Pentecost 26A **November 21 & 22, 2026**

The Final Deadline

"For thus says the Lord God: 'Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.'" Ezekiel 34:11

Deadlines. Deadlines can be both a blessing and a challenge. They're a blessing as they give us a specific time to get things done. Everything must be wrapped up on this date at this time. They're a challenge because as the deadline approaches stress increases. When stress increases, those initial words of promise turn to words of panic. The confident claims we make when the deadline is far off become concerned cries. Our actions that were so free when the deadline was months out now are forced with only days left. Deadlines can be both a blessing and a challenge but perhaps they more frequently become a challenge.

Whether we like it or not, life is full of deadlines – full of those blessings or challenges – depending on your current point of view. Homework and tests must happen at a certain time. Projects can't linger forever; people are counting on us to complete the work. Cars, homes, and even our bodies need maintenance that can't be put off too long. Maybe the most challenging and relevant of deadlines are birthdays and holidays; those special events, as much of a blessing as they are, can create intense stress and frantic scrambling as we seek to meet the deadline for the celebration.

While each of our lives is full of different deadlines, this final weekend of the Church Year reminds us that we all share the same final deadline, Judgement Day. And if it's true that for our more temporary deadlines that we experience this tension of both blessing and challenge, but often lean more toward challenge, I'm certain that this ultimate deadline brings this tension and lean in much greater intensity.

As the deadline of Christ's second coming approaches, we, sinners, scramble and seek for anything that we can do to ease this deadline pressure. We make words of promise that shift to words of panic under pressure. As things get closer, we walk back our confident claims to concerned cries. And giving into the fear of what is coming, our actions of mercy no longer flow freely but quickly become forced.

This weekend as we face the deadline of the Final Day, we are told of the way that this deadline pressure gets released, but it doesn't happen with our random scrambling and seeking. This weekend, confronted by such a looming and ominous deadline, we are turned around from our aimless search for relief into the hands of our merciful God. For it is our merciful God who seeks us out replacing our words of panic with His words of promise; who removes our concerned cries with His confident claims; and who restores the freedom of our actions of mercy from the forced burdens into which we sinners have fearfully made them.

With the words of Ezekiel, our God makes clear His beautiful words of promise spoken ages ago to His people in exile and passed down to us now in this time of exile. As God's people of Ezekiel's time dealt with the aftermath of the failed leadership, especially spiritually, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the scattering of God's people all over, the manmade words of promise and peace of the false prophets had now turned to words of panic. Into this distress, the Lord spoke His words of promise through Ezekiel, assuring them that they weren't forgotten.

Instead of leaving His people in disarray and disconnected with damaging leadership, the Lord promised to seek His people out Himself. **"For thus says the Lord God: 'Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.'"** *(Ezekiel 34:11)* No longer was the Lord leaving this search and rescue mission in the hands of anyone else. It would be His hands, literally His hands as we hear the messianic promise of the servant David, a.k.a. Jesus, who would feed and shepherd them unlike any other leader before Him.

It's this promise about the servant David, a promise made years after David's death designed to point to His greatest descendant, our God and Lord, Jesus, that assures us that the words of promise from Ezekiel are still applicable to us now. The same divine shepherd who was seeking His people out in Ezekiel's time continues to seek His people, you and me, at this moment in time. Yes, the Lord continues to seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak, and destroy those who have taken advantage of His people.

Yet, these words of promise from our Lord are easily and regularly questioned and doubted. We, His people, wrestle with what we are told and what we see. This promised restoration of the Lord seems so hidden in our time, not unlike the times of God's people before us. So, our concerned cries go up, how long O, Lord? When, Lord, when will You act for those who wait for You? Our endurance and confidence can quickly wane

as we wait. So, the Lord again seeks us out with His confident claims made through Paul to the Christians in Corinth and to us.

"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." *(1 Corinthians 15:20-26)*

By God's grace, Paul, who had seen the risen Christ, asserts the confident claim that Christ's resurrection means the resurrection of all believers in Jesus to life eternal with Him. Just as Paul witnessed Jesus' resurrection with His own eyes, he could also say with the same confidence that Jesus' resurrection meant the destruction of all enemies of God. The promised restoration from Ezekiel wasn't ancient wishful thinking but a present reality with complete fulfillment in the future. Any of Paul's concerned cries had been removed by Christ's confident claims and this truth he shared with the Christians in Corinth and now with us this weekend.

It's these words of promise and confident claims from our God that are crucial to us understanding how the Lord leads us to live as we await that final deadline. Jesus, the Messiah promised in our Ezekiel reading and the firstfruits of the resurrection in our Corinthians reading takes the pressure of this final deadline off us. His life's work and His sacrificial death have met the final deadline's demands completely and well before the moment arrives. He has sought us out with His words of promise and confident claims so that the approaching deadline doesn't lead us to scramble and seek our own faulty means for relieving the pressure but to remain connected to the ways He has taken care of that pressure for us as the One who continues to seek us.

And with the pressure off, we are led to learn that our Lord and Savior has actually been seeking us out in the very acts of mercy that we wouldn't have given a second thought about doing. You see, with the pressure of the deadline covered by Jesus, we aren't living to prove to ourselves that we deserve something that has already been gifted to us. Our salvation work is complete in Jesus. Our lives this side of heaven reflect the great mercy we've already received by living mercifully with those around us because that's who the Lord has called us to be.

In fact, this is what Jesus describes in His lesson from Matthew's Gospel. The righteous and unrighteous are separated and judged before any evidence or proof could be given. The righteous are the sheep of God's hand because of the Shepherd whose is judging. His relationship with them determines their fate at the deadline not their works. And the works that they are commended for reflect the work He's already done in them.

This is why the righteous are so surprised. They thought nothing of the works of mercy they were doing, they just simply did them. And it's in these very works of mercy that the Lord was continuing to seek out the people He has restored from forced labors of love to people freely acting with mercy and love as if it was their second nature all along. From our words of panic to His promises; from our concerned cries to His confident claims; from our forced burdens to the freedom He gives us to act with mercy and love, our Lord and Savior has delivered us from the final deadline pressure.

And this weekend, the relief that we hear and receive from God's ongoing seeking and rescuing us provides us with very practical and personal opportunities at Emmanuel to be a part of as we await the final deadline. This weekend our commitment cards will be handed out after the service and our renewed vision will be discussed in our congregational meeting to be useful tools for us to continue to reflect the seeking God has done and continues to do in our lives through His words of promise, His confident claims, and the freedom He gives us to act with mercy and love. May Christ's return be a deadline of blessing for us as we consider our personal commitments and discuss our renewed and shared vision as a church family. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan