

The responsive reading of Psalm 136. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. Give thanks to the God of Gods. Give thanks to the Lord of Lords. To him who alone does great wonders. To him who by understanding made the heavens, to him who spread out the Earth above the waters, to him who made the great lights, the sun to rule over the day, the moon and stars to rule over the night. It is he who remembered us in our low estate and rescued us from our foes. He who gives food to all flesh. Give thanks to the God of heaven. The word of the Lord.

Please stand for the reading of the Gospel. 16 1320 when Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, who do people say the Son of man is? They replied, Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah are one of the prophets. But what about you? He asked. Who do you say I am? Simon? Peter answered, you're the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. For this is not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, Peter, that on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on Earth will be bound in heaven. And whatever you loose on Earth will be loosed in heaven. Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah, the word of God.

Hey, I want to invite the kids. It's time for kids alive. So let's pray for the kids. Heavenly Father, we're so grateful for our children. We ask that you would bless them today. Ask that you bless those who teach them, and they would receive your word. And your word would take root and bear fruit in their lives. In Jesus name, Amen. All right. God bless you, kids. We'll see you. All right. Hey, it is a real pleasure today to have several people with us worshipping from Redeemer Anglican Church. Redeemer is the Church that has sent us out to plant out here in Garner. And I've had the privilege of working with Ford Jordan for many years. He was on staff with me, and then he went out to plant Redeemer. And it's a blessing to now have those roles reversed and be going out from Redeemer itself. And, Ford, we're grateful you're here. We cannot help but notice you're wearing Carolina blue. And you'll probably hear about Ford having been there before.

It's all I own. It's nothing in particular. It's just the only color I wear.

But he is preaching about thankfulness today, and I think he's pretty thankful. So, Ford, welcome to you. It's good to have you.

Would you all pray with me? Gracious Lord, we are so thankful for the gift of life that you've given to us today. We thank you for the beauty of your creation and the wonder of being able to sit in the midst of it looking up at the heavens which declare your glory. God, we thank you for your good gifts to us. We thank you for your gifts to this Church. We thank you for this community that we can gather together as brothers and sisters in Christ to encourage and strengthen one another in our lives of faith. Father, if we turn our attention to Your word now, we ask that you would open our eyes and our ears and our hearts and our minds, that we would be able to know you and see you and hear you and believe in you and love you through Your Word today. So making our hearts a fertile soil where your fruit might be born and where faith might grow, we pray in Christ's name. Amen. Well, friends, it is a joy to be with you today and to celebrate it today's. A celebration, right? It's hardly been mentioned, but today's a celebration.

Two years of life, of Tree of Life Church. What an incredible milestone and marker and what a privilege to be able to be here and to be a part of it. And what a day that God has given us to be here to celebrate. You guys are probably used to this. You all are spoiled that you get to worship in this beautiful place every time that the weather's cooperative. But as one who only gets to join you every once in a rare while, let me just remind you of what a beautiful space this is and what a gift you have to worship God week in and week out here in the midst of the glory of his creation and grateful to him for the beauty of this day. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. For instance, the starting of a Church is no small task. Takes a lot of hard work by a lot of different people to start up any organization, but particularly a new Church. We get a glimpse of the reason why starting a Church is so difficult, why it's such hard work. In the gospel reading this morning in Matthew, Chapter 16, when Jesus was speaking about how he was going to build his Church upon the truth that he is the Christ, he acknowledged that the gates of hell should not prevail against it.

They would not prevail against it. And that is certainly good news. But what's implicit in that statement is that the gates of hell are constantly fighting against all of the work that you've been doing for the past two years. There's spiritual opposition fighting you at every turn in the work of Kingdom building. We have an enemy whose sole and stated purpose is to steal and to kill and to destroy. He wants to do that to everything and to everyone, but he wants to particularly do that to those things which offer hope to the world and which give life to people. There's this powerful spiritual force at work against all of this. And yet for two years now, month after month at first, and then week after week, whether it was online or outdoors or in a warehouse, you all have gathered and you have worshiped and you have prayed and you have proclaimed the scriptures and you have prayed and you have baptized young children and new believers, and you have feasted at Christ's table, and you've invited others to join you in doing so. You've given of your time and of your energy and of your resource and of your heart to this venture.

You've joined with Jesus in the building of his Church upon his truth. And the gates of hell have not prevailed, thanks be to God. In fact, the reality is that the gates of hell cannot prevail against what you are doing here, because what you're doing here is so much larger than just yourselves. Just what we see gathered here today for you all are a Church. You're an Anglican Church, but you are also part of the one, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. You are part of Christ's Church. What that means is that regardless of the small roles that we play in this grand adventure, Jesus is victory over death, which we celebrate today and every Sunday in which we're particularly getting ready to celebrate in a couple of weeks at Easter. Jesus victory over death assures us that nothing will stop the work of Christ in the world. Nothing will stop the Church. So today we can celebrate in order to make sure that we're all in the spirit of celebration. This morning, I want to invite you to take a moment and consider. What are some of the things that you are thankful for on this anniversary of Tree of Life?

What are some of the ways that this Church has blessed you or changed you or encouraged you or strengthened you over the past two years that you are thankful for? Let me hear some of the testimony about the goodness of God in this community of faith. I might just call some things out. Let me hear what are some of the things you're thankful for on this anniversary? Community prayer. What's that, new friends? The baptisms sustaining through hard times, 35 years of marriage. We're celebrating all the kids that ran off. It's amazing what a blessed thing. Praise be to God. These are all great things to be thankful for. I'm sure it would be a good discipline to continue to think about this. What are the things that you have to be thankful for because of this community, because of the life of this Church? These are great things to be thankful for. And I tell you, if we celebrate those things well today it will be a good celebration, but one observation that I need to make. If you notice that almost everything mentioned there was incredibly positive, incredibly positive baptisms and community and prayer and new friends and 35 years of marriage, which I'm sure has been pure bliss.

Never a challenge. Those are positive things, and I wonder if that should be the criteria that determines whether or not we're to give thanks. If our circumstances are good and we got a hit, that's not always necessarily true, which is really important, because if the criteria for what we give thanks for is things are blessed and going well, then we may be in trouble. Because while it's great to go through seasons that are encouraging and positive and where there's momentum and there's growth and there's an excitement in the air, the reality is that in any Church, but particularly in smaller and newer churches, there are going to be significant challenges that you will eventually face if you have not faced them already. And Bobby, eventually you'll face challenges in your marriage. Eventually it'll come. Eventually we face challenges where everything isn't what we would wish for, where circumstances don't feel nearly so blessed as they might today. A couple of years into the planting of our young, small Church over at Redeemer, we lost half of our congregation and two thirds of our budget. It either happened overnight or it lasted for an eternity. I can't remember because it felt like both in the worst possible way.

During that season, we lost every family in our Church who had a child over the age of 13. Our student Ministry vanished. We lost two women who led our children's Ministry. We lost our worship leader. We lost our executive administrator. We lost two people off of our Parish Council. We lost three people off of our preaching team. I lost my two best friends. My wife lost her three best friends. Our kids lost

their six best friends. It was relational carnage. Some people left complaining about the preaching. Some people left complaining about certain decisions that were made. Some people left because their friends had left. Some people left because they moved. Some had good reasons, some didn't. But all of it hurt deeply. Your challenges will be different, for sure, and I pray that they are less severe, less destructive to the life of the Church, less traumatic to your pastor. But Jesus promises us that in this world we will have trouble. So what will you do when those troubles come? Today, it's a joy to give thanks and praise to God for his work in the life of this Church. It's easy to give thanks to God when things are going well.

But how are you supposed to give thanks in the hard times that are promised to come, when those good things may not be so obviously apparent? Why would you give thanks in those times? I think it's an important question to ask on this anniversary, week of all weeks. That's why we're looking at Psalm 136 this morning. I encourage you, if you have a Bible, to open it to Psalm 136, or if you have a phone with the Bible on it, pull it out. The whole Psalm wasn't printed in the bulletin, and we're going to engage with some parts that weren't in there. So if you have a Bible, I encourage you to open it there. But Psalm 136 speaks directly into that question, and it provides for us a framework of how we can be a people who give thanks to God in both the good times and the difficult times of our lives. It's a Psalm that I hope will help you to celebrate the life of this Church well this week and for all the future weeks that are to come for years and years to come, regardless of what's going on in the life of the Church.

So I want to invite you to look at this song with me, and let's consider together why it calls us to give thanks to God. The Psalm opens and closes with the call to give thanks to the Lord. Look at verse one through verse three, and then again at verse 26 says, Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his steadfast love, indoors forever. Give thanks to the God of God for his steadfast love indoors forever. Give thanks to the Lord of Lords for his steadfast love indoors forever. And then if you jump all the way to the end, it says, Give thanks to the God of heaven for his steadfast love endures forever. The Psalmist book ended with the call to give thanks to God. And then throughout the whole rest of the Psalm, the Psalmist describes the three great acts of God. In verses four through nine, the Psalmist points to God's work in creation. In verses ten through 24, the Psalmist points to God's work in redemption. And in verse 25, the Psalmist changes verb tenses and brings the work of God from the past right up to the present moment by acknowledging that even now God is sustaining his creation, he gives food to every creature.

And so the Psalmist here points to creation and redemption and God's sustaining work in the present moment, which, if you think about it, it really is a way of describing all of human history. And while the direct call to give thanks to God drops off after the third verse and doesn't return again until the end of the Psalm, the implication is that the exhortation to give thanks to God is present, even if unseen and unheard. In each and every stanza of the Psalm, we are to give thanks to God for each and every one of these great acts listed. We're called to give thanks to God for everything. And at first glance, that may not seem like anything out of the ordinary. Of course, we are called to give thanks to God for creation and for redemption and for his sustaining us in the present moment. That seems obvious. But if you really think about and consider each of these verses individually, and then you go back into the scripture and read the accounts and the stories that these verses are pointing to, a number of these occasions or events were not occasions for Thanksgiving when they were taking place.

Instead, they were at times terrifying and miserable experiences for the Israelites as they went through them. Consider verse 13, which recalls when God divided the Red Sea. Now, if you went back to Exodus, chapter 14, which recounts that story, you'd see that the Israelites were terrified in those moments. God's people were convinced that they were going to die and that they would not survive. That wasn't an occasion for Thanksgiving in the midst of it. What about verse 16, which recalls when God led his people through the wilderness? If you went back and read some of the accounts of the wilderness wandering in Exodus chapter 16 or Exodus chapter 17, or throughout the Book of Numbers, you'd see that the Israelites were miserable in the wilderness, and they constantly grumbled about God's provision for them during that time. That was not an occasion for Thanksgiving in the midst of it. What about verse 23, which recalls when God's people were in a lowly estate? There's no specific context given for that, but there were lots of times throughout the Scriptures when God's

people found themselves in lowly estates, in their slavery in Egypt, during the times of the judges, in their captivity in Babylon.

None of those were good experiences. Those weren't times of Thanksgiving. Those were times of crying out for help and for mercy. All those experiences were terrible times for God's people. Yet here in Psalm 136, the Psalm is calling them to give thanks for those times. Why? How are you supposed to do that? How are you supposed to do it as Church or as individuals? How are you supposed to give thanks in the circumstances of your life when things aren't going well, when the Church shrinks instead of grows? When your health fails, instead of is strong, when your friends at school reject you rather than include you? When your children are being stubborn or rebellious? Instead of sweet and obedient? During times when you're afraid, during times when you feel lost, during times when you're confused, during times when your circumstances feel lowly? How are you supposed to be able to give thanks to God during these times in your life when you don't feel very thankful? It's an important question to ask, because for some folks, this ends up being huge parts of their lives. How are you supposed to be able to give thanks to God during times in your life where you don't feel very thankful?

The answer to that question is right underneath our noses. In fact, we've already read it 13 times together this morning in the reading of the Scriptures if you read through the whole Psalm there, you'd say it 27 times to yourself. It's because God's love endures forever. You see, what Psalm 136 actually instructs us to do is not to give thanks for any of those particular circumstances, but instead it causes us to give thanks to our God who was at work in the midst of those circumstances. Even more, it calls us to give thanks to our God who was at work in those circumstances, exhibiting his love that endures forever in the midst of and straight through to the end of those circumstances. The good ones and the bad ones. Look at verse 13 and 14 again, give thanks to Him who divided the Red Sea into for his steadfast love endures forever and made Israel pass through the midst of it for his steadfast love endures forever. The Psalmist isn't saying to be thankful for those terrifying times that they faced. Instead, he's saying, Give thanks to God who is faithfully present with you in the midst of those difficult times and who brought you through those difficult times with his enduring love.

Those are two totally different things. I think this dynamic is really beautifully and powerfully portrayed in another Psalm in Psalm 77. If you want to flip there, there's a Psalm that shows both the terror that God's people faced when the red seas were being parted and the enduring love of God with them in the midst of that great act. In Psalm 77, verses 16 through 19, we read this that when the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid. Indeed. The deep trembled, the clouds poured out water. The skies gave forth Thunder. Your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your Thunder was in the whirlwind. Your Lightnings lighted up the world. The Earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters, yet your footprints were unseen. This was a terrifying moment with a storm raging all around them. Yet in the midst of that storm, God was faithfully, lovingly, leading them, even though his footsteps they could not see. We're not supposed to be thankful for the trial. We're supposed to be thankful to God who is faithful in the midst of the trial and whose love endures with us through to the end of the trial.

And this really is the key to be able to give thanks to God in any and in every situation when times are good or when times are bad. In the midst of our very darkest days at Redeemer, I was regularly meeting with Bishop Thad Barnum for encouragement for soul care just to help me walk through difficult times. And during our calls, he would always ask me about the church's worship on the previous Sunday, which was a question that I never really liked because the size of the Church at that time was often discouraging to me. One week he asked me that question. How was worship on Sunday? And in embarrassment and in defeat, I told him there were only about 30 people with us that day. To which he responded, Was the Spirit present? Not sure exactly how to answer that question. I chose to believe the promises of God that he is present with us in the reading of the Scriptures, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers. And so I responded, yes, I believe the Spirit was with us. To which Bishop Thad responded, Is that not enough? And in that moment, my heart was forever changed towards the circumstances of the Church.

Our attendance never mattered that much ever again. To me, the budget never bothered me that much going forward ever again. Whether the Church even made it or not didn't even really matter to

me anymore. After that realization that if God was with us by His Spirit, we were going to be okay no matter what happened. Because his love endures forever, he was going to lead us through the other side of the trial and whatever things looked like on the other side, he was going to be there with us, loving us and caring for us. The same is true for you. And whatever storms you're facing right now, or in whatever storms you will ever face in the future, you don't have to be thankful for the storms themselves. Why would you be? But I do hope that you are able to know and to acknowledge that God is with you in the midst of the storms and that even if you can't see or understand how he is leading you through them, that you can have confidence and give thanks that his love will endure with you to the end of your trials and beyond and forever more.

Because his love endures forever. We know that this is the case, and the reason that we know that this is the case is because of what God has done for His Son upon the cross. That's the ultimate picture of how all of this plays out in life. As Jesus faced the cross and the trials that he was going to have to endure, he wasn't thankful for them. In fact, before he went to the cross, he asked for God to take it away from Him. He didn't want to go there. And upon the cross, Jesus suffered greatly. Thanksgiving in that moment wasn't one of his emotions. He was experiencing pain and anguish and suffering. And in the midst of that suffering, he couldn't see how God was leading Him. He cried out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus couldn't see His Father's footsteps in the midst of that trial, but God had not forsaken him. His enduring love was with Jesus, mysteriously leading Him and guiding Him to and through the cross, through the grave, all the way into new and resurrected life. And that enduring love of God remains with his son today and Tree of Life let me tell you we have a faithful God.

If he did that for one of his sons, he does it for all of his sons and daughters. God is with you no matter what trials you are facing right now or ever in the future, you may not be able to see how he is with you. You may not be able to see how he is at work in the midst of your trial but he is with you in the midst of it and his faithful love will endure with you right through to the end of the trial and beyond and forever and for that we can give thanks. For that we should give thanks so on this second year anniversary of Tree of Life and on every day of your lives that follow, let's be a people who give thanks to God for he is good because his love endures forever. Amen.