was. He was lost. Trust me, however groggy Lou Ann might have been, that woke her up. Having a lost child is every parent’s nightmare.

 We are all God’s children. And before Christ came, we were all lost. We were not lost in the sense of being temporarily out of contact such that we could not be physically located. But we were lost in a much more fundamental way. We were lost in our sins. We were in rebellion against God and our guilt separated us from Him.

 But now we are found. We are found because God, in His great love, sent His own son into this world to find us, and to redeem us from our sins.

But this redemption came at a great cost. Our sins were so great that it took a great and perfect sacrifice to bring atonement. Christ was willing to make that sacrifice.

This morning, we are gathered to commemorate that great sacrifice. We will partake of the bread--the symbol of Christ’s broken body. And we will partake of the fruit of the vine—the symbol of Christ’s shed blood. These are not to be glossed over. Think about how Christ was beaten by the Herod’s soldiers; how He was whipped by the Roman soldiers; how He was made to carry a heavy cross on His shoulders to the place of His execution; how His wrists and ankles were spiked to the cross, how He was lifted up; and how a spear was thrust into His side and out gushed a mixture of blood and water.

The Romans were brutal, and crucifixion was the most severe punishment in the Roman arsenal. The Romans employed it because it was a very visible symbol of humiliation and punishment. But they also employed it because it was a painful and lingering way to die. Something to be feared.

Christ suffered all of these things for our benefit. Because we were lost and the only way to redeem us from our sins, to make us found, was for the divine Christ to make this great and terrible sacrifice.

So now that you are found, do not let yourself get lost again. One of the ways to do that is to stop, each week, and remember what it took to make us found. That is why we are gathered this morning, and that is what you need to remember as we partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine.

**CHRIST MADE A GREAT DIFFERENCE IN A SHORT TIME**

 One of the very senior attorneys at my firm, we will call him Tom, shared with us a story flowing from his time at a previous law firm. The story was about a junior attorney who was just not a hard worker. We will call him Bill. Bill did not take his responsibilities seriously. Everything he did was late and incomplete. Tom would have to hound Bill incessantly to get Bill to complete any task. In short, Bill was just lazy.

 Bill left Tom’s firm and then sought employment with a new firm. The new firm called Tom to ask whether he thought Bill would be a good employee. In today’s business climate, this can be a dangerous question. So Tom’s answer was a bit cagey. He told them that they would be lucky if they could get Bill to work for them.

 Bill’s problem is that he just did not get anything done. That is certainly not something that can be said of Jesus Christ. He fundamentally changed the world through a public ministry that lasted *just three years*. How could he accomplish so much in so short a time?

 In pondering that question, I sometimes marvel at the things Christ did *not* do. For instance, Christ did not write some significant book or treatise that could be copied, passed around, and studied and which could from the basis of some new school of philosophy. In fact, other than some scribbling in the ground, we are not aware of anything Christ Himself wrote. Moreover, Christ did not, like so many others have attempted, spread His message through the sword; imposing His philosophy through military conquest.

 So how can one explain Christ’s great and far-reaching impact after such a brief ministry? I believe there must have been three factors.

 First, Christ’s message must have been electric and inspiring. Indeed, it must have been divinely inspired. For Christ’s words so energized His followers that, in a remarkably short period of time, they carried it across the known world.

 Even so, there must have been more than just an inspiring message and gifted oratory. To motivate His followers to such an extent; to radically change their understanding of their religion and culture; and to set them out on a difficult, wildly unpopular, and dangerous path to spread the good news, Christ’s message to His followers must have come with some proofs of divinity. And so, second, there must have been miraculous signs that fortified Christ’s words.

 My third factor for explaining Christ’s great impact in so short a time may just be something that appeals to the poetic in me. But I believe that it was important that Christ’s ministry ended with a bang. At the pinnacle of His popularity, Christ entered Jerusalem in triumph. But shortly thereafter He suffered a very public and humiliating crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. The masses in Jerusalem were part of all of these memorable events. And thus, when Christ was raised from the dead, and the Romans could not disprove that claim, it had all the greater impact.

 Right now we are pausing to remember the culminating events of Christ’s ministry—His death, burial, and resurrection. As you do so, I would like for you to marvel at the fundamental impact Christ Jesus made in this world in his brief ministry. Ask yourself—how could that have happened? Perhaps you will identify things I have not.

But then I want you take comfort in the fact that it did happen. Christ did change the world by His ministry, and mostly by His great sacrifice on the cross and subsequent resurrection. And because of all of this, we now have forgiveness of sins, and the promise of eternal life.

**GOD LOVES ME**

 It was my junior year in college and I was driving home for Thanksgiving. One of my roommates was riding with me. I had a light Toyota truck, and it had oversized, off-road tires. It was drizzly and late at night. I was on Interstate 10 just outside of Katy. There were some bumps or imperfections in the road that lifted me up just enough for me to start hydroplaning. I slid from the right lane of the freeway, across the left lane, through the broad center median, and onto the opposite side of the freeway where I was hit by a semi going the opposite direction.

 Now that sounds pretty bad, and you may be asking yourself--how is it that I am here telling you this story? Well, all I can say is God loves me. A lot of things went just right for me. First, when I entered the center median I was certain I was going to flip. But the ground was so soggy that the mud just flew up and nothing grabbed the tires and held. But it did spin me around and arrest my forward momentum. That was critically important because by the time I hit the pavement on the other side of the freeway I was no longer moving forward at any signficant rate. But I still had some lateral momentum. So I slid sideways across the far side of the freeway. Fortunately, though, I had spun around so that it was the tailgate leading the way, not the hood.

The truck driver had seen me coming and he had moved over onto the right shoulder as far as he could hoping to miss me. He did not entirely succeed. But he was successful enough that I did not hit the front of the semi. Instead I impacted on the side on the trailer. Then my truck started to crumple under the trailer, which was a bad thing. But then the roll bar on my truck hit the trailer. It bent but did not break, and this popped me back out. In fact, the recoil pushed me back across the freeway so that when I finally came to a rest, I was back in the center median and out of the lanes of traffic.

 I was completely unhurt, as was my roommate. It was miraculous. The back of my truck was curled up like a pretzel, but the cab forward maintained its integrity. Both the front windshield and the back glass popped out, but neither shattered. Someone was looking out for me.

 As all college students do, I had all my laundry in a duffle bag in back of my truck and my hope was that I could convince my mother to wash it. Well, the bag flew out of the truck and someone ran over it. That poor driver was freaking out because he thought he had run over a body. Anyway, I had this bright yellow t-shirt in the bag and when I picked it up it had a tire mark directly across it. My plan was to wear the shirt when I got back to school and tell people that I was wearing it at the time of the accident. Unfortunately, my mother washed it and, would you believe it, it came spotlessly clean! It was like a Tide commercial.

 I do not know how God chooses to act in this world. I am not here to tell you that God intervened directly and kept me safe. I am not that important. But I am here to say that when I stopped shaking, pieced together what happened, and realized the perfect chain of factors that seemingly conspired to protect me from harm, it did make me think - God loves me! And I stopped and gave thanks for the love of God.

 We are now gathered to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. This is a time when we should all stop and give thanks to God for His unfailing love.

 God created man and put him in a beautiful garden. God showered His creation with love, but man sinned and rebelled against God. From that time forward, man has disappointed God again and again. God could have washed His hands of His creation. But He did not. He showed unfailing love toward man, and sought ways to redeem them. He made covenants with Noah, with Abraham, with Israel, and with David. He sent priests and prophets. But man was stubborn and spoiled all these efforts. More was needed to redeem man.

 Eventually, God sent His only begotten son. God loved us so much that He was willing to sacrifice His Son to redeem us. And Jesus loved us enough to accept this role. Because of Christ’s perfect sacrifice, we have been redeemed. Our communion with God, that was broken in the garden, has been restored. We now have hope and the promise of eternal life. That is why we are celebrating as we partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine.

**ANOTHER FOURTH OF JULY MESAGE**

 I hope all of you had a wonderful Fourth of July. Perhaps some of you went and caught a fireworks show. Perhaps you gathered with family and friends. Perhaps you ate some barbecue. Or maybe you just enjoyed some time off work. Since the 4th fell on Thursday, I know many people took Friday off and made a particularly long weekend.

 I am a proud and patriotic American. I believe the Fourth of July is a very important holiday. It commemorates the day when the American colonists stood up and declared their independence from a distant monarch. The colonists struck a blow for self-determination. For democracy. For freedom. Seven years of bloody conflict would be needed to back up that declaration. But it all began with the Fourth of July.

 For all her flaws, I believe that America is an exceptional nation. Since its founding, America has been a beacon of hope and freedom. It has sometimes been messy. There are sins that stain our history. Even today we often fail to love up to our principles and our high rhetoric. But there is a reason that so many immigrants have flocked to America, both in the past and today.

 So I believe that the day that America declared her independence is an important day, that deserves commemoration. We should set aside that day and make it special.

 But I do not wish to overstate the importance of this event, which is merely political, historical, and secular. This morning we are here to celebrate a far more important, a far more meaningful, event. That event was the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth; the Son of God. That event was, in fact, the most significant event in all of history.

 Christ’s great sacrifice changed the lives of all men throughout history. Moreover, the impact of the cross was not merely political, and it is not limited to this world. Rather, its impact is spiritual. Moreover, it fundamentally changed this world. But also, by delivering grace and forgiveness to His followers, Christ gave us access to the next world; to eternity.

 The declaration of independence was important, so we celebrate it once a year. The crucifixion of God’s own son was a far more important event. Hence, we celebrate it more often. In fact, we celebrate it 52 times a year. We do so because Christ, on the night He was betrayed, took the bread, and the wine, and gave it to His disciples. He told them to take this, in remembrance of Him, whenever they came together.

And so each week, when we meet, we break the bread, and we drink the wine, to remember our Lord, and His great sacrifice. We do this to honor Christ. And we do this to focus our minds during our worship; to make our worship more meaningful. Please join me in prayer.

**HISTORY BUFF**

 I am a history buff. I am particularly interested in the Second World War. I find the period fascinating—both the war and the events leading up to it. But sometimes I fear that, looking back on the events, I lose some of the human drama that played out. You see, I already know the ending. I know where the tide turned. I know the results of all the major battles and how they fit into the larger picture. And, of course, I know the ultimate outcome of the war.

 I am currently re-reading two of my favorite books—Herman Wouk’s *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance.* These books are part of a genre that I particularly enjoy—historical fiction. In these books the history is accurate and the author has created a story by weaving his characters into the history. In Wouk’s novels, his characters are spread out in strategic locations all over the world and got a broad view of the events leading up to the conflict, and of the conflict itself, as they unfolded. And significantly, as they lived through these events, they did not know what the outcome would be.

 They watched as German armies smashed through Poland and France. They sheltered with the British as German bombs fell during the Battle of Britain. They saw with dread the seemingly inexorable advance of the Wermacht across Russia and to the very gates of Moscow. In the Pacific, they experienced the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the Americans being ejected from the Philippines. They watched the Japanese push down the Malay Peninsula, capture Fortress Singapore from the British, and threaten Australia.

 As you read, you can experience the fear and dread of these characters as they experience these events in real time and see their world being torn apart by a seemingly unstoppable Axis tide. Could that tide be stopped? They did not know. Living through these events as they occurred is certainly a far different experience than studying them as historical events.

 Sometimes I fear that when we approach communion it is as though we are studying history. Christ’s great sacrifice on the cross happened 2,000 years ago, and we know what happened and what the impact of that event was. Moreover, we may see Christ not so much as a man, but as some-kind world-historical figure. But if we approach communion in that way, we will lose sight of the real human drama that played out.

 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed. “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.”

Matthew 26:36-39. Jesus was not some remote, world-historical figure. He was a man. And He was frightened and filled with dread. This was not a metaphor, or a story. This was really happening. He was about to be taken by the soldiers. Jesus knew what was coming, and He wanted no part of it. Never forget the anguish Christ was enduring, and the drama being played out.

 Looking back at it from the future, we know what Christ’s next words were: “Yet, not as I will, but as you will.” I have always wondered how long of a pause there was before Christ uttered these words. But on those words, and that decision, rests the Church and our forgiveness and our salvation. For Christ submitted to His Father’s will and went to the cross.

But even though we know the end of the story, we should never forget the human drama experienced by those who lived through these events. That is what I would like you to think about as we turn our minds to the communion.

**THE CORNER OF A FOREIGN FIELD**

There is a famous poem written by a man named Rupert Brooke called *The Soldier.* It tells the story of a very patriotic British soldier, stationed abroad, facing an upcoming battle. He knows he may die, and he writes a note, probably to a sweetheart. He says:

If I should die, think only this of me:

      That there’s some corner of a foreign field

That is forever England. There shall be

      In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,

      Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;

A body of England’s, breathing English air,

      Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

 There is no corner of Palestine that is forever Christ, at least not in this way. That is because, when the women came to honor Christ’s corpse by anointing it with oils, they found the stone rolled away, the tomb empty, and an angel who asked them – “Why seek the living among the dead?” There was no body! Christ triumphed over the grave and rose again. That is what we are here today to celebrate.

 Yes, we will partake of the bread, which is the symbol Christ’s broken body. And we will partake of the fruit of the vine, which is the symbol of Christ’s shed blood. Christ suffered a terrible ordeal. He died. It was a great sacrifice. If that were the end of the story, it would be a somber story indeed.

 But it is not. Christ rose again, and because of that we have hope! We have forgiveness of sins! We have the promise of life eternal! We have joy! So celebrate with me this morning that the tomb was found empty and there is no corner of Palestine that is forever Christ.

**30127**

 My son Seth works for a company that has a European parent company. His employer has some kind of matching fund where he is issued stocks on a European exchange. Someone at his company figured out that there are advantages to opening a European bank account to address any sales of the stock and to repatriate the proceeds back to the U.S. Long story short – Seth has a Swiss bank account.

 So, I have taken to calling Seth – 30127. Is that a number that anyone here recognizes? It is from a song in the musical *Evita.*

 When the money keeps rolling in what’s a girl to do?

 Cream a little off the top for expenses, wouldn’t you?

 But where on earth can people hide their little slice of Heaven?

 Thank God for Switzerland.

 Where a girl and a guy with a little bit of cash between them,

 Can be sure when they deposit no one’s seen them.

 Oh what bliss to sign your name as 30127,

 Never been accounts in the name of Eva Peron.

You see, for a long time, and perhaps still today, Swiss banks were known for offering anonymous, numbered back accounts where people could hide their money. Now there may be legitimate, innocent reasons to do this. But in all the old spy novels I have read, the reasons were always nefarious.

 Well, there are no Swiss bank accounts where we can hide our sins from God. He sees all. And what He sees when He looks at His creation must be disappointing. Men are selfish, vain, petty, jealous, sinful. His own chosen people rebelled and turned to idols and foreign gods. Even the pious Jews of Jesus’s time were disappointing. Jesus would call them “whitewashed tombs.” On the outside they kept the law with legalistic fervor, but their hearts had turned cold and, as Jesus said, they made their followers twice as fit for Hell as they were themselves.

 God could have washed His hands of His straying creation. He could have abandoned us and left us to our much-deserved fate. But He did not.

 Instead, and despite our sin, God sent His precious son into this world to be born of a woman and to experience life as a man. Jesus set an example for us of a life without sin. Jesus taught us a revolutionary morality based on love and not on legalism.

 But most importantly, Jesus played the role of the perfect sacrifice. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel offered sacrifices to God for temporary atonement for sins. Those sacrifices were imperfect and needed to be repeated.

 Jesus was the perfect sacrifice. Sinless. Pure. Divine. His sacrifice was once for all time. It cost Jesus dearly. He was betrayed. He was deserted. His body was broken. His blood was spilled. And He died an ignominious death on a Roman cross.

 The results of that sacrifice were wondrous, though. Through Jesus’ sacrifice, we are reconciled to God. Our sins, though many, are forgiven. We have the promise of eternal life.

 Today, we are gathered together to partake of the emblems of that great sacrifice. The bread to symbolize Christ’s broken body. The wine to symbolize Christ’s shed blood. We do this to honor Christ. And we do this to remember – both the selfless act of sacrifice itself, and the great benefits we now enjoy because of it.

 So join me today as we rejoice together in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

**Putting Our Struggles in Perspective**

 A generation after the death of Christ, Christianity had reached Rome in the form of an obscure offshoot of Judaism. Christians were rejected by Jewish authorities on religious grounds and seen as a threat by Roman authorities because they spoke of the coming of a new kingdom and a new king.

In the summer of AD 64, Rome suffered a terrible fire that burned for six days and seven nights. The people accused the Emperor Nero of starting the fire. In part to deflect these allegations and placate the people, Nero laid the blame on the Christians. He ordered the arrest of a few Christians who, under torture, accused others until the entire Christian movement was implicated and became fair game for retribution.

As many Christians as could be found were rounded up and put to death in horrific ways for the amusement of the populace. I imagine all of us have heard stories about Christians being thrown to lions in the arena or being lit on fire to serve as human torches for illumination.

My purpose in addressing this history is not to shock anyone. Rather, I wish to put our current struggles in perspective.

Today we are in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Certainly for me, and likely for most of us, this is the biggest disruption we have ever experienced in our otherwise placid and privileged lives. We are apprehensive. Some are frightened for their physical safety, or the safety of those they love, fearing they may fall prey to the illness. Some are frightened for their economic security. Many of us have lost our jobs, or seen our income cut back and our savings or assets denuded. None of us know what the future may hold, how this will all play out, and what our nation will look like in the wake of this upheaval. Uncertainty is just flat scary.

But I would like to make a few points here. First, the Covid-19 pandemic is not targeted at Christians. All are suffering and we have something many of our neighbors do not—a hope and a trust in God above. Second, the chance of our dying from Covid-19 is real. We have seen it here in our own congregation and it is tragic. But the chance of death is actually quite small for most of us and, for a Christian, there are worse things than death. Third, while we are all almost certain to face economic hardship from the pandemic, sometimes severe, these consequences are just economic. No Christian is likely to be thrown to the lions or set on fire, and we are unlikely to starve. We will muddle through.

So, times are tough for our nation, and the world. But for Christians, times have been tougher. The church not only survived Nero’s persecution, it thrived. Some Christians died, but they were comforted by their Heavenly father. Those who survived enjoyed a grudging new sympathy and respect from their neighbors borne from Christians staying true to their beliefs despite their horrific suffering. Long after Nero’s death, and indeed after the fall of Rome itself, the church endures.

We, too, will survive our current struggles. And if we stay true to our beliefs, even in the face of hardship, not only will the church survive, it will thrive.

What is it that made the Christians in Nero’s time so resilient, and that can make us, in the midst of our current anxieties, similarly resilient? It is our common bond as Christians. At root, this is the belief that the divine Jesus Christ came down from Heaven, was born of a woman, lived and experienced a human life as a man, laid down that life on a Roman cross as a perfect sacrifice to atone for the sins of His followers, and then rose again breaking open the chains of death. Because of that sacrifice, we have the promise of grace, forgiveness, and eternal life. We have the sure knowledge that, whatever our suffering here on Earth--whether it is being thrown to the lions as Christians were during Nero’s time, or living with the fear and anxiety of the Covid-19 pandemic--the Holy Spirit walks with us and when we finally lay down our earthly burdens, we will know peace and reward and life eternal with God above.

At this point in our worship service we stop to remember that common bond forged through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. We partake of the bread to remember Christ’s broken body. And we partake of the fruit of the vine to remember Christ’s shed blood. This is something Christians have done since Christ’s death in order to reinforce our common bond, and it is something Christians will continue to do until Christ comes again. We are part of a greater whole.

Please join me as we partake of the emblems of Christ’s great sacrifice, and as we recall what it means, and what it has meant, to all Christians throughout history.

**STRUMMING HER FOUR-STRING**

I do not play the ukulele. Not even a bit. But Lou Ann does. Or she is learning.

You see, during these times of coronavirus lockdowns, when we have all been cooped up in our homes, I have become something of a professional bingewatcher. I have gone back through a number of old television series, many of dubious cinematic or literary worth. Basically, wasted time.

But Lou Ann decided she wanted to learn a new skill. To better herself. So, she took up the ukulele. I can hear her down in the study until late in the evening strumming her -- four string -- and singing old John Denver tunes. While this might not be the hobby I would have chosen, it pleases me that she has chosen something, and I am proud of her for making good use of this time. My only complaint is that it serves to highlight my own sloth.

I often marvel that Jesus Christ – he made good use of His time. His public ministry lasted just three years. And yet, in those three years, Jesus changed the world. For a man with such a short time preaching, in a backwater province of the Roman Empire, who never wrote anything that we know of, other than some scribbling in the dirt, I find that unimaginable. In fact, I find it impossible without a divine explanation.

This morning, we have gathered for our worship service. We will do many things in this service. We will sing. We will pray. We will read from God’s holy scriptures. We will hear a lesson from a talented preacher. All of those are good things. But the most important thing we will do this morning, the best use of our time, is what we are doing right now.

For this is the time we have set aside to remember the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. We will observe the ceremony of the bread, and the fruit of the vine, to reinforce the significance of this great event. By observing this ceremony each week, as Jesus told us to do on the night He was taken, we help to keep in the forefront of our minds the great sacrifice that has given us hope, and forgiveness of sins, and the promise of life eternal.

The cross is at the center of all that we are as Christians. Unfortunately, the Christian world is fractured. We have divided over a host of issues, many quite trivial. But the vast majority of Christians believe that Christ came into this earth as a man; that He gave up His live on a Roman cross to atone for the sins of the world; and that He rose again on the third day breaking open the bonds of death.

Whatever differences I may have with others who name themselves Christians, if we can agree on these basics, they are my brother, or my sister. I will seek to minimize any areas of disagreement, accentuate the commonality of our central belief, and reach out in love.

Join me this morning as we make the most important use of our time during this worship service. Please join me in prayer.

**HAMILTON**

 Last week, I was with my two boys in Seattle at Seth’s apartment. Disney+ had just released a recording of a production of the musical *Hamilton.* Both of my boys are big fans of the musical, and so we sat down to watch it.

 I enjoyed it, although much of the music was in a style that I do not particularly care for. Specifically, a lot of the songs were in a Rap style. I do not question that this type of music requires great talent and can even exhibit real artistry. It just does not resonate with me. But it did resonate with my boys, and it does resonate with many in younger generations.

 What I appreciated most about the musical was that it presented our founding fathers in a positive, if sometimes irreverent, light. Hamilton was certainly presented favorably, as were Washington and Jefferson. Even the actions of Aaron Burr were treated thoughtfully and with measured consideration.

 I believe that is entirely appropriate. Yes, these were all flawed men. But they dared greatly, they fought bravely, and they changed the world, mostly for the better.

These are our stories. This is where we come from. We should not seek to whitewash our history and deny its blemishes. But, on balance, the founding of our nation, and the ideals on which it was based, were very good things. The men, and women, who brought it about, though imperfect, were noble and idealistic.

These are things that we should be proud of and that should bind us together with a sense of common cause and shared history and tradition. This seems to me to be a salutary message for all of us in these times of turmoil, and I credit Disney+ for releasing this production at this time.

As Christians, our common story is the Cross. That is where we come from. It is our shared history.

Jesus Christ left His heavenly home and was born of a woman. He suffered through all the vicissitudes of life as a mortal man. Through it all, He remained sinless and set an example for all of us. He became a teacher and He taught a revolutionary message and morality. He inspired men and changed the world.

But His most significant impact lay in how He left this world. He gave Himself up as a perfect sacrifice to atone, once and forever, for the sins of men. Though He was blameless Himself, He suffered betrayal, ridicule, and the bite of the lash. Finally, He suffered the ignominious death of a criminal – crucifixion on a Roman cross; a painful and brutal end.

Fortunately, the story did not end there. For on the third day He rose again, forever breaking open the bonds of death. Through His resurrection, He delivered to His followers grace, forgiveness, and the promise of eternal reward.

As Christians, this is our story. This is where we come from. This is our shared history and tradition. This is what we are here to celebrate this morning.

Please join me in prayer as we commemorate the emblems of that story.

**IT’S GOING DOWN TONIGHT**

When I read the accounts in the Gospels of the events leading up to Christ’s arrest, I am always amazed by what seems to me to be the apostle’s failure to appreciate that something momentous was about to happen. During the Last Supper, Jesus all but told them – it’s going down tonight!

Jesus tells them that one of their number will be betray Him. When John asks for more detail, Jesus identifies that Judas is the man. Then Judas gets up to leave and Jesus tells him – “What you are about to do, do quickly.”

Peter, in a fit of completely unmerited bravado, announces that he will never forsake Jesus, even if he has to die. But Jesus tells him – “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” That rooster is going to start crowing in maybe 10 hours!! What more could Jesus say to clue them in that the crisis was upon them?

Then, when Jesus and a few of the apostles head off for the Garden of Gethsemane, they carry two swords with them. They did not generally go around armed. The Romans would have frowned on such a practice. Once again, this night was a big night.

One would think, therefore, that the apostles would be keyed up and ready for anything. If there ever was a time for them to be sharp – this was it.

When they reach the Garden, Jesus leaves Peter, James and John down the hill and goes off by Himself to pray. Given all they have heard from Jesus that night, and the weight of the swords they are carrying, do these stalwart apostles endeavor to guard Jesus by setting a watch and keeping their weapons handy? No. They fall asleep!

Jesus comes back down the hill. He is obviously in great distress, and He is clearly unhappy that His friends have dozed off. Jesus scolds them. “Can’t you stay awake for just one hour? Stay awake and pray that you won’t be tested.”

Then Jesus goes back up the hill to pray some more. After being scolded by Jesus, surely now these men would stand to attention and prepare themselves for what was coming.

Alas, no. They fall asleep again! Jesus is clearly piqued when He returns. He blurts out “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough of this!” And Jesus marches them down to meet Judas and the soldiers who were approaching.

There is a message in this story for all of us. You do not want to be like Peter, James and John in this story. You do not want Jesus to find you sleeping when He returns and calls for you. I am speaking figuratively. I do not mean physical sleep, as in this story. Rather, I mean spiritual sleep.

There are times when you may feel close to God; when you are on some kind of spiritual high because of some event or some message you have heard. But there are other times when you may drift away from God. You become involved in other matters—you are busy at work; you are bickering with your children; bills are piling up; you are frustrated with political or social events. Just life. These concerns dominate your thoughts and you drift away, toward spiritual sleep.

What we need is to stay focused on, and close to, God, despite all the noise around us. That requires discipline and effort.

One way that we do this is to stop, each week, and celebrate the Lord’s Supper. We pause and remember Christ and His great sacrifice, and all that it means to us. This weekly practice can help to correct our drift and put us back on a Godly course. Faithful adherence to this repeated activity can help revive us and ensure that we are will not be found asleep when the time comes.

So – WAKE UP!!!

**WHAT CHURCH IS FOR**

Yesterday we conducted a virtual memorial service for Billy Smith. That is a new thing that was made necessary because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was largely the one who organized it and made it happen. As this was the first time we had ever done anything like this, it was a significant task.

 But I did not mind. Billy was a friend and I was pleased to honor him. More importantly, though, I believe that an event like the one we had yesterday is at the heart of what a church is and should be for.

 I remember when my mother died. This church hosted her funeral in this very auditorium. The majority of those who attended that funeral to honor her, and to comfort and support me and the rest of my family, were members of this church.

 When my two children were born, faithful church members hosted baby showers to help us prepare and to celebrate with us the joy of having a child. And then we had dedication ceremonies in this very auditorium after they were born to honor he children and dedicate them to God.

 When I married my dear wife Lou Ann, it was in a church building. It was not this church. Rather, it was Lou Ann’s home church in Dublin, Texas. The people who came to that event to help us solemnize our union, and celebrate with us, were largely church members.

 Church is important because it is a place where we worship and where we learn and where we serve. But is also important because it is a place where we fellowship. We share our lives with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We mourn with them when they are mourning. We celebrate with them when they are celebrating. We look to each other for spiritual, emotional, and material support.

This is a crucial aspect of church and, frankly, you get out of it what you put into it. Invest in your church and it will pay dividends. Be there for your fellow church members and they will be there for you.

In short, I love my church and that is one of the reasons I was happy to organize Billy’s memorial service.

 This is the point in our service when we stop and consider how church began. Christ began the church through His great act of sacrifice on the cross. Though innocent of any wrongdoing, Christ allowed Himself to be taken and He faced the corrupt justice of the Jews and the Romans. In order to deliver atonement and forgiveness of our sins, Jesus suffered the betrayal of the crowds, the desertion of his friends, the bite of the lash, and the anguish of crucifixion. He bled and died to wash away our sins.

 But He rose again on the third day to bring the hope and promise of eternal life. His followers banded together to form the church. And each week we stop and remember Christ’s sacrifice. We partake of the bread to remember His broken body. We partake of the wine to remember His shed blood.

 I hope that, like me, you love the church. This morning, as you think of the church, remember how it began – with Christ’s sacrifice on the cross of Calvary.

**SO FEW**

In the Summer and Fall of 1940 the vaunted, and heretofore undefeated, German Luftwaffe engaged the Royal Air Force seeking to gain air supremacy over England in support of a planned invasion of Great Britain. This has become known as the Battle of Britain. A relatively small number of RAF pilots fought the Luftwaffe to a standstill, denied Germany control of the air, and forced Hitler to abandon the invasion. Following the battle, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill summed up the efforts of the brave RAF pilots in a statement that has become legend: “Never in the field of human conflict have so many owed so much to so few.”

The following year, a large but poorly equipped, poorly trained, and poorly led Italian army fighting in North Africa surrendered to a British army that, at least in terms of numbers, was vastly inferior. This led Anthony Eden, Britain’s foreign secretary, to quip that “Never has so much been surrendered by so many to so few.”

I am occasionally troubled by Anthony Eden’s jest. I sometimes fear that we Christians are being cast in the role of the Italians. We are numerous. And yet, all too often it feels as though we are on the defensive and that we are surrendering more and more ground. Those assailing the church may be smaller in number. But they are louder, more militant, and seemingly more motivated. By contrast, we sometimes seem timid, disunited, and unengaged.

So how do we arrest that trend? Well, it is not through militancy. Our goal is not actually to defeat our enemies. Rather, our goal is to win hearts and souls for Christ, and that calls us to act like Christ. We must live moral lives beyond reproach. We must live lives of service. We must show love and compassion to all – not just those who are reasonable and lovable. In fact, it is probably more important for us to show love and compassion to those who are difficult to love.

Next, we must share our beliefs and convictions with others. We should not do this in a way that is intentionally obnoxious, confrontational, or judgmental. However, we should do it in a way that is bold and courageous. In today’s society, identifying as Christian and publicly proclaiming Christian beliefs and tenets can lead to negative social consequences. But if we are not firm in our convictions and our speech we will not win anyone’s respect. And if we are not proud of the name of Christ, Christ will not be proud of us when we stand before the seat of judgment.

 Finally, we should make an effort to be more united. We should make common cause with Christians around the world and focus on what is important and what unites us and seek to minimize our differences.

What is most important, and most central, to most all Christians, is what we are gathered together this morning to celebrate – Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. The vast bulk of Christians agree that Jesus came down from Heaven, lived a life as a man, and then sacrificed His life as an atonement for the sins of man. Through that great sacrifice, Christ delivered forgiveness of sins and the hope and promise of life eternal. The Cross is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

Right now, we are gathered together to partake of the emblems of that great sacrifice. We will partake of the bread, which symbolizes Christ’s body that was broken on the Cross. We will partake of the fruit of the vine, which symbolizes His shed blood. This ceremony, this ritual, celebrated first in the upper room, ties us together with Christians around the world, and throughout time. This belief in the Cross and its great significance is our most basic belief as Christians and we should find unity and common cause with all Christians who share this belief.

If we stand firm to our convictions, if we act in love as Christ acted, if we speak out boldly and courageously, and if we speak with one voice because we are all children of the Cross, we will not, as Christians, be compelled to surrender or cede ground to inferior forces, or any forces. Rather, the banner of Christ of Christ will advance.

**DEMO RANGE**

When I was in the Texas Army National Guard I served as a combat engineer. That role includes an explosives and demolition function. So, occasionally, I got to blow things up.

One day I was the officer in charge of an explosives range. That meant that we would head down range, set a number of charges, retreat back behind a big, earthen berm, and then detonate the charges. Then we would go back down range and lay more charges. Rinse and repeat.

In one of these iterations, we prepared 5 bangalore torpedoes. Basically, these are long tubes filled with explosives. They come in sections that screw together to increase the length. The idea is that you can shove the tubes underneath a concertina wire barrier and explode them to create a path through the barrier.

We laid five of the torpedoes and they were set to explode in 30 second intervals. The first two cooked off with satisfying BOOMS! But the third kind of went sphst. Finally, the last two made big BOOMS!

We had a problem. There had been a misfire and we had some unexploded ordinance down rage that was in an unknown condition. Pursuant to standard procedures, we waited 30 minutes to see if the charge would cook off on its own. Nothing happened.

So, that meant that the NCOIC and I had to go down range to investigate the problem. We tiptoed down range very carefully and it was pretty obvious what happened. There had clearly been a gap in the explosives in the tube. A small charge right at the entrance to the tube, where the blasting cap was, had exploded, but because of the gap, it had failed to ignite the rest of the charges. Instead, the bulk of the explosives had been ejected out the front of the tube. They were in a charred and discolored mass in front of the tube.

To resolve the situation, we placed a fresh block of C-4 on the ground. Then we very gingerly picked up the other explosives and stacked them around the fresh block so that, hopefully, they would cook off when we ignited the fresh charge. We then sprinted back behind the berm, detonated the charge, and all was well.

I was probably never in any real danger. C-4 is a very stable explosive that is not prone to accidental detonations. It takes both heat and pressure to cause a detonation. In fact, if I had a small block of C-4 here with me I could light it with a match and it would just burn, not explode. Back in Vietnam, when the army had C-rations in metal cans, soldiers would sometimes warm up their rations by cooking them over small blocks of burning C-4.

Still, I did not really know if the partial explosion, that had singed and discolored the initial charges, had done anything to affect their stability. And I can assure that any time you are working with high explosives and there is a problem, it is a scary situation. Any accident can lead to serious injury or death.

As Christians, though, death is not the worst fate we can suffer. That is because we have hope. The apostle Paul even declared that to live is Christ, and to die is gain. I have yet to reach that level of faith. But I do have hope.

This morning, we are gathered together to commemorate the one who gave me, who gave us, that hope. Before Christ came, men were lost in their sins. They were separated from God and without hope.

But Christ came to redeem men from their sins. He did so by playing the role of the perfect sacrifice. He was without sin Himself. He was blameless and pure. And yet, He accepted the punishment we deserved to atone for our sins. Metaphorically, we talk about how our sins were nailed to the cross with Christ, and how His innocent blood washed our sins away.

Because of Christ’s great sacrifice, we are now forgiven. We are reconciled with God. And we now have the promise of life eternal in a heavenly home. So now, we have hope. Death is not the end for Christians. It is, instead, the path to our reward.

I find that very comforting. We all need hope. It is precious. This morning, as we celebrate the Lord’s supper, cherish that hope and honor the one who delivered it to you.

**THE DUITIFUL SON** (140)

 This morning, as we prepare our minds for communion, I want to focus on a detail from the crucifixion that is seldom discussed. It happened while Christ was hanging on the cross John 19:25-27 reads as follows:

 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son. Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

 We think of Christ as God. As our savior. As the great redeemer. All of that is true. Indeed, Christ was, and is, divine. But He was also a man.

 He was born of a woman. He was a little boy once. He had a family that He loved and He was dutiful and respectful to His parents. Jesus had a human life. He gave that up to play the role of the perfect sacrifice to atone for the sins of men.

This incident with Jesus’ mother has always touched me and it provides insight into Christ’s heart. Here He was in great anguish on the cross. I cannot imagine the pain of having spikes driven into my wrists and ankles and having my weight supported by those spikes; and all of that was on top of the trauma He suffered before He was ever affixed to the cross.

And yet, in His pain, and as His life ebbed away, He was able to focus on the needs of the mother that He loved. Yes, Jesus was God. But He was also a loving and dutiful son.

This morning, we are gathered to commemorate Christ’s great sacrifice. We will partake of the bread as a symbol of Christ’s broken body. We will partake of the fruit of the vine, as a symbol of the blood that He shed. As we do so, I hope that you will contemplate the meaning of this sacrifice. Through His sacrifice, Christ paid the debt that we incurred through our sins. Symbolically, our sins were nailed to the cross, and then washed away by His blood. Because of His sacrifice, we are forgiven, we are reconciled to God, and we have hope. That is the meaning of Christ’s great, redemptive act. And it cost Him dearly.

But, as you remember the meaning of this great sacrifice, spare some thought for the man who made the sacrifice. For He was a man. A very good man. A man who inspired love and devotion. A man to be followed. A man who felt a responsibility toward His family. And a man who loved His mother.

Christ’s love and His sense of duty were so great that, in the midst of unimaginable suffering, as His life drained away, He stopped and did what He could to make provision for His mother after He was gone.

Truly, Christ was a man worth honoring.

**CREDIBILITY**

 When I was a young trial lawyer, the use of computers and technology in trial presentations to juries was still fairly limited. Back then, we used to create visual aids on big, blow-up boards. It seemed like every trial had a timeline spread out over a triple size, folding poster board. And key evidence and testimony would be highlighted, blown up, and mounted on big poster boards. But these boards were expensive to create and cumbersome to transport and manipulate. Moreover, they required a lot of planning as they had to be created by vendors who needed careful instructions and a lot of lead time. Finally, they were static – they could not be changed on the fly. As a result, a lot of thought and effort was devoted to boiling down what was truly important and making sure that everything on those boards was bulletproof—and by that I mean accurate, or at least supportable from the record.

 Now, things are different. Everything is electronic. Courtrooms all have screens and projectors and connections where laptops can be plugged in. Creating visual aids is simple. Slides can be created easily, cheaply, and quickly. Moreover, they can be manipulated on the fly to address changing situations. Lastly, in many cases, there is no longer a need for special vendors as technically-savvy attorneys can create relatively professional looking visual aids themselves. Even I have some limited facility with Power Point.

 For these reasons, the use of visual aids has exploded. But this can be a trap. Before, great care was exercised in creating each visual aid. Today, visual aids are churned out and displayed before a jury with much less care and analysis. It is easy to make a mistake, and such a mistake can have real consequences. If you overpromise something, or misstate the evidence, in a visual aid you show a jury, opposing counsel can turn it against you. Opposing counsel can pull up that slide and say – Taylor promised you that there would be evidence of this, but there is no such evidence. Or, Taylor told you that this was true, but it is not. You cannot believe what Taylor tells you. That kind of a mistake can badly damage an attorney’s credibility with a jury.

 As Christians, we have the greatest story ever told. God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten son – Jesus – into the world. Jesus lived a sinless life. He taught a revolutionary morality based on love, as opposed to obedience to the law. And He sacrificed His life in a great act of atonement to redeem men from their sins.

 Right now, we are poised to partake of the emblems that great sacrifice. We will partake of the bread, which symbolizes Christ’s broken body. We will partake of the fruit of the vine, which symbolizes Christ’s shed blood. And we will contemplate what Christ’s sacrifice means for us – forgiveness and hope.

 This is the great story of God’s love, God’s forgiveness, and God’s great blessing. It is the story that all men need to hear. We as Christians need to tell it.

 What I want you to focus on, in particular, this morning is our credibility as the story tellers. We do not want diminish God’s story because we, as Christians, lack credibility.

 We lose credibility when our actions are contrary to our high-sounding words. Nothing shatters credibility more quickly than hypocrisy. We lose credibility when we show hate, and not love. We lose credibility when we act selfishly and fail to put the needs of others before our own. We lose credibility when we appear ashamed of the Gospel. And we lose credibility when our lives fail to show the hope, excitement, and assurance of someone who truly believes that they are saved and loved by God.

 By contrast, our credibility is enhanced when we act as Christians should. When we live lives of love and service. When we speak out boldly about the Gospel. And when we show, even in the midst of hardship, that we have hope.

 As you participate in the ceremony of the Lord’s Supper this morning, this is what I would like for you to do. Focus on ways that you can enhance your credibility as a Christian so that God’s great story is not in any way diminished because of your shortcomings as the story teller.

**THE PORTRAIT OF DORIAN GRAY**

 The novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde, tells the story of a vain young man who has his full-body portrait painted by a famous artist. The portrait captures the image of a striking man, with handsome features, who is radiant with the bloom of youthful innocence and unspoiled purity.

 The portrait does not capture Gray’s true nature, though. At heart, Gray is a libertine; a hedonist. His only goal in life is to pursue sensual pleasures.

 But Gray realizes that his beauty and his innocent-looking mien will fade as age and harsh reality take their toll. And so, Gray strikes a bargain with demonic powers. He sells his soul to ensure that the portrait, rather than he, will age and fade.

 Gray then proceeds to live a life of debauchery. In fact, the novel was sufficiently specific that it was banned in many places. Moreover, Gray is cruel and heartless and even violent. Eventually, Gray becomes a frequent visitor to opium dens.

All of this begins to reflect on the portrait, but not on Gray’s body or face. The portrait begins to show a man with a sneering and harsh countenance, and a body scarred from disease, age and harsh use. The portrait becomes increasingly hideous. Not wanting to be reminded, Gray has the portrait hidden away in the attic and he does not look at it for many years.

 Eventually, and despite his handsome, youthful, and innocent appearance, Gray’s sins begin to catch up with him. Cuckolded husbands, people he has cheated or otherwise wronged, and the authorities begin closing in on him. To placate his pursuers and escape justice for his crimes, Gray falsely proclaims his innocence and professes his intention to live virtuously. He even tries to do so for a time.

 Gray begins to wonder if his new resolution to live righteously has manifested itself on the portrait. So, he goes into the attic to see. But he discovers that the portrait is more ugly and hideous than ever. From this, Gray understands that his true motive for his seeming moral reformation is not repentance or righteousness. Rather, it is merely a dodge to escape punishment, and perhaps a curiosity to try something new. In a rage, Gray stabs the portrait.

In the morning, the servants go into the attic. What they find is a withered and hideous man, wearing Gray’s clothing and jewelry, dead of a stab wound, and the portrait restored to its original glory.

 So why have I given all of you an English lesson?

 Well, what I would like for you to focus on this morning is how we *should* appear when we stand in judgment. The Bible often uses the metaphor of a white cloak to symbolize innocence and purity. But our cloaks have been stained and torn by a lifetime of sin. Our true appearance, before the judgment seat, should be stained, ragged, guilty, ashamed, and lost. We are not worthy of a positive verdict and entry into Heaven.

 But thanks to Jesus Christ, and His great sacrifice, that is not how we appear when we stand in judgment. Christ atoned for our sins, and took the punishment we deserved, by His death, burial, and resurrection. He paid the price for our transgressions and delivered forgiveness of sins to His followers. Symbolically, His blood washed clean our stained and tattered cloaks. Now, when we stand in judgment, our cloaks are white and mended, and God sees the shining countenance and purity of His son masking our true countenance and sinful nature.

 As you partake of the emblems of Christ’s great sacrifice this morning, pause to give thanks that Christ has washed clean your white cloak that has been stained and discolored by a lifetime of sin.

**FREDERICK DOUGLAS AND JOHN BROWN**

 A few months back, Lou Ann and I visited the town of Harper’s Ferry in West Virginia. It is a beautiful place set in rugged hills at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers. It is also a place with a fascinating history.

 Harper’s Ferry was the site of a federal armory that began operations in 1802. It was America’s first attempt at a military industrial complex. The layout of the site, and its scope and mechanization, were truly impressive for the time. It consisted of a series of warehouses and factories along the river. Water from the river was diverted behind the buildings through conduits and channels to turn water wheels and provide power.

 Because of its strategic location, its significant capacity for manufacturing weapons, and its stockpile of arms, the armory was the site of a lot of fighting during the Civil War. It changed hands between the Union and the Confederates several times. The city, and the armory, were largely destroyed during the fighting, and the armory was never rebuilt.

 But Harper’s Ferry is best known for an event that occurred just before the Civil War that provided a spark for that war. In 1859, a religious zealot named John Brown led a band of about 20 armed men who assaulted and captured the armory. His intention was to incite a slave rebellion which he would arm by supplying runaway slaves with weapons from the armory.

The rebellion never materialized and, two days later, a company of U.S. marines arrived and overran Brown’s position. Ten of Brown’s men were killed. Brown himself was captured, tried for treason, and executed.

In the town, there are monuments to the raid, and numerous signs describing the key players and where events took place. In all of it John Brown is treated pretty favorably; almost like a folk hero. That was a bit hard for me to swallow.

John Brown was violently against slavery and let me be the first to say that slavery was a monstrous evil that needed to be eradicated. But John Brown is not really someone I admire. He was a religious fanatic who saw himself as a Messianic figure with a mandate from God. He was willing to do anything to further his cause. After all, he came to Harper’s Ferry leading an armed raid on civilian factory workers, and his intention was to incite a violent uprising.

Plus, before coming to West Virginia, Brown had been in Kansas. At the time, proslavery forces and antislavery forces were pouring into what was then a territory seeking to gain control of Kansas before it became a state. In 1856, Brown and his five sons attacked a small settlement and hacked five pro-slavery men to death with broad swords. This became known as the Pottawatomie Creek Massacre and it touched off a summer of guerrilla fighting between the two sides.

 Suffice it to say that Brown’s legacy is mixed. While I applaud the cause he championed, I have problems with Brown himself. Even so, when I think about Brown, his warped sense of a divine mission, and the violence he committed, I also remember the words of Frederick Douglas.

Douglas was born a slave but escaped captivity and gained his freedom. He was a gifted writer and a powerful orator who became a leading voice for the abolitionist movement. He served in that cause for decades. Douglas’ relationship with Brown was certainly strained. But after Brown’s very public execution, Douglas is reported to have said that he, Douglas, lived for the slave, but John Brown was willing to die for the slave.

These words have always resonated with me and made me ponder the concepts of dedication and commitment. I like to think that I live for Christ, although perhaps I am just deluding myself. But am I willing to die for Christ? If the truth be told, I really hope that that is not put to the test.

But one thing I do know is that Christ was willing to die for me. In fact, He did die for me, and all of us.

That is what we are here to commemorate this morning. We were lost in our sins until Christ came. Although innocent Himself, Christ atoned for our sins by sacrificing His life on a Roman cross. Christ showed the ultimate dedication, and the ultimate commitment. And His great act has made all the difference.

I hope that none of you are required to die for Christ. But at a minimum, I pray that you, that we, are sufficiently dedicated and committed to live for Christ. It is the least we can do.

**NOT ON A MISSION FROM GOD**

 The last time I delivered a communion focus message to you I talked about John Brown and his raid on the Harper’s Ferry arsenal. I expressed to you that, even though the memorials in the town treat Brown as some kind of folk hero, I am troubled by Brown. Today, I want to expound a bit more on why I find Brown so objectionable.

 It is not because of the cause he championed. Brown was staunchly anti-slavery, and that is a cause I believe was just. Moreover, it is not because of the violence he employed, per se.

 I am not a pacifist. I served in our nation’s military. Had it been required of me, I would have fought our nation’s enemies and employed violence in the service of my country. If someone was threatening me or those that I love with physical violence and I had the means I would defend myself and my loved ones with deadly force, if necessary. And, I believe that sometimes violence by the government in the name of public safety is necessary.

 In short, I believe that there are situations where violence is justified. But the reason I believe this is because we live in a fallen world and men have made a hash of it. What I do not believe, however, is that this type of violence is somehow in the name of God, or in His service.

 And that is what troubles me about John Brown. He believed that God had called him to be a warrior in the struggle against slavery. In his mind, when he hacked five pro-slavery men to death with a broad sword, he was doing God’s work. He was certain that he was acting in the name of God, and therefore any means he might employ, however violent or savage, would not only be justified, but righteous.

 It is that worldview that troubles me, whether it is employed in the name of Jehovah, or in the name of Allah, or any other deity. A man who believes he is so called by God, and is so empowered, is dangerous. He is outside the bounds of human restraint and capable of anything.

 Moreover, I believe that this worldview is misguided. That is because it is not in any way consistent with the Jesus I read about in the Gospels.

Jesus lived in a time of great social injustice when cruel Roman occupiers were oppressing His people. All through His ministry, His apostles and others pressed Jesus to raise the cry of militancy against Rome and lead a violent revolt. But Jesus resisted those pleas.

 There was a strange incident where Jesus and His entourage were turned away from a village on the border between Galilee and Samaria. The apostles asked Jesus if they should call down fire from Heaven to destroy the village. But Jesus rebuked them.

 On the night Jesus was taken by the soldiers, Peter took up a sword and struck off the ear of Malchus, a servant to the High Priest. But Jesus told Peter to put away his sword and he healed the man’s ear.

 Jesus was a man of peace. He was not a warrior or a man of violence. Not once did He call upon His followers to use violence in His name, or to further His cause. Jesus asks His followers to live for Him, and possibly to die for Him, as He died for them. But never did He ask His followers to kill for Him.

 There is danger and injustice in this world. Strong measures, even violent measures, may sometimes be necessary to address these evils. But to those who employ violence to further their idea of social or political justice, or even in self-defense, do not tell me that you are acting in the name of God, or on God’s orders.

I would tell the man who kills an abortion doctor, you are not doing God’s work and you do not want me on your jury. I would tell the man who beats his neighbor claiming he is striking a blow against systemic racism, Christ has not called you to use violent means to achieve your vision of social justice. And I would tell the man who flies an airplane into a building hoping to foment political change, you are not a soldier of God, or, at least, not the God that I know.

 In the end, this is what I want you to focus on as we partake of communion this morning: Christ was a man of peace. Even when He was unjustly arrested, whipped, and finally crucified, He did not lash out in violence, or exhort His followers to violence. He remained a man of peace. From the cross itself He looked down on His tormentors and prayed that God would forgive them for the violence they perpetrated against Him.

 We live in a fallen and chaotic world. Because of man’s brokenness, there may be times when violence is necessary and justified. But even if it is justified, it is not righteous. However just you believe your cause is, or however vile you believe the evil you are seeking to combat is, never come to the conclusion that, somehow, God is calling on you to commit violence, or that such violence is in His name. Instead, spend your life trying to cultivate the peace of Christ.

**TEN MEN CURED**

 In Luke 17, Jesus is traveling toward Jerusalem and he passes through a village on the border between Galilee and Samaria. Ten men afflicted with leprosy stand at a distance and cry out to Him – “Jesus, Master, have pity on us.” Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priests, who in that time and that society were something of the arbiters of public health. As the men are on their way to see the priests, they are cleansed of their leprosy.

 One man, out of the ten, comes back and praises God in a loud voice. He throws himself on the ground at Jesus’ feet and thanks Him. And this man was a Samaritan.

 Jesus asks the man – where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except for this foreigner? Then Jesus tells the Samaritan – rise and go, your faith has made you well.

 I have often thought about this story. Ten percent. One man in ten. That is all that was not so wrapped up in their own petty concerns that they stopped to pay appropriate respect and gratitude. And I think – are these results anomalous? On average, if men were selected at random, would ten percent be low, or would it be high, or is it about right? I guess I do not know, specifically, but the basic point holds true that, on average, men are selfish and seldom see beyond their own desires, concerns and advantage in the moment.

 And then I think – as Christians, would we, on average, do any better? We profess to believe in God. We profess Jesus as our savior. Surely we can be counted on, to a greater extent, to give appropriate praise and honor to God, our creator, our sustainer, and to Christ, our savior. But is that true? Remember the story – the only man that came back was the foreigner; the Samaritan. The Jews who were healed, they did not come back.

So, I am left to wonder whether if, left to our own devices, we as professing Christians would actually do better.

Well, one of the reasons that we pause, each week, to observe the Lord’s Supper is because we should not be left to our own devices. One purpose of ceremony and ritual is to internalize certain ideas and behavior.

The men in the story were cleansed of leprosy—a terrible disease that not only ravaged their bodies, but it also made them social pariahs and outcasts. Truly, they had much to be thankful for when Jesus healed them of their affliction.

But as we focus on the Lord’s Supper this morning, try to appreciate how much we have to be thankful for. We—all men--were lost in our sins. We had no hope. We had no way to achieve redemption; no pathway back to God. We stood convicted and condemned. We may not have suffered from a physical malady, but our spiritual malady was devastating, indeed it was eternally fatal, and no cure was within our reach.

Christ changed all that. He was the son of God, and He was sinless, blameless, and pure. That made Him the perfect sacrifice to atone, once and for all, for the sins of men. At an unimaginable personal cost, Christ brought redemption by His messy death on a Roman cross. And because He was the son of God, death could not hold Him. He rose again on the third day breaking open the bonds of death for His people to follow. Through Christ’s actions, we now have hope, forgiveness, and the promise of life eternal. Truly we have much to be grateful for.

In part to show our thanks we stop each week to commemorate what Christ has done. We do not want to be like the nine men who failed to thank Christ for healing them of leprosy. We want to do what we can to ensure that all of you, that all of us, periodically pause to remember what Christ has done for us, and that when we do so, we offer proper respect and gratitude.

That is what I would like you to focus on this morning as we partake of the emblems of Christ’s great sacrifice in this ceremony of the Lord’s Supper.