

***Darkness, Guts, and the Goblet of Fire***

March 17, 2019

Kevin Garcia

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Kim Stack]

Good morning, I'm Kim. And show of hands, who had to drive through a snowstorm to get here it's morning? Oh seriously, it was snowing so hard I almost turned around; that's how hard it was to move. Psalm 27 is our call to worship:

The Lord is my light and my salvation;

whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life;

of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me

to devour my flesh—

my adversaries and foes—

they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me,

my heart shall not fear;

though war rise up against me,

yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the Lord,  
that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the Lord  
all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the Lord,  
and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter  
in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;  
he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up  
above my enemies all around me,  
and I will offer in his tent  
sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,  
be gracious to me and answer me!  
“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”

Your face, Lord, do I seek.  
Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,  
you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,  
O God of my salvation!

If my father and mother forsake me,  
the Lord will take me up.

Teach me your way, O Lord,  
and lead me on a level path  
because of my enemies.

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,  
for false witnesses have risen against me,  
and they are breathing out violence.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord  
in the land of the living.

Wait for the Lord;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the Lord!

[Male voice]

Good morning, I'm Josh. The second reading today is from Luke 13:31 through 35:

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones

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those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

As our next reader comes forward I want to do something I forgot to do in the first service which is to remind you of our theme verse for Lent. We were talking about a season of repentance, but repentance meaning changing your mind. Romans 12; this is our key verse that we want to return to again and again in this season and it's one that we are going to learn to say together. So I'll say the first part and up to the comma and then I want you all to shout back the last bit of it, okay? Because this is what I want us all to be doing during Lent and I actually think today's sermon will give us some tools for that:

"Do not be conformed to this world [whole congregation] but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

[Voice of Pastor Scott] And may that be true for us. Alright, and now Laura.

[Voice of Laura Reed]

Good morning. I'm going to be reading from Genesis 15 verses 1 through 12 and 17 through 18:

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down

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on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates."

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

We have a very special guest preacher with us today, Kevin Garcia. And I I don't say this every time. When we have guests in, I hear the sermon twice. And today I'm really excited to hear the sermon a second time. And so I'm excited for you to hear it as well. So Kevin told me earlier that a good bio would be digital pastor, content creator and self-identified hot mess [laughter]. Kevin also works with the Reformation Project, is a seminary student in Atlanta and has a small business, Queerly Beloved. Some of you have backed their recent explosive Kickstarter project for t-shirts. We are really excited to have him with us today and I'm going to stop talking, so would you join me in welcoming Kevin Garcia [applause].

[Voice of Kevin Garcia]

I'm going to do something I didn't do in the last one, which is teach you how to talk back to the pastor because, listen, I am a Baptist at heart and when the pastor is doing really good you've got to say, "Mmmm okay that's good!" [laughter] so I'm going to say something that we can all agree on. How about, God, cheese is just so good. [All] Mmmm that's good! "Come on!", "Yes!" or "Say, it pastor!" All these things are appropriate things. Or you don't have to do it at all because I get that it's not your culture. Like, you guys don't even put sugar in your tea [laughter]. But I'm also laying off sugar because, like, I'm turning 30 soon and my metabolism is slowing down and my body is just like, "You thought that you could just have that Big Mac, didn't you bruh?" Joke's on me.

Hi I am Kevin Miguel Garcia and it is so nice to be here. I cannot tell you how lovely you all are. Seriously, every single person I've met. It just feels like home. And shout out to Anna and Eliot for hosting me, being my internet cousins and real life friends. Also their kids are so weird and so wonderful, I love them so much [laughter]. My preferred pronouns right now are they/them/theirs or he or she. Like whatever's fine, just don't be rude (that's my rule). I'm a Scorpio if you're into that sort of thing. I'm an Enneagram 8 wing 7, so it's like anger but make it fun [laughter]. If I fall backwards on this [referring to object on stage] I'm just going to say I'm slain in the spirit [laughter]. I'm mixed race which is like confusing with the ginger beard, I know. I am Mexican-Filipino from my father's heritage and then white from my mother's

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parents. I take 150 milligrams of Wellbutrin, 50 milligrams of Zoloft, for anxiety and depression, 10 milligrams Finasteride to keep my hair from falling out because I'm turning 30 and my body is changing.

Things I talk about all the time with my content: I love talking about Jesus, I love talking about sex, I love talking about the body, I love talking about shame. I love talking about how do we live a better and more abundant life now, and not just prepare for the life to come, whatever that means. And I tell you all this because I want you to know who's walking into the space. I, one time in my life, believed that it was important for me to completely tailor myself or dull my shine to fit into certain spaces so that I would be more acceptable to other people. More palatable. But then a friend of mine said, "You're doing nobody a favor because if you show up looking like a bro on day and then you come in semi-drag to church the next day it can be a little confusing for people." And so I'm here, full tilt weirdo. So for all the full title weirdos in the world and in this room, wassup [laughter]. And yes, I am wearing green. I got the message but I'm not talking about St Patrick's Day.

Let me tell you a little bit about myself. I am pretty much a P.K. which means pastor's kid. More like, by proxy. I'm technically a pastor's nephew but we did everything in church. My mother was the worship leader, my uncle was the pastor and we were in church like three times a week. So Sunday 9 a.m. service, 10 a.m. service, and then the after church brunch. Then Wednesday night for potluck and some strange Bible study or Christmas cantata rehearsal or Easter cantata rehearsal. Then extra Saturdays for when we had to decorate the church because my mother did not believe in asking friends for help but just enlisting her children to climb up these like 12-foot ladders to hang paper so she could get an overhead projector and then have us color in the lines while leaning off of the ladder. Super safe [laughter]. My mother is amazing by the way, I just question some things that she did. Don't tell her I said that. Also my mother doesn't know how to use technology so I know she won't ever hear this on the podcast so that's why I'm really okay with this [laughter].

[In southern accent] I accepted Jesus Christ my Lord personal savior at age 9 at a Jesus camp in the backwoods of Tennessee. And I really did used to talk like this, I'm not making fun of my family or anything like that, but I did. I got baptized at age 9 on the Fourth of July no less, because I'm a good Christian American human. [Voice in congregation] That's good! [Voice of Kevin, in response] Come on, now! [laughter] See, we're bringing the spirit in the house of the Lord. Y'all thought you were the frozen chosen but we gonna make these dead bones *rise Jesus*, hallelu. Anyways but that's the kind of environment and the Jesus I was captivated by — this Jesus that picked people who were second best. I was made fun of a lot for being fem as a child and like, I didn't realize I was gay until high school which is also a strange. But I was always just

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this person who had a big personality and I just knew in my body that Jesus is real and Jesus loves me, and I want to give my life to this love. And I don't know; maybe it was emotional manipulation, maybe it was just weird feelings in the moment but I remember saying, "I believe in Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God," and I had this indwelling of love and joy. And I was like, "Oh my God, this is real." It felt like the closest thing to magic we can talk about, the presence of God. I don't know if you have had an experience like that. I'm not saying you have to have that kind of experience to be a Christian or anything like that, it was just my experience at this weird Jesus Camp in Tennessee at age 9 [laughter]. And so of course I take that same feeling and expression back to my home church and my mother says to me when I'm doing this [raises hands] in worship, because that's what we do in Baptist worship (we just lift our hands to the Lord) which is really weird for some people. My mother comes up to me and she says, "Kevin, you need to stop being so dramatic." And I'm like, "Girl, who you talking to?" [laughter] I didn't say that, I was confused really because at age 9 I was like, "I'm not being dramatic. Why is that dramatic?" But then it became very clear to me that for Christians there are things that we do and things that we don't do, especially in our version of Christianity.

Growing up in evangelicalism is crazy because somehow you're convinced that your church is the only church that's going to heaven. Like we've got the answers right here in this space, and that's when I believed. It was the amalgam of American civil religion that kind of taught me that there was a correct way to be a man and a correct way to be a woman. You have your current roles and that's just how it works. If you do the right thing you're going to be #blessed and America's going to be blessed because why wouldn't God bless America because we're so great? And then as a good Christian teen, I didn't do anything — I was such a goody two shoes. Man, if my younger self could see me now, Jesus. I started high school and realized I was attracted to boys. I thought [whispers], "Oh sh\*t!" Because there's little ones in the room, I'm going to be more PG-13. But I realized I liked boys and I was scared of going to hell. So it wasn't just that I wanted to do the right thing to please God, it was, I better do the right thing so that I don't burn forever in constant eternal torment. Casual, as a teenager, to be dealing with that.

So my life became about figuring out what was pleasing to God because when you're a queer person and you have been told your entire life that [southern accent] the lesbians are out to kill our babies with abortions and the gays are out to give everybody AIDS and they're recruiting your children, it's the whole 9 yards. And I didn't choose this so I know I need to get rid it. There's this shame on the existential level because like, you never pick it. You can't control your thoughts. It's problems related to this if you're allosexual, which means you experience sexual attraction unlike a sexual person who may not experience sexual attraction the same way (fun vocab for the day). But if you're someone who experiences sexual attraction and went through puberty you might experience this urge like, "Oh my gosh that person is so cute." You might be

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discovering parts of your body and then at some point someone said, “Oh my God, don't do that because it's going to make you blind,” [laughter] and you're like, “Whaaat?” So some of us can relate to that. But that's the thing, we're told to be ashamed of our bodies. For it was it wasn't just like, “Dont like don't kiss girls,” It was like, “You better not think about kissing boys either.” But when you tell someone don't think about a rainbow unicorn, what do you think about? Rainbow unicorn. She's majestic. “Don't think about kissing boys, Kevin.” What do you think I'm thinking about all the time? Also, I was always watching “America's Next Top Model.” Like, I don't know like how my parents didn't see it coming. Oh honey. But my entire life I was figuring out what is going to be the thing that is pleasing to God because I know this just isn't right. It's this feeling of constantly trying to police yourself. If you look back at videos of me from high school you can see me visibly trying to not be gay on camera, which, come on [chuckles]. I was also in, which also “wasn't gay,” it was just acting, right?

My dad outed me to my mom my sophomore year. My mother freaked out and we went to the Exodus International office in Richmond, Virginia and I was in and out of reparative therapy groups for about 12-plus years. And that's gross. After they realized I might “not change” it was like, “You're gonna change. If we can just figure out where your dad went wrong, you can get saved.” So I got this message that it was my dad's fault but also kind of my mom, and definitely my fault too. Then after they realized, “Oh, you might not change. There's hope for change but it's kind of a crap shoot so show up anyways so thank you, don't touch yourself and also don't kiss boys and maybe you won't go to hell.” That's how it was, and that's what my life became. It was like, I am going to do this thing so I do not go to hell. That is coercion and that is scary, and that's not really choice in my opinion. But that's another sermon for another time.

But I think that's what a lot of us grew up with, whether it was with queer stuff or not. Like there's something in our lives where I don't want to mess up, I don't want to do something that's displeasing to God. And American civil religion kind of teaches that if you do the right thing you're going to get the right thing. God is going to bless you and God helps those who help themselves. And so we go on through our teenage years feeling shame about our bodies and not really knowing how to relate to each other, and having to recount all the times that you screwed up and confess. I don't know if y'all had to do confession in your youth group but we did and it was *so weird*. But not just regular confession, like, confessing your sexual sins to your other teenage friends — your other teenage guy friends who were also teenage guys and were also like... I mean...none of us went blind is all I'm saying [laughter]. So that's the thing about these thoughts that kept coming up for me, and like I said before, when you try to suppress the thought it just keeps coming up. And it was so hard for me as I was always thinking, I'm doing my best. I know that I love God. I'm showing up to church and I'm on the praise team and I'm serving in the kids' ministry and I'm not cussing and I'm not drinking with all my friends. I'm

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doing the right thing. God, why won't you fix me? Right? I feel like a lot of us sometimes go into our religious life like, God I'm doing the work — why aren't things getting better? And that, I think, has to do a lot with capitalism that has kind of seeped its way into American civil religion. You can also interchange that with evangelicalism white folks' civil religion. And because we love patterns, we take capitalism's idea of "you are worth what you create." If you create labor that is marketable, sellable, has a price tag on it then you're worth something. Same thing with God; if I do the things that are pleasing to God I get my God points and I can exchange them in for the blessings that I want. Because when the praises go up blessings come down (thanks, Chance). And the thing about labor is that it's only if someone else deems it valuable. So again, where do we look for what's good and what's not? We look to the church, and the church has told so many of us and continues to sell to so many of us that you are what you create you are what you bring to the table. You're only beloved if \_\_\_\_\_. Maybe not in so many words, but that's what a lot of people experience.

And so if it comes down to the game of you are you are only as holy as the people you haven't slept with, you're only as holy as the cuss words you never say, you're only as holy as the people you haven't kissed and you only are holy if you listen to worship music and vote Republican, and if you do those things God will love you, you're going to do it you're going to nail it. And that's not how it works because I was a good Christian boy and I started struggle with homosexuality early on. My parents got divorced, which was so bizarre to me. I did the holy thing and my dad got cancer and died. I did the holy thing and I just prayed, "God please don't let the judge give my brother a larger sentence." I was doing all these things believing that God could do anything and that because I'm good, God will do everything. God can do anything but why won't you do this thing for me?

And so it's our lived experience that bumps up against this belief that American civil religion teaches us that faith begets miracles. That was the realm I grew up in, kind of this prosperity gospel, right? Kate Bowler has this really great book called "Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies That I Have Loved" and in this book she is so heartbreakingly beautiful. The premise is this. She is a Duke Divinity professor at the height of her career. She's got kids and she is diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer and is looking straight in the face of death and she realizes, "God, I've done everything right. Why do I have cancer? Everyone says everything happens for a reason. What do I possibly have to learn from this experience?" I think there is something to say when we come down to the lowest parts of ourselves. They come down to these darkest moments when we are just shaking our fists at the sky saying, God, why aren't you doing what you said you were going to do? The Psalms are full of those same prayers; the psalmist is always going to God, petitioning God and saying, "This is what has been said about you. This is what I believe about you. This is what I know about you. Why won't you do this

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thing? Where is my justice? Why am I still being oppressed? Why am I still being hurt? Why can I still not pay my bills? Why is such and such getting cancer? Why is poverty still a thing? Why are people getting shot in their places of worship in mosques and churches and synagogues? Why God, have you not shown up?" We want equivalent exchange, we want answers, we want comfort in the midst of our dark night of the soul.

Now, what the heck does this have to do with the lectionary text? I'm so glad you asked because now I get to nerd out. So I am going to be poking around that Genesis text that our friend read just a minute ago. It is the one of the weirdest — let me recap it for you. Picture this before we tell that story. It's the ancient Near East and in this realm of the world there's a relationship between humanity and the gods, and the humanity's sole purpose to exist is to please the gods by offering sacrifices them to literally feed them. They believed they had to feed the gods. The gods were not these things that were never omnipotent. They could do whatever they want. They had anthropomorphized human personalities including egos and motivations and jealousy and sometimes they were good and sometimes they were bad. And so, if you like pray to the good God maybe they would be happy with you and you could maybe not get smited and your crops would grow. And then there's these other demons or trickster gods and maybe if you serve this one you get something but maybe not because they're jerks. And so that was the whole point, and that is that this cycle of conquering and conquering and conquering because that's the name of the game; we've got to get more land, more people to offer more things to our gods so we can be happy — so we can be the strongest and our gods can be not mad at us. So it's the cycle of violence and doing for the gods that is reflected a lot in the ancient near east creation myths that people have.

One of my favorites — what? Who has favorite like, near east creation myths [laughter]. Yeah, I'm single, please date me. If you're into ancient creation myths, slide into my D.M.'s. The Babylonian creation myth tells the story of Marduk who's the main character. He is the son of Tiamat, who is the mother goddess who along with one other god created all the other gods. Marduk is like, "I'm going to do whatever I want," because he's kind of a jerk and fighting all these monsters and whatnot and eventually gets to this place where he wants to do something with the world to really create the world. So he goes and rips Tiamat in a literal half to create the earth and the sky. It was from these two things from ripping apart of the divine feminine that created the earth. From this notion, it was from violence that the world came. Humanity in this story as well, is grown from the blood of another god who is killed by Marduk. So humanity is created from from the dirt of someone else's death, the death of somebody else, and then we come out and now we're supposed to serve the gods so that they cannot not smite us and whatnot. This story tells us that the world is violent and that's why; we just we're just doing what our gods have done and this is how the world works. What's also really interesting is there

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is a Mexican creation myth that basically tells the same kind of story. There's two male gods who chase after a female deity who is representative of creation and chaos. They rip her in two as well to create the sky and the earth, and from her tears water and life springs forth. So again, the divine feminine is being ripped apart in order to create life, saying that violence is a part of this. So it's interesting the Genesis creation myth that tells a different kind of story. In the Genesis creation myth there is nothing; the world is void and whatnot, right? It is without form, and instead of something being ripped apart there is generative co-creation — the voice of the divine saying, “*Let there be,*” as if to say, “Whatever potential is there, do it. Be the thing you're meant to be.” And it was. When it says there was the earth and sky, he said, “Let there be a dome that separates the waters from the sky,” or...I don't know, I can't remember right now. I'm in seminary now, I don't have my full degree yet but we're working on it [laughter]. But that's the thing, it's just “Let there be” a separation. Not, “I'm going to rip something apart” but let there be, and then God goes on to say, “Let the waters teem with life.” Not, “I'm going to put fishies in those waters,” but rather, “*Let the water do something.*” God put this creative energy there. “*Let the earth bring forth seed bearing plants. Let the animals do stuff, let the people do stuff. Let's let it be. I'm just going to let you do what you are naturally here to do,*” and I think that says something. It's not about a violent creative but a co-creation God being with us in the dirt, in breathing life into something.

[Exhale] Come on, somebody, that's good. And so this is a step forward in our spiritual understanding of the world. The people of the time had been told the world the violent place. The nation of Israel comes along and as they're trying to codify their stuff and stitch together a bunch of different types of passages to form what we now have as the Hebrew Bible, they said, “No. We see God as a generative figure. The force in the universe that is making things and holding it together, and the person who is holding us and protecting us.” And that brings us to our text of the day. Now that I've set that whole thing up, we're going into Genesis 15 which is a weird passage.

So Abram hasn't become the baby daddy to Ishmael yet so he's not problematic or cancelled yet [laughter]. Let's recap the story. Abram's there and God's like, “Hey, you're going to be the father of this nation,” and he's like, “How, because I ain't got no kids?” and he's like, “Go look at the stars. That's your gig; that's how many,” and that's when it says he believed God and it counted to him as righteousness. How wild is that, like you get called out of your own nation where nobody ever leaves home and God says, “Go to the land I will show you. I'm not going to tell you where that is, but just keep going. And I'm going to give you a bunch of kids even though your old lady is barren. And he believed God. That's wild to me. I don't have blind faith; we're working on that part. But what I'm zeroing in on in the story is when God says, “Bring me a cow, a sheep, a goat, and two birds. Cut them in half, separate them and put them there.”

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This was this was an ancient near east thing called cutting a covenant. They would put sets of animals that have been split apart and blood and guts and everywhere (gross) and the people who are participating in the covenant were to walk through the middle of these as kind of a prophetic way of saying, "If I don't keep up my end of the bargain, may I be divided as these animals. May I be ripped apart, my guts and blood all over the ground. This is how much this means to me." And so what we have in the story is Abraham is probably ready for an anthropomorphized version of God or something to show up to say, "Okay, I'm going to Covenant myself. I'm walking through this and yes, I'll do anything you say and may I be ripped apart if I don't keep my end of the bargain with you, divine being who is temperamental and probably not pleased and obviously always pissed at me because that's how the gods work at the time, right? This is Abram's view of the divine at the time. However, what happens after Abram chases these birds off (because he's been waiting there long enough for birds of prey to come in like eat the dead animals) he gets tired. He's sitting there and he falls asleep and it says a "deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him." [Shudders] What does that even mean?

What the lectionary actually leaves out (my favorite verse in there) actually says is that the Lord spoke to him and said, "I know this for certain. Your children will be an alien in their land and they should be oppressed for 400 years." Great. This is the covenant that I want to sign on for, thanks, God. And so he's sitting there then it says that a smoking fire pot and a torch come down and float in the middle. So like literally the goblet of fire from Harry Potter comes down out of nowhere and floats its way between the 2 before it spits out Harry Potter's name and Dumbledore going, "Harry Potter!" [laughter] So like what's this Goblet of Fire/smoking pot situation? It's actually an ancient symbol for the gods, the divine. This is something that Abram would have been familiar as a religious symbol. And so he sees the smoking pot and torch come through and walk or float itself — I don't know if it had legs — we don't know, but this presence of God floats between the middle of this sacrifice and then says to Abram, "Behold, I will give you the land and that's in front of you," and then names all of the people and says, "I'm going to give you all of them. I'm going to give you something.:"

What's interesting here is this is a leap forward where he is thinking that this is all going to be something violent if I don't do what God says. But God is saying, "I am entering into this covenant with you rather than you having to enter it with me." God is saying, "I am the one who is going to take the responsibility for this. I am the one entering into this life with you, these blood and guts, and may I be divided if I don't keep my covenant to you." Whooooo come on, somebody! God is covenanting himself to us, to the people and to the generations to come. God is saying whatever happens I'm going to be with you. I look at the old testament and all the time it's like, why do they keep keep breaking the covenant over and over and over again? It was never about the Covenant a man made with God. It was always about the covenant that

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God made with us. [congregation member: Amen!] So that's a departure from "I have to do the right thing. We have to remember this is also pre-Judaism right this is pre-temple worship before God even like was like chilling in the pillar of fire and cloud, before the 10 Commandments and all of that. And more than likely, Abram was probably not clean by what we would call the Levitical standards. This all happened just because the Holy Spirit shows up wherever she wants to [congregation member: Woo!]. God is saying that I'm going to be the one who's going to make this deal. I'm the one who's going to be responsible for seeing it to fruition and I'm going to walk with you in this life the blood and guts the moment that feels so gruesome, the moments that feel like death.

I'm blown away by that kind of intimacy. Abram just continues on with his life. I don't know how one goes on after knowledge like that. There's this woman wearing a sweater and on the back of it (I don't know if you've seen this branding where) it says, "HE>I." It's like an evangelical thing where it's saying God is bigger than I am. God is more important than I am, and I guess there is some sort of like healthy humility to saying that the creator of the universe is more powerful than me. But I don't think that's what God is trying to do. God's not trying to make us feel small so we have to keep playing these games and keep getting our Jesus points. God is trying to say, "I want you, I'm coming down with you, I'm here to be *with* you." God is stepping into our deep terrifying darkness to say, "I want to give you something." God is always in the darkness, in the places we least expect it. God comes to Jacob in dreams showing him a ladder of angels ascending and descending and Jacob wakes up and says, "In this place God was but I was not aware of it." In the dark place when he was on the run. And then later when he has to go and meet his brother after stealing his birthright after being away for a couple decades, afraid he would get killed God comes to Jacob in the form of a stranger in the night wrestling him to the ground and blessing him, giving him the name Israel.

God lurking around in the darkness. God comes to Moses in the cave in the form of a burning bush, which I guess in a cave it's presumably dark. And he says, "You're going to speak and going to set people free and then after he does that God leads them by a cloud. I assume this is not just like an ordinary pillar of cloud that you probably can't see through; it was probably quite dark. The prophet Elijah meets God at Horeb and he's like, "Go up on the mountain for I'm going to pass by." And there's darkness and fire and lightning and earthquakes and wind and God's not in that, but God is in the still small voice and everything just calms down. When I am like that and just by myself I can hear that with God. One of my favorite verses from the Gospels in Mark 5 the garrison demoniac that says, "I am Legion and whatnot," which is like — sick opening line, bro [laughter]. But the garrison demoniac meets God in a graveyard. The man whose daughter was dying comes to Jesus and says, "Please come heal my daughter. I know if you touch her she's going to live," and on the way she dies. But God meets that man in his

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darkest moment. And the woman who has been bleeding for 12 years, spending all her money and has a reputation as unclean, meaning she has to be separated from her community for 12 years, finds God when she has no other options. When she is down to, “I literally have nothing to give. I just need Jesus.” Jesus, when he was running around the desert when he got baptized and driven into the desert by the Holy Spirit — which, what is that like? That does not sound like fun to me (I’m not an outdoorsy girl) [laughter]. But Jesus was literally going back and forth with the literal devil and in that darkness God met Jesus and cared for him and angels attended to him. It’s in those darkest moments where God wants to show up and say, “I have a gift for you.”

So it's in the season of Lent as we're starting to prepare to remember the execution of Jesus at the hands of the state, that we remember that we all have our own deep and terrifying darkneses; our own dark nights of the soul. Being evangelical growing up, we didn't really do a whole lot with Good Friday or Holy Saturday because we were all about Sunday morning — “He is risen indeed!” — but we never knew how to grieve Good Friday. We never knew how to feel the pain of Holy Saturday at that moment. It’s in this moment of my life that on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, not just like the actual dates themselves but in those Good Friday and Holy Saturday moments when there is tragedy, and the moment right after tragedy when we say, “God, I don’t know where you *are*.” are those are the moments I feel closest to God. There's a moment in the Gospels, probably the darkest moment for all of the disciples, when Jesus gathers his faltering friends and at the table says in a in the midst of an occupied Israel, in the midst of something so hard Jesus says, “I want to give you something. This is my body.” God was never trying to make us feel small. That is what ancient religions did. That is what American civil religion has done to us. For so long in my life I just kept thinking I am in charge of keeping God happy and if I don't keep God happy then I'll suffer. That's not what God's doing. God coming to Abram with the cutting of the Covenant is saying to Abram, “I am going to be with you.” God was trying to make us aware; he comes to a room and says I want to give you something. I look at communion the same way, like God saying, “I am not so grand that I cannot be found in something as simple as bread and wine.” Every week when I get to take the Eucharist I remember that God is saying, “I'm here. I know it hurts,” because right after that what does Jesus do? He heads to Calvary. And that's what I think is so interesting too. As he's cutting this covenant of Abraham he doesn't tell him this is going to be great. He says your kids are going to be enslaved for 400 years. You are going to go through it. God doesn't say that God is going to rescue Abram who will be Abraham later. But he says rather, “I'm going to be with you in your darkest moment. In the guts and blood of your life I'm going to be with you.” So I see this Divine Love walking with me through the heart of gross and messy blood and guts kind of life and what I am comforted by today is Psalm 27 which is also part of the readings because

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it's one of my favorites. "The Lord is my light and salvation, of whom shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid?" I feel that this is Abram in some ways. I feel his voice talking back through the darkness; "Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. If my mother and father forsake me the Lord will take me." For a queer person to say that, that is something then. I've got a really complicated relationship with my family so to me that is like [exhales]. "I believe I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living," (Psalm 27:13). I used to say that about hoping God would make me straight, but now look at it. "I would have lost hope had I not known that I would see the glory of God in the land of the living." That's the KJV and that one really brings it home for me. Like, I look at my life now and I see glory. Halle!

I believe that faith sometimes begins in the darkness. It begins the point when we are at our lowest because we've tried so hard to do, to please. We've made the sacrifices, we've done the thing. And yet again it is God covenanting with us. And so if we are the church, if we are the Body of Christ, if we are Emmanuel God with us, then that means that we are also the extensions of that covenant, right? If we are the presence of God on the earth made manifest then I believe that we should hold up that covenant too and enter into each other's deep terrifying darkness, to hold each other in those moments. Because let's not make an illusion of what's going on right now. The attack on our Muslim community in Christchurch, New Zealand. Trans women of color who get killed and never get reported because nobody cares about trans women of color. The black and brown bodies that get mowed down in the street by police brutality. My friend who's a non-binary person in L.A. texted me that they got ran out of the bathroom this past week because they were wearing a suit at a wedding reception. We are surrounded by deep and terrifying darkness and we're so tired, "God, why haven't you shown up?" We're waiting here and we're believing but there are days I don't do good with saying the creeds. That that is why we are the church. That is why we are the body. That's why we are here to believe for one another, and like that's the thing is that I do desperately want to believe. I desperately want to wake up and just be able to say that I believe in the virgin birth and the life and the death and the resurrection of Christ and that I believe in the church and I believe in the resurrection of the body in the Holy Spirit and that maybe the life to come is going to be better than this one. And I sometimes wonder if desiring to believe, even if imperfectly, is still good enough. Because again, it's not about whether or not I believe; it's about the fact that God believes in me. It is not about whether I am good at belief. It is that God already believes in me. So my dearly beloved family, if today you're sitting in your deep terrifying darkness I want you to remember that God doesn't promise that God will get rid of your darkness, but God is with you. And when I say God is with you, I also mean that we are we are the Body of Christ. We are to enter into another deep and terrifying darkness. What if we

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did that same thing? What if we thought about community and Covenant the same way that when I say when I promise myself to a body, I say, “May I be divided if I cannot keep my covenant with you.” What if we were that desperate for community, that desperate for love, that desperate for our Muslim friends to feel safe in their houses of worship? What if we did that? What if we covenanted with the world that same kind of love. I believe that's the kind of love that can change the world and I'm so tired of thinking that things cannot get better because so often that's what the world tells me — that this is just how it is. But what does Jesus say? He gives us a different narrative. And I believe that it is so possible to see the goodness of God in the land of the living. I don't want to die and still have kids who are queer dying. I don't want to die and see a church that is falling apart or given over to Jerry Falwell Jr. I want to see the goodness of God in the land of the living, I want to covenant with the rest of the world and I think that is the challenge of Lent is to say what am I willing to do to see that kind of resurrection? So wherever you are today, I want you to hear God speaking to you. Whatever the bloody mess of your life is, I want you to feel the warmth of God's fire floating towards you and saying, “I have something to give you.” Do not be afraid. Wait for the Lord and be strong. Let your heart take courage and wait for the Lord. Amen.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Kevin, thank you so much for that powerful message. We are so grateful for the Spirit's gifting in your life and for your willingness to be here with us today. Well, it's my privilege after a message like that to invite us to take communion together but before we do that, I do want us to say the Nicene Creed together. And I love that Kevin's message set this up so beautifully. Because the creeds can be difficult for us, can't they? And as I've said so many times recently since we started using this one instead of the Apostle's Creed more often, the pronouns are helpful. It's *we* believe when *I* can't or *you* can't on one part of it this week or another part of it next week. We do, and we believe together. And so as an act of solidarity, not as a final exam before you come to the table, but as an expression of this centering set of beliefs and trusts. Can we say this creed together before we come to the table:

[All together]

We believe in one God,  
  
the Father, the Almighty,  
  
maker of heaven and earth,  
  
of all that is, seen and unseen.

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We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

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We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,

and the life of the world to come. Amen.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

It's a joy to invite you to come to this table, which is not the table of the church but the table of the Lord. The table where Jesus presents the bread and says, "This is my body" and breaks it. Come and take a piece of the bread and to put in one of the cups. You can see everything is labeled here so you can find the best combination for you and your needs. But it is one table because we are one church and this is an act of remembrance of Christ's sacrifice. And it is food for your hungry souls. So come and be joyful at the feast of the Lord. A prayer team member will be at the back of the room if you'd like to receive prayer during this time as well. Let's continue to worship God.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](http://ArtisanChurch.com)