

1 That's what we hope is going to happen
2 over the next few minutes as we give
3 attention to God's work together.
4 It really is part of our theological
5 tradition that we that we
6 understand and we share the truth that
7 even in a moment like this, the essence
8 of what is going to be happening here is
9 not each of us hearing and figuring it
10 out for ourselves. and then figuring out
11 how it applies to our lives. We actually
12 believe in our tradition that we need
13 God's help, that we need the Holy Spirit
14 to open our hearts, open our minds to
15 receive what God would give us. That as
16 we encounter God's word, there is a
17 supernatural element involved. That's not
18 letting us off the hook of trying hard to
19 to think well and do as well as we can.
20 We just simply understand that the really
21 good stuff is going to come to us by the
22 grace of God and by the power of God
23 exercised through His Holy Spirit with us.
24 We hope that happens here today.
25 Before I offer a few opening comments
26 here, I I want to give a bit of a
27 disclaimer. I may be saying these things
28 at the beginning here because I'm an old
29 guy. And old guys
30 always think that things were a lot
31 better back in the day, right?
32 Any old guys that can plead guilty to
33 that, right? I mean, things were better
34 back then, whatever back then means. And
35 I think people have probably been doing
36 this forever. There's evidence of this
37 very thing in the Bible, I think, where
38 the old guys are telling the young guys,
39 you know, it was better back then.
40 And also, maybe because I'm I'm a little
41 bit sentimental in my old age, but it
42 seems to me that we used to read the
43 news and cry.
44 Innocence abroad caught in the crossfire
45 of intelligent and passionate men with
46 loaded rifles, overflowing
47 anger and emptied hearts.
48 Children at home with guns at schools
49 living out the logical implications of a
50 culture outlawing all moral guidance
51 other than the absolutely intolerant
52 demand for tolerance at the altar of
53 individual freedom. Another
54 high-profile person, entrusted with civic
55 responsibility, proving to be nothing
56 like a positive role model.
57 We used to cry. Now it seems we are
58 more inclined to shrug our shoulders
59 with our instant access to the flood of
60 tragic information. I mean, it's
61 so much. It's so much to
62 try to deal with, and I think oftentimes
63 we have to deal with it by just sort of
64 pulling in, trying to just deny it.
65 Only the stuff that affects me, the bad
66 stuff in the world, yeah, well, whatever.
67 It's ever been so, shrug your shoulders.
68 We've grown accustomed to moral disgrace,
69 and so we are seeing what some have

70 called the death of public outrage.
71 Evil doesn't seem to surprise us anymore.
72 Yet, still,
73 we do respond. Maybe
74 not wisely or redemptively or
75 productively, but respond, we
76 do. Maybe we can't help it.
77 Anybody else besides me have friends that
78 are always sending you their opinion
79 about political realities in America
80 in no uncertain terms?
81 Well, here's the upside of all of that. I
82 mean, stuff that comes from all sides.
83 Here's the upside to that as I think
84 about it. Maybe, Maybe
85 this is evidence that God has
86 made us in his image.
87 And so, despite all
88 protestations to the contrary, we
89 are, in fact, moral
90 beings who will respond to
91 things we perceive to be wrong.
92 Has there ever been a time more aptly
93 characterized, though, by the phrase
94 rapid response?
95 Has there ever been a time when people
96 were more in need of bearing in mind
97 that the image of God in each and
98 every one of us, starting with me,
99 is a tarnished, incomplete,
100 corrupted reality? That our
101 personal wisdom is always well served
102 by hearing well that of others.
103 And that our corporate human wisdom is
104 always in need of divine revelation and
105 guidance. With the
106 easy availability and easier opportunity
107 afforded by our toxic culture of social
108 media, for anyone to pretend to be an
109 expert on anything when they are not,
110 to demonstrate their ignorance dressed in
111 the emperor's new clothes of opinion,
112 and to do this habitually, callously, and
113 caustically, it seems today we are
114 less likely to cry and more
115 likely to get angry as the
116 daily news hunts us down through our
117 televisions, our radios, our
118 computers and our phones, and
119 to find somebody to blame and
120 somebody to hate. Who
121 taught us to hide our hearts behind such
122 a fortress of dehumanizing
123 media technology? When did
124 we decide that crying out against foolish
125 and fallible men and women, people like
126 us, was better than just crying
127 at the presence and power of evil and the
128 brokenness of our world. Why do
129 we think to batter the arguments of
130 worldly fools is better than to
131 allow our hearts to be broken by the
132 things that break the heart of God?
133 How did we come to think that declaring
134 the error and idiocy of other people,
135 those with power and those merely with
136 opinions, was a worthy
137 substitute for proclaiming the truth and
138 goodness of God.

139 Where is the joy in this
140 new national comment posting
141 pastime we are accepting and
142 encouraging?What is the
143 matter with us?Well, of
144 course, we know and we share the
145 the news that the big answer is sin.
146 All we, like sheep, have gone astray.
147 Each of us has turned to his own way.
148 6. For all
149 have sinned and fall short of the
150 glory of God.
151 23. That's what God's
152 word says. We like to say, I think our
153 culture encourages us to say, all of them
154 have sinned and fall short of the glory
155 of God. But the scriptures say all,
156 and that includes us. For a closer look
157 at this general reality, and to gain some
158 insight and find some help making our way
159 out of this predicament, let us look
160 again at what the apostle Paul said to
161 his friends in Philippi, way back
162 around 60 AD. Hear
163 the word of God. Philippians, chapter
164 one, second part of
165 verse 18 through verse 26.
166 Yes, and I will rejoice.
167 For I know that through your prayers and
168 the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,
169 this will turn out for my deliverance,
170 as it is my eager expectation and hope
171 that I will not be at all ashamed,
172 but that with full courage now, as
173 always, Christ will be honored in my
174 body, whether by life or by
175 death. For to me, to live
176 is Christ, and to die
177 is gain. If I am to live in the
178 flesh, that means fruitful labor for me,
179 yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.
180 I am hard pressed between the two. My
181 desire is to depart and be with
182 Christ, for that is far better.
183 But to remain in the flesh is more
184 necessary on your account. Convinced of
185 this, I know that I will remain and
186 continue with you all, for your progress
187 and joy in the faith,so that in me,
188 you may have ample cause to glory in
189 Christ Jesus, because of my
190 coming to you again. Let's pray.
191 Lord God, thank you for being with
192 us. Thank you for calling us to be here
193 today. Thank you for your
194 presence and power in each of our lives.
195 A presence and a power that sometimes we
196 even can see and know and
197 experience. but a presence and power that
198 is there whether we know it or not.
199 Lord, we pray that you would help us now
200 to think well your thoughts after you,
201 shared through your servant, Paul the
202 Apostle. We pray this in your name and
203 for your sake, amen.
204 So here's the idea that we began with
205 last week, we're gonna continue this
206 week. The problem, too many of
207 us are living only under the

208 circumstances. And I've got some
209 further bad news. The big
210 circumstance we are living under
211 is D-E-A-T-H,
212 death. Death is the fear behind
213 all fears. It is what gives a
214 robber with a gun at a convenience store
215 or an angry teen with a gun at a school
216 his power, until policemen arrive
217 with more guns. Death is the
218 world's the world's
219 ultimate reality, the inevitable
220 destiny we're all trying to cope with by
221 distracting ourselves, or by using
222 counterproductive techniques like
223 self-medication or denial.
224 Nothing we do, though, removes the
225 specter of death, the big
226 circumstance we are all under.
227 David Paulison, a Christian,
228 a counselor and writer,
229 Wrote what he called the anti
230 Psalm 23. I actually
231 learned of this just this week at
232 Presbytery. It was in a sermon that was
233 presented to us by Troy Wilson from
234 The Table in San Francisco. Just a
235 marvelous message that he shared with us,
236 and in it he shared this
237 Psalm. Anti-Psalm 23, and
238 I thought, oh my gosh, it it fits so
239 perfectly in what I was gonna share
240 today, I've gotta use that. So I went up
241 to him and asked if he could tell me
242 where to find it. He did, and I did, and
243 here it is. The
244 anti-Psalms 23.
245 I'm on my own. No one looks out for
246 me or protects me. I experience a
247 continual sense of need. Nothing's quite
248 right. I'm always restless.
249 I'm easily frustrated and often
250 disappointed. It's a jungle. I
251 feel overwhelmed. It's a desert.
252 I'm thirsty. My soul feels
253 broken, twisted and stuck. I can't
254 fix myself. I stumble down some
255 dark paths. Still, I
256 insist, I want to do what I
257 want, when I want, how I want,
258 but life's confusing. Why don't things
259 ever really work out? I'm haunted
260 by emptiness and futility,
261 shadows of death. I fear the
262 big hurt and final loss.
263 Death is waiting for me at the end of
264 every road, but I'd rather not think
265 about that. I spend my life protecting
266 myself. Bad things can happen.
267 I find no lasting comfort.
268 I'm alone, facing everything that could
269 hurt me. Are my friends really
270 friends? Other people use me
271 for their own ends. I can't really
272 trust anyone. No one has my
273 back. No one is really for
274 me, except me.
275 And I'm so much all about me,
276 sometimes it's sickening. I

277 belong to no one but myself. My cup
278 is never quite full, I'm left empty.
279 Disappointment follows me all the days of
280 my life. Will I just be obliterated into
281 nothingness? Will I be alone
282 forever, homeless, free-falling
283 into void? Sartre said,
284 Hell is other people. I have
285 to add, hell is also
286 myself. It's a living death,
287 and then I die. I
288 would encourage you, I'm not going to do
289 it now, but I would encourage you, as
290 quickly as possible after the service
291 today, maybe first thing when you get
292 home, grab your Bible and read the real
293 Psalm 23. Because
294 that tells us the truth about God's care
295 for us, and the opposite of all the
296 things that I just read in that poem.
297 Into our dark and joy-sapping world
298 comes, like a flash of
299 healing light, Paul's
300 amazing, joy-filled message
301 to the Philippians and to us.
302 I want you to know, brothers, that what
303 has happened to me -- and you remember a
304 lot of bad stuff was happening to him --
305 that what has happened to me has really
306 served to advance the gospel.
307 To people in desperate need of
308 transcendent truth to defeat
309 circumstantial hopelessness,
310 Paul brings his report of
311 paradoxical reality
312 Negative events in the past have
313 surprisingly led to positive results
314 in the present. And all of this
315 will lead to a very positive future
316 outcome. Paul's three-part
317 secret? First, he
318 has an over-the-circumstances
319 God-sized perspective. And then he
320 has an over-the-circumstances
321 Christ-led purpose, which, as I
322 mentioned last week, is linked to what we
323 call evangelism, sharing the good news of
324 Jesus. We talked about those two last
325 week. This week, we're going to focus on
326 the third of his secrets, which is this.
327 Paul has an over-the-circumstances,
328 Holy Spirit-filled power.
329 The results to come from Paul's
330 over-the-circumstances perspective,
331 My deliverance, he says in verse 19.
332 Christ will be honored. Christ
333 will be honored, whether by life
334 or by death. Verse 20.
335 And so, you all, along with me, will
336 have cause to glory in Christ.
337 Verse 26, Purpose
338 fulfilled. And the agency of these
339 positive, over-the-circumstances
340 results. Verse 19.
341 Through what power will these things come
342 about? Paul says,
343 By the help of the Spirit of Jesus
344 Christ, and through, he
345 says to his friends, through your

346 prayers. Paul's conclusion,
347 For me to live is Christ,
348 and to die is gain. Verse
349 21. Let's take a closer look
350 for just a moment. at this profound
351 revelation from the apostle. And I'm
352 gonna work from the back forward. To
353 die is gain, he says.
354 Paul's internal question, Would I
355 rather live or die?
356 Not that he does or will choose,
357 that is only and always God's
358 prerogative. Not that he views death
359 as good. Bringing
360 gain doesn't make something
361 good. Bad things can bring gain,
362 and in God's hands, they do.
363 For example, hunger. Good
364 or bad?It's bad.
365 Hunger is bad. It's a bad reality in our
366 world. But diets can be
367 good, and a lot of times,
368 let's be real here, all the time, diets
369 mean some level of hunger, right?
370 Exercise is good. But
371 that doesn't make physical pain,
372 often a part of no pain, no gain
373 exercise, good in itself.
374 You don't exercise in order to experience
375 pain, if you're a healthy person. But
376 you will endure some pain to exercise
377 to achieve other good things. Okay, you
378 get the idea, that just because something
379 brings good results doesn't make it good
380 in itself. Death, for Paul, would
381 not simply be an escape, but a
382 means to depart and be with
383 Christ, as he says in verse 23.
384 And this, for him, means ultimate joy.
385 His conclusion, his decision, his
386 expectation is, I will remain and
387 continue with you all. An empowered
388 purpose grows from an enlightened
389 perspective. He says, before that, To
390 live is Christ. Paul's
391 necessary and important subsequent
392 questionWhose life, whose
393 heart, whose character, whose work am I
394 to express through the life that I
395 choose to live?Paul's is a
396 life revolving around Jesus Christ.
397 His empowered purpose grows from his
398 enlightened perspective, which comes from
399 his extraordinary power.
400 This makes possible the reality and the
401 recognition of true gain through death.
402 And it all comes to Paul by the power of
403 the Spirit of Jesus Christ,
404 working in part through his
405 people's prayers. And it comes
406 to us through the missional work and
407 inspired writing of Paul himself,
408 and by the power of that same Spirit.
409 And Paul begins with, To me.
410 Paul has made a transforming discovery
411 and has applied it to his life. He
412 doesn't say, To everybody. Many
413 need to know still the joyful, freeing
414 truth of Jesus and gain through death

415 by him. God is sending
416 him out with the good news to as many
417 people as possible, and now even
418 to us. So here's a
419 conclusion for us today.
420 What is our statement regarding
421 the big circumstance?
422 For me to live is blank,
423 and to die is
424 blank. What you put in the
425 first blank determines what goes
426 in the second. What we're living
427 for is going to tell us
428 what death means for us. And it would
429 seem to me that in almost every
430 case I can think of, that second
431 blank is one I'd rather not have to
432 face, rather not have to fill in. Because
433 death is just going to bring an end to
434 all that other stuff, and it's all going
435 to be proved to be ultimately
436 meaningless.
437 Knowing and serving the living God, who
438 is Lord over all circumstances, is
439 the way to find joy under our
440 circumstances, whatever they may
441 be, including the biggest circumstance,
442 the fact of physical death.
443 One of the first things that happened
444 after I arrived as the new pastor here at
445 Covenant almost 27 years ago,
446 was that we lost one of our members.
447 His name was Alvaro
448 Calombro, and he was,
449 by his own confession, a brutal
450 murderer who lived what was
451 largely a wasted life.
452 He was a young man who sank
453 about as low as a human being
454 can sink. On April 5th of my
455 first year as your pastor, Alvaro
456 was executed by the lawful authority of
457 the state of Nevada. He had been
458 baptized in prison a couple of years
459 before that by our previous pastor, Don
460 Frank. His baptism was approved by
461 our elders, and so he had become a member
462 of the Covenant Church family by their
463 authority, and according to our
464 church traditions and governance.
465 Though his membership was apparently not
466 widely publicized, he did
467 receive some pastoral care from our
468 church, despite his inability to
469 attend and his tragic
470 circumstances. Alvaro,
471 Covenant Church member, was reported to
472 have desired to die.
473 He didn't want to spend his life in
474 prison. Was he like Paul in this?
475 Probably not. For him, it was
476 likely more of an escape from being
477 under the circumstances of a life
478 tragically full of horrendously bad
479 choices. He probably had
480 not suddenly discovered new
481 reservoirs of heroic wisdom,
482 but he had apparently discovered
483 something else: the

484 power of the gospel.
485 Concerning his baptism, Pastor Frank said
486 this:He seemed to be genuine
487 in his confession of faith in Jesus
488 Christ, his sorrow for his sin,
489 and his desire to be baptized.
490 Was his faith real?Was his confession
491 genuine?Only God
492 knows. But if it was,
493 with faith even as small
494 as a mustard seed, the death
495 of Alvaro Calombro was an
496 enormous gain. to him.
497 The forgiving work of Christ on the cross
498 was applied to him despite the absence of
499 anything resembling self-justifying
500 or mercy-attracting work on his part.
501 Similar to the thief who died next to
502 Jesus. The resurrection power
503 of God in Christ became the
504 resurrection power of Alvaro Calombro
505 in Christ, who is God.
506 What does this mean for us?
507 Godforgives
508 sinners. Sometimes I
509 think that we church
510 people huddle up in
511 church to desperately try to tell
512 ourselves that that we're really pretty
513 good people and and we're the kind of
514 people that Jesus didn't need to die for.
515 I mean, you know, compared to other
516 people.
517 Alvaro Colombro, by the way, had
518 No way to do that. There was nobody he
519 could compare himself to that was worse
520 than him. God
521 forgives sinners.
522 That's me. That's us.
523 And if we overcome sin, if we're
524 people who have been blessed, overcome
525 bad habits along the way, if we're people
526 who have found strength in our
527 faith,to become truly, in God's
528 eyes, better people, I just would refer
529 you to that song that we sang earlier.
530 Yet not I, but through
531 Christ in me.
532 That's not a happy theological thought.
533 That is the truth. All
534 glory for my
535 life goes to
536 the living God. Amen?Amen.
537 And there is great help in that. There is
538 great gain in that. God forgives
539 sinners. He calls them from death
540 and empowers them for life eternal.
541 We don't have to, indeed, we mustn't
542 downplay the horror of what Alvaro
543 Calombro did, and I don't recommend going
544 back and looking him up online and trying
545 to find the story. It's
546 horrid, it's horrible. We do
547 need to take seriously not only the
548 tragedy of murder and death,But
549 also the wonder of God's grace,
550 goodness and power. So
551 here's the invitation from God through
552 Paul. If the good news of Jesus

553 Christ by his power can
554 lead us to a new perspective which
555 sees death as a means toward gaining
556 something good. then it should lead us
557 all the more to a new, joyful purpose
558 of telling that good news and living for
559 Christ all the days that God gives to
560 us. Knowing and serving the living God,
561 who is Lord over all circumstances,
562 is the way to find joy under our
563 circumstances, whatever they may be,
564 including the biggest circumstance, the
565 fact of physical death.
566 Here then is the good news Paul was
567 willing to proclaim, even at the cost of
568 his own life. The big
569 circumstance, really,
570 truly, ultimately, finally,
571 transcendentally, in life
572 and in death, is not death.
573 It is
574 Jesus Christ,
575 the big circumstance.
576 For to me to live is
577 Christ, and to die
578 is skin. Let's pray.
579 Lord God, we thank you
580 once again for your word that blesses us.
581 And we thank you for the presence of your
582 Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the
583 Holy Spirit that is here with us, and we
584 thank you for your work today. and in
585 every day. Lord, help us
586 to be freed from our
587 our fears and habits
588 that that keep us just thinking
589 under the circumstances. And Lord, help
590 us to live more and more out of the
591 power and the truth that
592 you have shown us, that you are the
593 over-the-circumstances God, and
594 that there is nothingthat this world can
595 put over us, that cannot be
596 defeated through your power,
597 for your purposes, and to your glory.
598 Lord, hear us as we pray for one
599 another. Lord, we ask
600 that you would be with those in need.
601 That includes us as a church, as we
602 continue to look for someone to lead our
603 youth programs. Lord, we pray
604 for Gary, and for Leanne and
605 for Shirley, for the lowe's, for
606 Barbara. Lord, that you would bring
607 healing. Pray for
608 friends and family of George and Brett.
609 Help them to to find hope
610 and truth and a renewed
611 sense of a bigger perspective
612 in the midst of their loss. Pray
613 for our neighbors next door once again,
614 for your blessing for them.
615 Pray for those serving in the military:
616 Noah and Taryn, Cody, Matthew,
617 Weston, Chase, Levi,
618 Gary, Molly, Brian,
619 Anna, Margaret, Benjamin,
620 Chandler. Lord, I know that these
621 are just names, most of them to

622 most of us. But I am
623 reminded through our scripture from
624 today that things happen
625 by the power of your Spirit
626 and by the prayers of your people.
627 And so we do this with hope
628 and confidence and purpose. And we
629 do truly pray that you would watch over
630 these folks. Bless them. Help
631 them to know that their service is
632 appreciated by people like us. Hear
633 us now, Lord, as we share in the special
634 prayer that you taught us, saying, Our
635 Father, who art in heaven,
636 hallowed be thy name, thy
637 kingdom come, thy will be
638 done on earth as it is in
639 heaven. Give us this day our
640 daily bread, and forgive