

Oh, so Lord, thank you. Here we are, as we always say, here we are. We answer your call to be with you, to serve you, to be gathered in congregations. And as they say, said in the days of old, here we are, Lord, here we are. We want to learn, Lord. We want to worship. We want to grow. We want to be the disciples that you know us to be. We want to be the men and the women, the husbands and wives, the brothers and sisters that you want us to be. So Lord, we turn to you with our whole hearts and our whole minds and we love you and we worship you and we open ourselves to you this and every day. Lord, please take your place as the pastor and the teacher of this church and guide us in all things this morning. In Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen. The opening word is from our prophet Isaiah from chapter 10 verses 10 through 16. Later the Lord sent this message to King Ahaz. Ask the Lord your God for a sign of confirmation, Ahaz. Make it as difficult as you want, as high as heaven or as deep as the place of the dead. But the king refused. No, he said, I will not test the Lord like that. Then Isaiah said, listen well, you royal family of David. Isn't it enough to exhaust human patience? Must you exhaust the patience of my God as well? All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look, the virgin will conceive a child. She will give birth to a son and we'll call him Emmanuel, which means God is with us. By the time this child is old enough to choose what is right and reject what is wrong, he will be eating yogurt and honey. But before the child is that old, the lands of the two kings you fear so much will both be deserted. The two points that we always, well, we always talk about prophecy. It is written for that particular time. It is written for the immediate future of what will happen and those lands will be joined in unity regarding the backstory of this prophecy. And it is part of our holy scriptures because it is written for us to take something away today. And we understand a couple of things. The virgin will conceive a child. This prophecy of the one who will heal the lands is given to us for that purpose. We talk about healing the lands. We talk about the Prince of Peace. We talk about today, God is love. And we see this prophecy of the one conceived from a virgin will bring together the warring peoples and the warring lands. Now as we carry that forward, you see the direct connection to the age now where God's kingdom around the world, brothers and sisters in Christ around the world are commanded by scripture and instructed as how to do it to live in peace and harmony one with the other. And we are called to expand the kingdom of God right now to include as many people as we can so that God may redeem them unto himself. And more and more people will live in harmony. More and more people will live connected in Christian love. More and more lands, people groups will be healed. That is the prophecy. The prophecy is also unique when it says the virgin will conceive a child. Much is made out of this, and I've already spoken on this in Advent. But this is a prophecy of what we see fulfilled in the New Testament. This is not some sort of origin story of some pagan God that so many, dare I say, progressive Christians and non-Christians want to compare the virgin birth of Jesus to some crazy origin story of some pagan God. We see through the prophet Isaiah the word of God moving through him, telling the world that this will happen. And it does. There is a huge difference. And we have talked about not only the significance of the fact of proving that it is true, but the significance of it being true. For if it is not true, then there is no divine nature of Christ. And there is divine nature of Christ, fully human, fully divine, the perfect sacrifice for our sin. Amen. Wonderful. Another one of those bishops of Psalm rising and going up like last week. It was just mighty hymns of the church that tell the story. That's what it's all about. That's what it's all about. When I came to church town, I've always said one of the great advantages I feel I've always had as a pastor is that I was very much unchurched when I was called into ministry. I didn't know all of the churchy stuff and all of the churchy words and I didn't know. All I had to depend on was scripture, was the Bible. So I tried to figure everything out from the Bible. If it was something that I had experienced in a different church somewhere and I'm like, "Why are we doing that?" Then I would question, "Why are we doing that? Is it here? If it's here?" So I knew maybe five hymns and I began, and I'm not going to embarrass her, but Marge is the one who taught me that the best hymns, you don't break them up and try to be part of this hymn, then part of that hymn. The great hymns tell the story from start to finish. And so he sang the hymn. And I've lived by that ever since. And it is amazing the power that those hymns have.

Indeed, they are Christmas hymns and they tell the story. The first week of Advent, there was a representative of council here and his wife, and that was Taylor and Morgan. The second week was Kids for Our King. Thank you so much. There it went. Kids for Our King. And we had fun with that one, didn't we? With Joy to the World. The third week of Advent was Sisters in Grace and Melissa came up and read and prayed and lit the candles. And now this new thing that is happening here at Church Town with all of the couples who are being married in the church, having babies in the church, doing all the new ministry that has been created called Pears and Spares, which I was kind of skeptical of, but it's a young adult ministry. The name only. The name only. I was like, "What?" But people like it. It was there. And I just spoke to a couple who had asked me to perform the wedding ceremony in October. And it's another young couple here at the church. And there is now structure in place. And I don't mean this like some sort of corporate structure, but there is now ministerial structure in place to support this young couple from day one. That is awesome. You know, everybody, whether you're younger or whether you're older, whether you're a couple or whether you're single or whatever the case may be, you have those times when you need help. You have those times when you feel like what is happening right now has never happened to anybody else. It's happening to me or us. And we don't know why. Well, we have people and those young people have people that they can talk to and they do and they support one another. One of those couples I am very happy to say is Justice and Alyssa. And I have asked them and their family if they would like to read and pray and light the candles today as representatives of the Pairs and Spares ministry. Now, if it comes down to it, I mean, I'll hold a grandchild if I have to. I'll sacrifice. Get this ready for you. And then, guys, you're going to be letting all four of you. We're reading from First John, chapter four verses seven through twenty one. Dear friends, let's continue to love one another for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love. Not that we love God, but he loved us and sent his son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us and his love is brought to full expression in us. God has given us the spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. Furthermore, we have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the father sent his son to be the savior of the world. All who declare that Jesus is the son of God have God living in them and they live in God. We know how much God loves us. We have put our trust in him. God is love and all who live in love live in God. God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect so that we may so that we may not be afraid on the day of judgment. But we can face him confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world. Such love has no fear because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment. And this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. We love each other because he loved us first. If someone says, I love God, but he's a fellow believer. That person is a liar. For if we don't love people, we can see how can we love God when we cannot see? He has given us this commandment. Those who love God must also love their fellow believers. Let us pray. Loving God, you demonstrated your love for us in this while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. I trust in your unfailing love. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Teach me to love you with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my mind. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Teach me to love you with all my strength and to love my neighbor as myself. Teach me to even to love my enemies and do good to those who hate me as Jesus commands. Help me to remain in your love. Help me to do everything in your love as I live by faith in the Son of God who I love me and give myself for me. Music in this little church really comes to life in the Christmas season. I don't want to miss anybody. Whenever you begin to name names, I always get nervous because I'll miss somebody. But you know, you've seen it. You've heard it. The new song singers and the brats and Liam and everybody else who has been stepping. Everybody stepping up, March, and from the Christmas hymn sing on just bringing out the richness and the fullness of the special music. And when you get away from Rudolph the Red-Nosed

Reindeer and you get into the Christmas hymns, it really does help. It helps with a lot of things over the Christmas season, things that we spoke of at the very first week of Advent when we hung the stockings and how difficult this season can be. But you hear this and you feel this and you hear the story over and over and over again. And it is a balm for the soul, right? It is. I was drawn to, as obviously many pastors and preachers are going to be this day, many scriptures about love, particularly in the New Testament. I have a lot of them outlined there in the folder for you. But the one that I really want to preach on isn't there. Of course not. Because as I went through the various scriptures and I put the various scriptures in their context and tried to draw out what either Jesus himself was saying or one of the apostles was saying. The depth of what they were saying really began to resonate with me. When we talk about love, we talk about First Corinthians 13, the power of love without love. John says God is love. All of these different things. I really don't want you walking away today with having glossed over what is being preached, particularly to the churches in the letters about love. Let's take the example of First Peter. And one of my references is going to originally be a reference scripture, and it's a scripture that I really want to focus on because I do believe that it brings out the preaching that the apostles were trying to give and get across to the churches. Peter, when he writes this letter, is in Rome. Rome is as anti-Christian a culture at that time that there ever was on earth. Nero is the emperor. And we know Christians know Nero, and it's the beginning of the centuries of what they call blood persecution, blood martyrdom. And Nero is the first of these to try and bizarrely and nefederously unify the empire by singling out Christians as the ultimate enemy to empire. We've seen this throughout history. We've seen it as recently as World War II and even in Communist China, etc. You find a group that you promote and you propagate, these are the people we all can agree on, we'll hate. This was his power play of unity. If you recall, he burned part of Rome and blamed it on the Christians. And you talk about persecution, and we have. This is the beginning of the persecution that would last until, ironically enough, in 380. Christianity, and we can talk about the reasons why, but Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. God knew 100% what he was doing. But can you imagine walking through the city and on pikes along the road are Christians that have been stuck on these pikes and set on fire to light the city at night. That's the persecution. Pouring Christians into the Colosseum and allowing animals just to tear them apart for as people looked on and cheered and wager. Or the gladiators, pouring people into the Colosseum and pouring 5 or 6 gladiators in and then betting on how many Christians any one gladiator could kill. Who would get the most? Women and children taken and out of the will not eat, I'll let you use your imagination at random for the purposes and the pleasure of the ruling party, the ruling class. This began. The pressure on the Christians and the followers of Jesus. As I said, it was called the period of blood martyrdom. In other words, if you were any kind or to be considered any kind of a true spiritual leader, you sought to be martyred during the next few centuries until again, Christianity became the actual state religion of the Roman Empire. You would seek to be martyred. This is how God He pressurized the gospel and made examples of Christians in his own way for the rest of the world to see. Now this letter from Peter is written from Rome to churches in the Roman Empire. And nearly every commentary that I read, nearly every sermon that I might read, nearly every cross reference that I try to do, it speaks of this, I dare say, superficial love of God that we can sort of relate to. And we can. I'm not poo pooing that I love you. I told somebody this morning, I love this person, and I do. And that is real and that is very much a part of what is being spoken about here. When we as brothers and sisters in Christ here and around the world, we are joined by the power of his Holy Spirit as family. And we can say how much we love one another, because you are my brother, you are my sister. Oftentimes, we sign Christmas cards or cards to one another for any special occasion in Christian love. Pastor Brian. And that is a real thing. Now I want to read this letter from First Peter beginning with verse three, after he introduces himself as an apostle, one who has learned at the feet of Jesus, and has been commissioned by Jesus. And that's called an apostle. So he sets himself, he lets people know that I know these, this to be true. Writing to people whose family members have been dismembered, have been burned at the stake, have been slaughtered for pleasure. In order to truly understand and release ourselves of that superficial, and again, it's a good

thing, I'm not, but to release ourselves and understand the power of God's love, we have to understand the context that Peter is in himself, and he's writing to the churches. So choose a scenario. You're being persecuted. Members of the gathered congregation have been taken away for all the various reasons that I just stated, and now somebody receives this letter from Peter as it circulates with, and now you hear this all praise to God the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance and inheritance that is kept in heaven for you. You are an undefiled beyond the reach of change and decay, and through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see. So be truly glad there is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. Ask yourself, your wife, your husband has been taken, your child has been sold to somebody, taken by, would that comfort you? The thing is, it has to. Because there is no greater power in our sovereign Lord, and we know that our sovereign Lord is love. And so you take these desperate situations and Peter says, be truly glad there is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. Oh, to have faith like that. To look at your circumstances and your surroundings here immediately, the political situation around where you are, the oppressive government that wants to do whatever it wants to do, the horrific things that they do as they try to unify the empire around hatred, not love. So you see the forces at work. They try to unify the empire using hatred. God says, maintain your love. And although you do not see the picture, I do. And although you do not know future history, I do. And although you do not know the plans that I have to utilize this hatred and turn it for the benefit of the gospel, I have them, you do not see them. Can you be faithful enough to endure such horrific circumstances? All of those simple words. How else do you say that? How else do you say that? But I think when we read them, we kind of again, we think probably of immediate congregation. And I love you with Christian love. I will have your back. All of those things are true. We will spiritually support. We will financially, emotionally, spiritually, physically support one another from this congregation and let it flow out like ripples on a lake and do all that we can for the kingdom of God. We will do all of that. But we know that there was a time. And as we look forward into the revelations of Jesus Christ, there will be a time when it will be you and your faith in sovereign God. Many of you, many of us have faced life circumstances where it comes down to the point where it is you and your faith in sovereign God. And you do not know what your future holds. You do not know what the future of your family is. You do not know why your family is divided or your nation is divided or even the Christian church has such division and false teaching. You don't know any of that. God will work out his plan for humanity through all of that. Do you believe this? Christ asks this many times. Do you believe this? So when we read these words, they're being spoken to individuals, as I have said, who have experienced the most horrific circumstances that you can possibly imagine. Many of us, pretty much all of us throughout the course of our lives will face life and death circumstances. We will experience tragic loss. We will experience the diagnosis that changes our lives. We will experience broken relationships that we thought were once so whole and complete. We will experience the betrayal of people who we thought were deeply ingrained in us as friends. We will all experience such things. The question is not if, but when. And the follow up question is now what? I once heard it described to me as I was going through some things. You can turn to the cross or you can walk away from the cross. It's very simple in its explanation, but it is very, very true when you're experiencing whatever that circumstance is. It is going to drive you more deeply into your relationship with God through Jesus Christ or your selfishness and your self pity. And I'm raising my hand because I just sat in that corner feeling complete pity for myself. In your selfishness, my selfishness and self pity turn away from the cross. As we began, I began time and time again to read the scriptures from John, 1 John, 1 Peter, 1 Corinthians, all these different scriptures. And there wasn't a preacher and there wasn't a commentary that I felt really brought out the power of God, the power of His love to overcome these circumstances in such simple terms. How about if I tell you? And you've just lost a child. And I say to you, so be glad. You slap me. You're going to want to slap me. We cannot even fathom that. Be glad.

There's wonderful joy ahead. Such simple words that dig so deeply into those circumstances to support people who are experiencing the worst that humanity has to offer. Be glad. There's great joy ahead. Hold on to your faith, even though you must endure trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. True. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold. Though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. You love Him even though you have never seen Him. Though you do not see Him now, you trust Him. These are incredibly powerful words. They're beautiful. You love Him though you've never seen Him. And though you do not see Him now, I know you trust Him. Beautiful words of encouragement. But do you hear in the context, easy to hear and easy to relate to when times are fine? I love Him though I've never seen Him and I have great faith. It's easier to have great faith when you're not confronted with the circumstances of which we've been speaking. This entire letter of Peter is written into those circumstances. There's nothing superficial about it. These are words that are going to hopefully, praise God, sustain Christ following believers through, again, the most horrific circumstances that you can imagine. The whole letter is dedicated to that. And I just want to, because I couldn't find it. And I'm like, why are you not speaking of this power of God, the power of God's love and the faith of the believer to dwell in the power of God's love, knowing that regardless of circumstance in your life, family, church, community, nation, world, regardless of circumstance, God's got this and He will take every circumstance and use it for the benefit of the kingdom of God, no matter what it is. He used the hatred to the point where nearly every, unless you went out into the desert, the desert fathers and mothers and all that, they used the hatred of Christians, the martyrdom, drawing and quartering, beheading, bloodletting, all of these things. He used all of that so that the gospel and the power of God would eventually spread throughout the world by the very same structures that were killing those people before. Now, if you're in the 30s, if you're there now, could you ever see 300 years in the future? But would you have faith that this is not randomly happening and that whatever happens, God will use it to manifest His kingdom on earth? The reward for trusting Him will be the salvation of your souls. This salvation was something even the prophets wanted to know more about when they prophesied about this gracious salvation prepared for you. They wondered what time or situation the Spirit of Christ within them was talking about when He told them in advance about Christ's suffering and His great glory afterward. They were told that their messages were not for themselves, but for you. And now this good news has been announced to you by those who preached in the power of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. It is all so wonderful that even the angels are eagerly watching these things happen. The angels, the spiritual realm, watching what happens here in the earthly realm, eagerly anticipating the growth of God's kingdom on earth by these very unique creatures called humans. And this divine institution created and headed by Christ called the church. Will they all gather and say, yes, I follow Jesus, I want to be saved, glory be, I profess, I proclaim glory be, I want to be saved and then and then persecution. I do not want to be saved. I am not a Christian. I will not fight. The words are so simple and so powerful. It makes me think of when I am counseling somebody that is in a bad situation. And you think that I think the last thing that I want to say that to them is just believe God's got this regardless of outcome. I don't think that that's very complicated. Just Peter says, be glad for through your suffering, great things will happen. God will take care of that and just don't find that very comforting. But these are the words of scripture. And when I can look somebody in the eye and say. Have faith. Have faith. Don't give up your faith. Whatever the circumstance is, he will use it for his glory and the expansion of his kingdom. Do you believe this? Love is, for lack of a better way of saying it, the most powerful force in the universe for God is love. To know God is to know love and to love by the power of God's Holy Spirit is to love with the very power of God. And to be saved by God and adopted into his family is to be loved by the sovereign God of the universe. I don't want to make that superficial. I want you to feel the power of that in your individual circumstances throughout your families, your church, your community, etc. God takes every circumstance. And turns it for his glory and the expansion of his kingdom. Amen.