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Transcribed Message

Message: Preparing the Way for the Cross

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Matthew 11:1-6

Let's read Matthew 11, one through six. Even my plans for the selected text were not my original plans. I had originally planned something else, but me and my daughter have been reading through the Gospel of Matthew. I don't know if anyone else, maybe for different reasons, but I really stink at reading through the whole Bible. The reason I'm not very good at it is because I get caught up on a text and I don't move on from it. And the reading plan goes on and I don't. This kind of happened with me when we were reading through the Gospel of Matthew this past month. I got stuck here in Matthew 11.

This is what it says, verse one. When Jesus had finished giving instructions to his 12 disciples, he moved on from there to teach and preach in their towns. Now, when John heard in prison (this is John the Baptist) what the Christ was doing, he sent a message through his disciples. And he asked him, are you the one who is to come or should we expect someone else? Jesus replied to them, go and report to John what you hear and what you see. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news. And blessed is the one who isn't offended by me.

I have, for as long as I can remember, always wanted to be a dad. As some of you know, I grew up in a home that was very difficult. And because of that, I always looked forward to the day when I would be an adult, and I could do things my way. Part of that was probably a hope for redemption, but I think in another sense, a lot of us thought like that when we were kids. We'd say, and maybe you hear this from your kids now, when I get older, I'm going to stay up as late as I want, and my kids will have to go to bed instead. Or when I'm the boss, I'll never take a nap. Little did we know that those were the glory days of our sleep routine.

Back then, I thought fatherhood would give me the chance to do things differently, but I never imagined that God would use it to do something different in me. God has used fatherhood to heal me in ways I never expected. For example, there are times that I come home from work after a really rough day. My kids come running toward me with outstretched arms and then they proceed to push on my belly while singing, roll, roll, roll the dough, gently down the stream. That's not exactly the comfort I was expecting coming home from my kids on a rough day. A hug would have probably been what I was expecting, but even in the midst of that, it's almost as if what my bad eating habits meant for evil, God meant for good, and because there's something healing when I have those moments with my kids. Now I have to be careful because they'll come up to me in public. They may even do it to me after service and I have to be like, no, not in front of people. Don't do this, but it's hard not to laugh and in all reality, it does turn my day around. It's not what I expected, but it does make me laugh.

Sometimes God's unexpected ways make us laugh. Other times they leave us confused, disappointed, and asking questions that we never expected to ask. That is where we meet John the Baptist. Jesus is moving freely from town to town, teaching and preaching while John cannot leave his prison cell. On the one hand, the man who prepared the way for Jesus now has questions about the works of Jesus. Matthew puts this tension in plain view. He presents us with this concept we see here in verses one through three that John suffers while Jesus works. Jesus is working miracles, but the baptizer is not a recipient of those miracles. The man who prepared the way for the Lord cannot leave his cell to see where that way is leading.

Matthew actually frames this contrast on purpose. Verse one begins with this important phrase that we see a couple of times in the gospel of Matthew. It says, when Jesus had finished giving instructions, and then it goes on to say what happens. This phrase though, when Jesus had finished giving instructions, there's some form of that phrase that appears five times in Matthew. Sometimes it says when Jesus had finished these sayings. In one instance it says when Jesus had finished these parables. But each time it ends a major section of Jesus's teaching and it begins a story that's connected to

what he just taught. So, in Matthew 11, we have to look at this, and we have to ask what is it that Jesus is teaching beforehand and how does that connect to the story that comes after it?

So, in Matthew 11, Jesus has just warned his disciples that faithful messengers will suffer. He gives them authority to do all these magnificent things, but then he says, you're going to have opposition because of that. Then following that, we have this story. Matthew shows us John the Baptist, faithful, suffering, and in prison.

This is also a shift in the gospel of Matthew because from here on out in Jesus's ministry, there will be increasing opposition to the ministry of Jesus and those who associate with him. But there is something encouraging here in the midst of that. Jesus teaches, verse one in towns that John cannot visit. Jesus does not send his disciples and then decide, I'm going to go sit in the pool for a couple of weeks and just chill. Instead, Jesus sends his disciples, and he sends them to do a work that he will also do himself and continue. Verse one says, when Jesus had finished giving these instructions to his 12 disciples, he moved on from there to teach and preach in their towns.

I think sometimes we say to ourselves, I can't see God at work in my situation. Therefore, God must not be working. But that conclusion mistakes the limits of our vision being able to see his work with the limits of his actual activity. So just because we don't see what he's doing doesn't mean he's not actually doing something. That's pretty clear here. Like John doesn't see all the things that's going on in Jesus's ministry, but Jesus is still working even though it looks like John is losing. John cannot visit those towns because, but Jesus is still at work in them. And word of that work does eventually reach John in prison.

Verse two says, John hears the works of Christ from prison. Now, Matthew could have said, John heard the works of Christ and that's it. Don't give any kind of context. It's just, he heard what Jesus is doing. That's all you really need to know. And it makes him ask this question. But the hearing the works while in prison is important.

According to Jewish historian, Josephus, this is what he says about John the Baptist. John was being kept in a prison called Macarius. which was a fortress owned by Herod Antipas. John was put there due to a confrontation that he had with Herod. And this is going

to sound a little complicated. I mean, it's messy. Sometimes I feel embarrassed to share what's in my family history, but I see why John felt the need to address this. So, I'm going to try to explain this to you and not make it overly difficult to understand. This is essentially what's going on. Herod had taken Herodias to be his wife. If you don't know who Herodias is, Herodias was his brother Philip's wife. And Herod is the king over Israel. And if you think to yourself, wow, Herod, and he's getting married to someone named Herodias. That's a really weird commonality between the names. That's because the name ran in the family. Not only is Herodias his brother's wife, Herodias is also his niece. She's named after King Herod the Great, which is Herod Antipas's father. Both Herod Antipas and Philip had another brother that had died. Philip took his daughter Herodias to be his wife. And then Herod takes that daughter, this niece, brother-in-law's wife, or I guess sister-in-law, and takes her to be his own wife. That's messy in all kinds of ways. Like even the most corrupt people, or maybe the most loose morally when it comes to relationships in our culture, would look at this and say, no, we probably need to draw a line here.

So, John confronts Herod, and because of this, he's thrown into prison. From prison, John hears the works of Christ. And because there's this tension, it rises up this question in John. John's suffering forces his question into the open. This is in verse three. So what does he do? John sends his disciples to ask Jesus, are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?

Now, you and I ask a lot of questions that are not really questions. My wife might ask me, do you notice anything different today? There's nothing that sends my OCD into adrenaline overdrive like that question. Suddenly, I start channeling my inner Sherlock Holmes to try to figure out what did I miss? It's like, is it her hair? No, her hair is the same shape, I think. Her hair is still the same color. She's not wearing new clothes. She couldn't have possibly got new glasses. And one day, it's like, okay, it must be inside the house. Is the floor extra clean, more than normal? Or what is it that I've missed? And I rattle my brain and I get very nervous.

But it's not really a question. That's a trap. She knows I have no idea what changed.

And she's trying to prod me, hey, look around. I've been doing some stuff. Or to turn it around, I might ask her, suppose she's looking at her phone and I'm trying to talk to her, and I might say, did you hear what I just said? All right, I can see y'all aren't buying that. And you're right, I don't say that to her. That's another question that she asked me. But in all fairness, that also isn't a question. She already knows the answer. What she's really saying is, pay attention to what I'm saying.

The question that John is asking needs an answer. Is Jesus the one who is to come? Now, John had used this language of the one who is to come earlier in Matthew 3:11. He says, the one coming after me is more powerful than I am. John also says in chapter three, that he expected the coming one to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Now, if you don't know what that means, he's talking about one coming of the Messiah that's going to have two different effects. On the one hand, it's going to purify those who are followers. And on the other hand, it's going to consume and judge those who are unrighteous. So don't think when he says, when John the Baptist says, the Holy Spirit's going to come with baptism and fire, those aren't both good things. One is talking about judgment, and one is talking about salvation. He also spoke of an ax at the root of trees, ready to chop down any tree that doesn't bear good fruit, and a winnowing fork in his hand. If you don't know what a winnowing fork is, I looked it up and I still don't know the difference between that and a pitchfork. Eugene Peterson puts it this way, and I think it's really helpful. He says this in the message. The one who is coming is going to clean house. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God, but everything false, he'll put out with the trash to be burned. So, this is what John expected of the coming one.

But then we get Jesus' response in verses four through five. Jesus proves his kingdom is here. Jesus responds to John with evidence of who he is. First, he tells John's disciples to go and report what you hear and what you see. Now, there's a whole motif in the Bible about hearing and seeing in relation to faith. You may have seen it appear a couple times in the book of Isaiah where its earliest occurrence is. It says, hearing, they do not hear. Seeing, they do not see. Talking about why Israel doesn't believe the words of the

prophet and the words of the Lord. In Revelation, you get a positive phrasing of it. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

But I think there's something else that's present here going on without looking at every occurrence of those phrases, which I almost did. But again, my wife was helpful to say, don't do that to us. Jesus directs John's disciples to report two things. I think there's significance for these specific things. That which they hear, which corresponds to his teaching. And that which they see, which corresponds to his works. If you want to know who Jesus is, it's both. It's what he says. It's also what he does. And we're tempted a lot of times to want to divide the two. Sometimes people may be more inclined to really like the teachings of Jesus, but they don't really want to live their life like Jesus. Or perhaps they like something about the life of Jesus, but when he talks about something that's really dear to them and corrects them, they want to reject it. So, Jesus says, go report what you hear and see.

And Jesus' six signs connect Isaiah's promises for Messiah with the works already recorded in Matthew eight through nine. So, I'm going to go through these and I'm just going to kind of lay out what's being commented on and how Jesus is connecting this to the Isaiah prophecy. The first one is the blind see. In Matthew nine, Jesus opens the eyes of two blind men who call him son of David, which in Isaiah is an identification of the one who's promised to be the Messiah. By doing this, by healing these two blind men, Jesus fulfills Isaiah 35:5. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened.

He goes on to say, the lame will walk. In Matthew nine, Jesus tells a paralytic to get up, take your stretcher and go home. By doing this, he fulfills Isaiah 35:6. Then the lame will leap like a deer.

The next one, lepers are cleansed. This one's a little bit harder. In Matthew 8:1-4, Jesus heals a man with leprosy. However, Isaiah doesn't specifically mention leprosy in his entire book. But there is a significant caveat here. Matthew 8:17 connects Jesus's healing ministry with Isaiah 53:4, which says, yet he himself bore our sickness and carried our pains.

Then you have the fourth one, the deaf hear. This is another challenging one. In Matthew 9, Jesus heals a man who is unable to speak. Now you might say, I thought he said the deaf hear. What do you mean he healed someone that was unable to speak? In the ancient world, being deaf and being mute were normally associated with each other. I mean, just think about it from that perspective. If you're mute or deaf, it's not like they have a whole lot of ways of knowing. Staci pointed out to me last night, because she majored in deaf education, so she's fluent in American Sign Language. And the sign for deaf is this. You point to your mouth, then your ear. She was explaining to me the etymology, the root of where this word comes from in sign, is the idea that you're unable to speak or hear, because normally they go together. But more than that, in Matthew 9, the Greek word for mute is this word, *kophos*. And then in Matthew 11, when it says that the deaf hear, the Greek word used there for deaf is *kophos*. And if that's not enough to show that there is a connection here with the Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 35, it predicts both. It says, the ears of the deaf will be unstopped, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy.

Then we have the fifth example of signs. The dead are raised. In Matthew 9, Jesus raises a little girl from the dead. In Isaiah 26, it is prophesied that the dead will live, and their bodies will rise.

And then you have this last one here, which seems really oddly placed, because all the rest of these are really miraculous, supernatural. And then he concludes with this, the poor receive good news. Matthew 9:35 says this, Jesus continued going around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. This is prophesied in Isaiah 61, which says, the Spirit of the Lord God is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted. So, I think there's something to be said here that maybe when he says the poor receive good news, he's talking about, yes, those who are literally poor, but also all the other people that came before this, such as the blind people, the lame people, the lepers, the deaf, the dead. It's painting this picture of people who need help and can't help themselves. And so there's good news that's proclaimed here. See what's going on?

John says, are you the one who is to come? And then Jesus points to two things. He says, look what I've already done, and look how this fulfills what Isaiah promised. The works of Jesus reveal an intrusion of the kingdom of God into fallen creation. Through his miracles, Jesus is giving a glimpse of the future hope that's revealed in the Lord's prayer, which says, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. This means that Jesus' answer to John's question, are you the coming one, is more than a mere yes. Instead, he says, look at what kind of "yes" that I am. John the Baptist expected the coming one. Jesus shows him that the coming one is restoring human life. The answer identifies not only Jesus' authority, but also his heart. What we see in these works is not a temporary kindness that God will outgrow. We are seeing the character of the eternal king, and the final kingdom will not reverse Jesus' compassion. It will complete it.

So, the next logical conclusion is, how does that future change how we live now? And I just have four observations. I had more, but there's a brunch after this, and I don't know if you can tell by my physique, I do not miss very many meals, much less be late. I have motivation. Lowell's a genius for putting me on the day that there's a brunch after I preach, so that I don't go over too much. Either that or God in his providence is sovereign and saw beforehand.

But here's what I think. What does this future kingdom change about how we should live now? How is it that we should try to partake in this kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? Here's my four observations. If Jesus restores bodies, which he does, we should care for the sick, disabled, and grieving. If Jesus defeats death, we should oppose whatever destroys or degrades human life. If Jesus brings good news to the poor, being wealthy, astute, or having influence cannot determine who is welcomed in our doors to receive this message. If Jesus cleanses the excluded, holiness must move us toward broken people.

Now, there are a couple questions that come up, because verse six seems really odd with one through five before it. Just hear it. John's in prison. He says, Jesus, are you the coming one? And Jesus says, yes, I am. Look at all these things I'm doing. And then Jesus says, and blessed is the one who doesn't stumble because of me. Why might John stumble? Verse six. Blessed is the one who isn't offended by me.

Here's a couple observations on this to try to figure this out. They also add to the confusion and nuance. John has already heard Christ's works. And what does Jesus respond to his question with? His works. That's weird. Verse 2 says, John heard the works of Christ. In verse 5, Jesus replies with the works of the Christ. It doesn't look like John has received any new information.

The second question, Jesus gives a positive answer. Why would that cause John to stumble? I mean, you would think if he's in prison, he asked the question and Jesus says, nope, sorry, you got it wrong, dude. That would cause him to stumble. But Jesus says, yes, I am the one who is to come. Look at my works. And blessed is the one who isn't offended by me. So why would that cause John to be offended or to stumble?

The answer is in two prophecies from Isaiah. One in chapter 35 and one in chapter 61 that Jesus omits from his answer. Jesus lists other promises from these passages, but these two are missing. The first one is judgment against evil. This is in Isaiah 35:4 through 6. I want to read it and you just listen. You can follow along too but listen to the words and notice what's missing. Isaiah says: Say to the cowardly, be strong, do not fear. Here is your God and vengeance is coming. God's retribution is coming. He will save you. Then after that, the eyes of the blind will be opened. The ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy. For water will gush in the wilderness and streams in the desert. See that? Judgment. He's looking for judgment and all he sees right now is mercy. And he didn't think that comes until after the judgment.

Look at Isaiah 61, 1 through 2. Isaiah writes, the spirit of the Lord God is on me. Because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of our God's vengeance, to comfort all who mourn. I think this helps explain why so many are confused during Jesus's ministering. You know, why is it that all of them seem to think there's going to be some worldly king that comes and overthrows Rome? They're constantly measuring Jesus by the authority, and the power, and the works of what they would expect a worldly king to come do and respond

to a power like Rome. But the prophecies spoke of the Messiah. These prophecies spoke of the Messiah coming in judgment.

I think that's what most of the disciples, all of the Pharisees, and even the people are hoping for when they hear word that someone is doing the works of the Messiah. John expected God to save his people by judging their oppressors. However, there's one more prophecy, you may have already noticed it, that was missing in Jesus's answer. That is freedom for prisoners. I think this is what really reaches the heart of John's question. Not whether Jesus is the Messiah, I think John probably believed that, but what kind of Messiah is Jesus proving to be? It's almost as if John is hearing about all these people being healed, and he asks, am I next? Am I on the list to receive this blessing? Is Herod about to be overthrown? Will I be free soon? Is the kingdom really here? And in response, Jesus claims he is the coming one.

But by his omission, he says, John will not be released from prison. John expected judgment. Jesus sent reports of mercy. John expected liberation. Jesus did not send a key for his prison gate. Then he said, in effect, blessed is the one who receives me without falling away, when my way differs from his expectation. We like to imagine that if Jesus appeared before us, we would recognize him immediately. But the gospels warn us otherwise. The people most often certain of their ability to identify God's works are often the people that oppose Jesus.

Now, for some, especially in our culture, we think about how do people respond? What are people offended by in the works of Jesus? For some, what offends in our culture is exclusivity, which means they are willing to admire Jesus as one spiritual guide among many. But Jesus claims to be the way, the truth, and the life. There is no other way.

For others, it's his holiness that offends. They want forgiveness without repentance. Or they want Jesus to bless desires that he commands them to surrender. For others, it's his delay. They can believe in a powerful Jesus or a loving Jesus, but not one who permits a prison door to remain closed. In all these instances, when the bargain fails, people assume Jesus failed.

But the truth is, that was never the promise that Jesus made. John the Baptist sets an example for us. Far more important than the question that arises in our own heart is the person you take it to. We have to ask these questions. Where do your questions travel when you have doubt and hardship? Toward people who feed your resentment? Toward an algorithm that will numb your pain? Toward an inner monologue in your own heart where you are always the judge and Jesus is always the defendant? John gives us a better way. Take your questions to Jesus.

Now, we should notice the next purpose in John's suffering. John's death prepares the way for the cross. We've already kind of talked about this a little bit. In chapter 14, this is where you get this story. So, if you want to go read it, chapter 14, 1 through 12. John confronts Herod's sin and he's put in prison. However, John doesn't merely remain in prison. In verses 9 and 10, Herod executes John the Baptist. Herodias, his niece/wife, devises a plan that pressures Herod to kill John the Baptist.

Fast forward a few chapters and you have this event in Matthew 17, where Peter, James, and John are walking with Jesus after the mountain of transfiguration. You may recall Moses and Elijah show up and they're talking with Jesus. And Peter says, Lord, should I make some tents for you, Moses and Elijah? Hey, can we stay here a little bit? And then while Peter is speaking, they hear this voice say, this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. Well, on their way back down the mountain after this, something clicks in the minds of the disciples. They've just seen Elijah himself at the mountain of transfiguration. And they asked Jesus this question, because Jesus' ministries are already underway. If Elijah must come first, how did the Messiah already get here?

So listen to this exchange in Matthew 17. So, the disciples asked him, why did the scribes say that Elijah must come first? Remember, they just saw him on the mountain of transfiguration. Jesus replies, Elijah is coming and will restore everything. But I tell you, Elijah has already come. They didn't recognize him. On the contrary, they did whatever they pleased to him. In the same way, the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

A couple observations here. John fulfills Elijah's role through preaching and suffering. And it's not just his preaching though. I think normally we think of a voice crying out in the wilderness. But there's something to be said here that it seems Jesus himself is pointing a connection between John's suffering and his own. John's suffering foreshadows the suffering of the Son of Man. Jesus said concerning John's suffering, in the same way, the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands. John's death anticipates the cross of Jesus.

What do we do with John's death? There's just a quick couple of things here. How do we reconcile this? Is there any kind of theodicy to be had here? Theodicy being the study of making sense of suffering and the problem of evil. John's lack of deliverance does not invalidate Jesus's other signs. That's the first thing. Jesus gives John reasons to trust him. He does not demand faith in emptiness. There are real signs. Yet trust must extend beyond what John can presently verify about his own future.

Secondly, John isn't entirely wrong about the Messiah coming in judgment. That's one of the more challenging parts of this. In his first coming, Jesus does bring judgment. But instead of executing it upon sinners, he takes it upon himself.

Lastly, a conclusion we can make here. Here it held John's body, but not his hope. After John the Baptist died, his disciples took his body and gave him a proper burial. But more than that, when Jesus returns, John will be raised and given a new body that cannot be destroyed.

So, what do we take away? My first thought here. Are you poor enough to receive? Isaiah 55:1 says this. Come everyone who thirsts, come to the water. And he who has no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without price. The first five things that Jesus presents won't last in this life. Those with sight will eventually shut their eyes again. Those who Jesus heals and enables to walk will lay in a grave again. Those who are wealthy will weaken. Those who hear will hear experience silence again. And those who live will die a second time. However, there is a common thread.

What do these have in common? They know they cannot save themselves. So, they come to Jesus with nothing but their need. Jesus came not only to heal bodies, but to forgive sins. He went to the cross, bore the judgment that we deserved, and he rose from

the dead. The question is not whether we have enough to offer him. The question is, are you poor enough to receive what only he can give? And if you haven't done that, there would be angels in the heavens celebrating, people on church staff, myself, people sitting next to you. If you haven't put your trust in Jesus yet, there would be nothing that would make us happier. Not even the brunch that comes next than for you to trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.

The second observation here or takeaway, the mountain is breathtaking, but fruit grows in the valley. Peter wanted to stay on the Mount of Transfiguration. To be honest, I probably would have too. When I read the gospels, I think which disciple I associate with the most, it's Peter, the one with the foot-shaped mouth. The mountaintop experiences, though, in our lives, they are awe-inspiring. The problem is they're not built for ordinary life. You went to Falls Creek, some of the teens, I remember going to Falls Creek as a kid. There was almost a depression that came over me when we came back because reality sinks in and I came back to the normal world. Some people are willing to climb the highest peaks of Mount Everest. Nobody lives there. It's not habitable for life. It's harsh. It gives you this really memorable experience, but you cannot sustain it long-term. Life grows in the valley in ordinary ways, marked by hardship and endurance. Paul says in Romans 5:3-5, that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. There is a tested hope that only grows in suffering and hardship in the valley, and there's no sign of it on the mountain.

Lastly, what do we take away from this? If you are a believer in Jesus, we carry Christ's death so his resurrection life may be revealed in us. At Covenant, we like to say we're about three things, right? We all know it. Know God, love others, live the gospel. Listen to what Paul says about living the gospel in 2 Corinthians 4. We always carry the death of Jesus in our body so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake so that Jesus' life may also be displayed in our mortal flesh. So then, death is at work in us, but life in you.

As an old American proverb says, everybody wants to go to heaven, nobody wants to die. Or in the terminology of a modern-day theologian, D.J. Callen, all I do is win, win,

win, no matter what. And the picture that we see in the gospel is the opposite. We choose to lose. We're not winners in this life. We're winners in the life that is to come. True gospel life embodies the death of Christ. Death to your pride, death to your greed, death to your comfort, death to your selfishness, and why? We let death work in us so that eternal life might come to others. Or to put it in the terminology of Matthew, John in his cross-bearing points forward to the cross. We are called to live a life that points back to the cross. And blessed is the one who isn't offended for identifying with the name of Jesus.

Let's pray. Lord, you know that we are fragile and broken people. We're imperfect. There's no way that we can live up to this calling. But it is the calling that you've given us knowing all our shortcomings. When you called the disciples, you knew that Judas would betray you. You knew that Peter would deny you. You knew all the rest would scatter. And still you called them to partake in this mission. Lord, there are people around us who all they know is death. But be people who in a kingdom reversal embrace death to point to something everlasting. And that is your Son, Jesus. Amen.