

# Loving the Church

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[ 0 : 00 ] It's good to be here. It's good to be here and to be part of this covenant church family.

! The tide is spinning and I'm freaking out a little bit, but it's good to be here and to get rolling after many months of praying and pondering and looking forward to this.

So things are off to a great start here, and I'll say more about that in a little bit. But first, I just want to thank you all for today.

I want to thank Gene and Don for helping put together the plans of the rich service this morning and the choir for that anthem of praise to the Lord, who is our salvation.

That's what this is all about. And just beautiful testimony. And it's been good to get to know all of you. I want to say a special thank you to Don and Steve and Jim and the search team and counsel.

[ 1 : 21 ] You all, I know, poured yourselves into the work of shepherding along the search process and also shepherding along this congregation over the last two and a half years.

And you've done well and you've poured yourself into prayer as a part of that work and really discerning God's leading and his direction for this congregation and his work in this place.

And you've done well. And so I just want to commend you and say thank you, too, because as part of that, the last number of months, you've spent a lot of hours with me and helping me and walking along with me in this discernment process and preparation process.

So thanks for all of that and your kind attention. I also want to say thank you to Sarah and the transition team, the whole crew who's really helped our family as a whole to feel welcome and to get acclimated and to help with all the logistics there, even with our house and that sort of thing.

It's been great. Thanks to those of you who brought meals and helped us with helpful information about our new surroundings here and provided words of encouragement written and spoken over a number of months now.

[ 2 : 38 ] So appreciated. And just for all of you and your prayers for us and just embracing us as a family. It means so much. And it's been a blessing to be here already.

It's been a blessing. The past few weeks have been kind of wild. And we've been dead tired at the end of every day with everything going on mentally and physically.

We've been tired, but it's been a really good kind of tired. And all along the way, it seems like there's been confirmation that this is where God wants us to be. And we're grateful for that.

Renee started her new job at the Wisconsin Resource Center. It's a psychiatric hospital north of Oshkosh. She started there in kind of an administrative role.

And she's got a weekend. And that's going well. And we're thankful for that opportunity for her to use her gifts in that way. Caleb and Josie are working with the Fox Valley Autism Treatment Program and have a weekend there working with young kids.

[ 3 : 44 ] And that's been a blessing. And they're getting their legs under them with that. And Maria's down in Madison with her new job and her new apartment and her new life there. And so we're learning a lot and adjusting and things are going well.

But before I get going too much further, I wanted to show you something. There's a little show and tell aspect to things this morning. And maybe you saw this already.

I am almost 50, but it's not a cane. It's actually a shepherd's crook. And on this shepherd's crook, it says, Pastor Keith Beist, under shepherd, feed my sheep.

And then it says, October 19, 2008. October 19, 2008 is the day that I was ordained as a minister of the word.

I completed seminary and then had a call to go off to a church in Canada. And I was ordained there on October 19, 2008.

[ 4 : 50 ] And it was good and ordained as a minister of the word. And at the end of the ceremony, one of the elders of the church gave me this. He presented this to me.

And this elder was a shepherd. As far as I know, he still is a shepherd, a real live shepherd, a sheep farmer. And so apparently he went into his sheep farmer catalog and he ordered a shepherd's crook.

And he put a little plaque on it. And here it is. He presented it to me as part of my ordination service at the end of the ceremony.

And then he got up behind the mic and he said a few words about shepherding sheep. He's got a lot of experience with that. And he said a few words about that. And so it was very meaningful. So I keep this in my office as kind of a reminder of that call. And, yeah, being an under-shepherd of Jesus Christ. Feed my sheep.

[ 5 : 51 ] Don quoted that verse earlier. So you can stop by and visit me. If you didn't know, my office is the first room right on the left, right outside the worship center here.

It's a little different place than the former office. So that's where to find me. And there's all sorts of ways to connect with me. But I also wanted to draw your attention to this little white card.

Maybe you've seen them scattered around the place here. So I gave you a little bit of a snippet of my story with the shepherd's crook.

But more important, I want to get to know your stories. And you individually as members of this church, as participants in the life of this church family.

I want to get to know you. And that's kind of what this is about. So if you would, do me a favor and take a couple of minutes today or sometime this week and give me four things.

[ 6 : 57 ] Just four things that you would like me to know about you. And I'm not going to tell you what sorts of things to write about. That's up to you. But just give me four bullet points about yourself.

And you can write them on here and put it under my office door or hand it to me. Or maybe more easily, you could just email me at Keith.Bistage email.

And it would be good to hear from each of you. That would help me out. I'd love to get to know you in person, face to face as well. But this will be a good start. If you're willing to do that, that would be awesome.

I'm going to read this morning from Psalm 122. So we're going to switch gears. I'm going to open up God's word together. Go to Psalm 122 if you want to follow along there. Otherwise, it'll be up on the screen.

We're going to be talking a little bit about Jerusalem and then moving into the church and God's gift of the church.

[ 8 : 02 ] So Psalm 122. Psalm 122. I rejoiced with those who said to me.

You can kind of see maybe where we got the theme of the service today. I rejoiced with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord. Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together. That is where the tribes go up. Tribes of the Lord. Praise the name of the Lord.

According to the statute given to Israel. There, the thrones for judgment stand. The thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels. For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, peace be within you.

[ 9 : 10 ] For the sake of the house of the Lord, our God, I will seek your prosperity. The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen. So I'm sure for most of you, you have a special place, a special destination that you just love to go.

Maybe it's a certain coffee shop or a place down by the river. Maybe it's Life Fest or Camp Calvin or a favorite campground or B&B; somewhere.

Maybe it's Lambeau Field or Six Flags, perhaps. Maybe it's a hunt camp or a tree stand somewhere. Maybe it's spring training down in Arizona or maybe somewhere out west up in the mountains.

Or maybe a dirt bike track or somewhere that you love to go, a special destination. Maybe it's a place that you get together with family every summer.

Maybe you're looking forward to that even as you sit here this morning. Well, probably for me, I have many, but maybe near the top of my list is Lake Michigan.

[10:29] I love Lake Michigan. I grew up on the other side of Lake Michigan about the same number of miles from the eastern shore as we are right now from the western shore of Lake Michigan.

And while I love any water, and I love the fact that from my new house, I can walk down to the Fox River, and that's a fun thing and a fun bonus. There's just something, though, over the years, there's just been something about standing at the edge of the big lake, Lake Michigan.

And you've got the wind and the waves and the sand and those little dead fish by your feet and the smell of all that, and there's just something, something awesome about that.

And I rejoice when I get the chance to go to Lake Michigan. And I'm sure you feel that way, too, about your happy place, wherever that might be, that destination, going there.

It's like a pilgrimage. When the date is set and someone tells you it's time to go, you rejoice. Well, the writer of Psalm 122, he rejoiced.

[11:45] He experienced this, too. I rejoiced with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord. Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem. Finally, we're here.

We've arrived. This is it. Here we are. Jerusalem was his happy place. It was. It's where he longed to be, longed to go. Probably he went there a couple of times a year for the major Jewish feasts.

He'd go there, and it wasn't a burden for him or some guilt-ridden religious duty that he did. No, he looked forward to it. All year he looked forward to going to this special place, to Jerusalem.

So my wife and I, we have this expression that we use sometimes. We are where it's at. So we'll be out, and the sun will be setting, and it'll be just the perfect timing in a beautiful spot.

And we'll look around. We'll kind of soak it all in, and one of us will say to the other, ah, we are where it's at. This is where it's at. Or maybe we'll be out for a drive or something, and we'll kind of come upon a local festival somewhere.

[13:03] And the music's good, and the food's good, and there's a lot of people there. It's a beautiful evening, and not too many mosquitoes. And we'll say, oh, we are where it's at.

This is where it's at. Well, that's how the psalmist felt, arriving there and standing there in Jerusalem. It was the place to be. And he goes on in this psalm to talk about why, to give some real reasons as to why.

Beyond the excitement of the moment, beyond all the people, he uncovers for us. He elaborates for us on the real significance of this place, what it represents.

And he mentions three things. He mentions, number one, that it's special because, well, verse three, it says, it's built like a city that is closely compacted together. He admires its structure, its architecture.

It's a well-built city, solid. It all fit together well. I know we've got some engineers here. Maybe appreciate this, right?

[14:12] It all fit together well. It was tight, well-planned, well-designed. And being so well-built, it kept out the enemy, and it kept up the local economy.

And the psalmist, he just felt safe there. He felt good there. It was a good place to be. Plus, it looked nice. It had this beauty and order to it. The city was well-built.

That was the psalmist's experience. There was a real beauty to it. Things fit together, made sense there, worked well there in Jerusalem. The second thing he mentions, he mentions in verse four, Jerusalem is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to praise, to praise the name of the Lord, to worship.

It was the religious center. It was the soul of the nation. For years, right, there was no temple. And so the Ark of the Covenant, kind of the center of the temple, would kind of be in temporary spots around, and it moved around.

And then they built the temple, and then the Ark was brought there in a great ceremony. And there it was, housed in the temple. And so people could come, and people came from all around to meet with each other there in Jerusalem, and more importantly, even to meet with their God.

[15:37] It's almost like, it's almost like heaven and earth kind of touched a little bit there in Jerusalem. God felt a little bit closer there.

It was a place of worship. People prayed, they offered sacrifices, and they heard from their Lord. Spiritual home. And the third reason comes in verse 5.

There the thrones for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David. So Jerusalem wasn't just home to the temple and the priests. It was also home to the palace and the kingship there in

Jerusalem.

It was the capital city. It was the place where justice was carried out, and governing happened. And that governing, it happened through God's chosen instrument, through King David and his kingly line.

Jerusalem was a blessed place, and it was blessed to be a blessing. To pass along, to enact the order of the Lord, and to pass along the blessing of the Lord, and to be God's instrument of blessing.

[16:49] The whole idea was that justice and peace and goodness would flow from there out to the peoples and nations around. And there'd be a real impact.

So there you have it. You have quite a picture here in this psalm, and really quite a testimony here in this psalm.

Steve and Jim gave us a testimonial earlier today about God's faithfulness and his work here. The psalmist in this psalm, this pilgrim there in Jerusalem, gives a testimony.

His excitement about Jerusalem and why he's excited about it, to be there in the city, in those gates. Now, what about us? What about us?

So the psalm writer, he went on pilgrimages there to Jerusalem. He wrote about it. He gushed about it. What about us? Should we be doing pilgrimages, and should we be maybe more excited about Jerusalem?

[17:50] Well, I've talked to people who've been there, who've been in those gates, and have done Holy Land tours, and each one has said how meaningful it is, and I don't doubt it.

There is a lot of significance. The fact is, though, that Jerusalem, in terms of its role in God's kingdom, is not what it once was. It doesn't hold the same special status for us today.

The temple curtain was torn in two on Good Friday, right? And the ground shook on Easter, and on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out far and wide.

Something changed. Something fundamentally changed. God's presence is no longer tied to a specific location. God's presence now, today, is mobile.

Worldwide. God's presence, it's not tied to a place, but to a people. It's no longer centered on a place, but on a people, the people of God, the body of Christ.

[18:55] God today is uniquely present to the church. Wherever God's people gather, whether it be in a living room or a sanctuary in the Fox Valley or the Congo or wherever, Jesus promised, where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.

It's like a little Jerusalem each time. It's like heaven and earth touch just a little bit when we get together as brothers and sisters in Christ. The house of the Lord, Jerusalem, today, it's the church. And back then, right, Jerusalem played a central role in the carrying out of God's work in the world, in the building of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. And now it's the church.

That central role belongs to the church. As the old hymn says, the church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord. She is his new creation by water in the word.

From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride. And by his own blood he bought her. And for her life he died. It's the good news.

[20:06] And the implication of that is that the church is special in God's eyes. And he's really hoping that, well, he's hoping that we'll see it that way too.

I just want to pause for a moment here. And make sure you know how special this church is. So, on this occasion, I think it's okay if we pause for a minute and just ponder on that a little bit more.

We'll get back to the big C church in just a moment. But what I love about covenant, I was thinking about it this week. And there's a lot of things I could say.

But one thing is it's both a thinking church and a thoughtful church. And I see God's fingerprints in that all over. It's a really neat, neat thing.

It's a thinking church and a thoughtful church. For one thing, we've got some real thinkers here. I know that. I've observed that. We care deeply about things and learning about things, even nerding out about things sometimes.

[21:13] And I know that I'm also far from the smartest person in the room. But I'm okay with that. I've been the dumbest one in my family for quite a while now.

So, here we go. But this is a thinking church, and that's a good thing. I've also found, though, that this is a thoughtful church, a thoughtful bunch, caring.

You don't all just kind of come here as consumers to try and see what you can get. You come here seeking the good of the body.

Thinking about that family, not just on Sundays even, but during the week as well. Thinking about one another. Caring for one another. And I've experienced it, too, your kindness.

Your kindness to me and to my family. And you've been patient with us. And you've fed us and embraced us. And I see you doing that with each other, too. And I know it's really genuine.

[ 22 : 14 ] It's genuine. It's neat to see. You care about people. You care about people and you care about unity over and above any individual agenda. And that makes a huge difference.

I love the different languages spoken here. And I think that, too, is a work of God. I love the facility that God's given you and how you've developed it and cared for it and stewarded it and used it well for all different sorts of functions.

The music here, the musicians here, amazing and well done. Not only well done, but also rich and deep. And your singing is hearty.

And so let's keep that up. It's awesome. You have a good sense here, too, of we. This shared identity. I remember someone saying to me early on, we love baby showers here in this church.

Just a very specific thing, but it kind of testifies to that caringness, but also to that shared identity.

And that's God's developing and working here, bringing us together around different things.

[ 23 : 26 ] That's awesome. So I'm excited to get to know each of you as individuals, but I'm also kind of excited to get to know more of the personality and the story of you together as a body, as a church family.

And I'm excited to be a part of that now. And I'm also just really glad and excited to be a part of Christ's church.

I love your church, oh, Lord. We're going to sing that in just a little while. And that's the cry of my heart. And I hope it is of yours, too. Not just your love for this church, but your love for Christ's church worldwide.

Probably actually the most important thing about covenant church is our relationship with Jesus Christ, our head, right? And that puts us in strong connection with fellow believers across denominations and around the world.

And that's an amazing thing, if you think about it. We're a part of that. You could say we're a part of a broader covenant family, the people of God. And the reasons for joy that we find in the psalm, Psalm 122 for us today, those reasons for rejoicing and celebrating Jerusalem point ahead, as the Old Testament always does, right?

[ 24 : 53 ] Points ahead to the New Testament, points ahead to reasons that we have for rejoicing and celebrating God's work of the church and God's gift of the church today. So let's think about that a little bit.

Number one, church is where we come and life makes sense again. So Jerusalem was a well-ordered city. We talked about how it was well built.

And that's the church, too, in a sense. God has created his church to be the place where we come and life sort of makes sense again.

We don't get answers to all of our questions. We don't get all of our problems solved. We don't leave messy behind because ministry is messy, too.

It is. But we do get Jesus here. And we get the way of Jesus here. And we get, as friends, followers of Jesus Christ.

[ 25 : 54 ] And that's a pretty cool thing. In a world that's really confused about a lot of things, we come and we get Jesus. The way, the truth, and the life.

And we also come and we get some ancient rhythms of worship and work and rest and learning. These ancient rhythms that we get to draw from and incorporate into our own lives. Rhythms that go back thousands of years. Rhythms that are actually tied into the very fabric of God's creation itself.

These rhythms, they're well built. And they make for well built lives. God uses his church really to give us the order and purpose that our hearts so long for.

And really that we were made for. It's here that we get the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's here that we're reminded that we're secure in his grip. And it's here that we're reminded too of what our calling is.

[ 27 : 00 ] And what life is really all about. You could say we get a firm foundation to build our lives on. A well built foundation. Second thing.

There's another reason to be excited about the church. The church is where we really participate in what's central to life. And that is worship. So Jerusalem got that pilgrim all pumped up. Because it's where he got to join with his brothers and sisters from all different tribes. And they came together to praise the Lord. Now we don't know a lot of specifics about how we'll spend eternity.

And what that will all be like. But one thing that's quite certain from scripture is that we'll worship. We'll stand shoulder to shoulder. With others from every tribe and language and people and nation. We'll stand shoulder to shoulder singing praise to our God. And worshiping the Lamb who's on the throne. That won't be the only thing we do. We're not going to be like sitting on clouds playing harps and worshipping.

[ 28 : 04 ] It won't be the only thing we do. But that will be central. And that is a strong clue for us of what's central to our lives today too. Worship.

Our God, he gives us something to rejoice over. And when we come here to worship with our brothers and sisters, we get a little taste of eternity in the here and now already.

Here at church. We meet together with our God. And the third thing. The final thing this morning is the church is not only about gathering.

It's also about going. And that's also a reason to rejoice. So the psalmist, he took pleasure in seeing God at work there in Jerusalem.

God was at work there through his anointed king. And through his priests. And through the people. And we know it didn't always go well. Human beings have a way of messing things up.

[ 29 : 09 ] Even in Jerusalem. But God was at work. Life was ordered according to eternal principles. Rather than according to popular appeal. God's kingdom was being built.

God's ways established on earth as it is in heaven. And now God gives us some of that work to do. We get to participate in that.

So our savior, our king, King Jesus, he's on the throne. And as Jesus' people, as Jesus' church, we get to participate in his work. In carrying this out.

We get to be a part of building his kingdom. And so he gives us, he pours out on us his own spirit.

And I was here a couple weeks ago on Pentecost. And we celebrated that. And it was so moving for me as I'm feeling, you know, very overwhelmed by all of this.

And we sing song after song about the Holy Spirit equipping us. And indwelling us. And using us. Even in spite of our weaknesses. And so Jesus gives us his own spirit for this work. And his spirit meets us not just when we gather.

[ 30 : 13 ] But also when we go. Goes with us. God, by his spirit, goes with us. And so we go. And we go with confidence as God's people. Onto the job site.

And maybe into the office. Or into the classroom. Into voting booths. Into nursing homes. And neighborhoods. We go. As God's people. We go into places that have perhaps been ravaged by tornadoes.

Or hurricanes. We go into places. Into people that have been hurt by physical illness. Or mental illness. We go into places that have been devastated by hatred.

We go there. As the body of Christ. Into every area of life. On behalf of King Jesus. Fueled by his spirit. Sustained by his grace.

To carry on something of his word. Amazing thing. The body of Christ. On the move. Psalm 122 insists that we stop.

[ 31 : 13 ] And take notice. And really see. This gift. The gift of the church. And give thanks. A lot to give thanks for.

Let's bow our heads together. Amen. Lord. We thank you. For the church. This unique creation of yours.

That we have the honor of being a part of. It's frustrating at times. It can be. It's boring at times. Sadly. Even people get hurt in. Your church at times.

Lord. So we pray that you would forgive our faults. And help us to forgive. And may your grace flow here among us. Lord. And give us patience. Lord. And give us. Lord.

We pray. Eyes to see. The supernatural work. That you're doing. That you're doing. As we gather. And as we go. Use us.

[ 32 : 08 ] Lord. Each one of us. Lord. Fill us with your spirit. And in spite of our shortcomings. Lord. And we just pray that. That our little lives. Would make some sort of. Contribution. To the building up of your church.

And the coming of your kingdom. We're eager to see what you do. We pray that you would use us. To pass on your blessing. To those around us. In Jesus name. Amen.