

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 transcendently, 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