

When Death Itself Dies

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Date: 16 November 2025

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- [0:00] So we are in the penultimate second-to-last sermon on the book of Revelation.! This is like the end times of the end times, okay? It's the end-time-ception.
- So next week Tanetta is going to finish out our series. I have the lovely task of talking about the lake of fire and the great white throne judgment and all of that.
- So thank you Tanetta for assigning me that sermon. I appreciate it. To get things started, as I like to do, instead of sharing tweets or threads in my Instagram stories, I will inflict them on you with the screen behind me.
- And my favorite thread of this week was cause of death, which are basically these little tiny paper cuts that make you suffer. So for instance, cause of death, shirt shirt, sweat shirt sleeve, a little wet after washing my hands, right?
- Is that not a terrible feeling and you wish that you could just die or keep going? Cause of death, I wore my coat to get in the car because it was cold outside, but now my car is hot and I can't get out of my coat! Help me!
- [1:06] That's the worst. I hate coats in the car. Next one. Secondary cause, the hair ties around her wrist also got wet. Yes, yes, yes.
- Next one. Cause of death, sweatpants pocket got caught on the doorknob. It's like nothing more humiliating than just walking and being like, whoa! I was just walking.
- Next one. Cause of death, what shower curtain liner touching me while I'm trying to take a shower? Like, could you not back up? Oh man, that's terrible. Next one.
- Cause of death, unknown poison. Source, ice cubes a little too old. It tasted like the air in the freezer. Anybody else relate to this one? Like, old freezer air is just like a certain kind of terribleness.
- Yeah, yeah, it's not good. It's not good. Last one. Well, I think that was the last one. Okay, so I bring these up because these are all like our version of our own personal hell.
- [2:05] Tiny, absurd moments that feel like death by a thousand paper cuts. Minor irritations that make you want to burn everything down and start over. And we joke about moments as hell or hellish.
- Cause we instinctively know that hell, whatever it is, is about discomfort. It's about things being wrong. It's about wanting desperately for something to be different than it is. Which takes us to Revelation chapter 20.
- Now, if you grew up in a church like I did, not everybody here did. I understand that. But folks who did grow up in a church like mine, you probably heard quite a bit about hell. And we've talked a lot about hell over the years about how to understand it.
- And we're not talking about wet sleeve after washing hands kind of hell. Fire and brimstone. Eternal conscious torment. Left behind series. Turn or burn kind of hell. The kind of people that stand outside of your apartment building with signs and with bullhorns telling you to repent or burn.
- And when we talk about that kind of hell, it brings up fear. It brings up bad emotions. And part of maybe some of those bad emotions can be this idea that it's what scripture says.

[3 : 18] And we have to totally ignore scripture if we're going to come up with some better idea of hell. But what I want to do today is try to invite us into a different reading of Revelation 20 and other hell texts.

Not because I just want us to be more comfortable with scripture. Not because I want us to ignore the hard parts of scripture. But because I think reading Revelation 20, in light of everything else that we've said about Revelation so far, will help some things click.

And when we read it through the lens of what Revelation actually is, this apocalyptic literature that's written to oppressed Christians under Roman imperial power, I think a different picture is going to emerge for us.

A picture where death itself dies. A picture where judgment is about refinement and not revenge. A picture where the lake of fire is not the end of the story, but part of God's relentless, unstoppable work to make all things new.

Now, Revelation and much of the New Testament and much of our scripture, we are used to the sort of individualized experience of reading.

[4 : 30] We have grown up in a literate culture. And when we read, we imagine, I know some people in here appreciate going to doubles for the silent book club experience.

Pastor Heidi is a fan of this. You go, you sit with your book, and it's quiet. But this was actually not the typical way of experiencing written word for most of human history.

The way that you would experience the written word is that there would be somebody literate in your group, in your social group, and maybe they would get a letter from somebody, maybe they would get a piece of literature, and they would read this out loud.

Or better yet, it would be even dramatized in some way. Do I have, by chance, three brave volunteers who are willing to dramatize Revelation chapter 20 for me?

Three volunteers who are ready to look a little goofy or silly in front of a crowd. I knew it would be Katie Madison. You're going to... Yeah, Katie Madison. I need one more.

[5 : 27] One more. Aislinn, thank you. All right. All right. All right. So this is entirely unscripted. I have given them zero instructions.

They maybe have some vague idea. Some characters that are going to come up. There's an angel. Who wants to be the angel? Okay. Aislinn's an angel. There's a dragon. There's a dragon. There are people on thrones.

Okay. Now there's three more characters. The rest of the dead. Okay. So we'll go back to Aislinn. So Aislinn, you're going to be the angel, the rest of the dead. A person on a great white throne.

Okay. And then death and Hades. Dragon and death. Angel and people on thrones. And death and Hades.

And people... Oh, you're the throne people. Okay. Great. All right. Here we go. Then I saw an angel. Woo! Coming down from...

[6 : 24] Coming down from heaven. Holding in her hand the key to the abyss and a huge chain. And the angel sees the dragon.

That old snake who is the devil and Satan and bound him for a thousand years and threw him into the abyss and locked and sealed it over him. Yep.

Now. It was great. So some people have the right idea. So as you're experiencing this letter, you're watching it being dramatized, the watchers or experiencers of this are cheering on.

Okay. So you are cheering on the angel and you're booing the dragon. Right. So. And this was to keep the dragon from continuing to deceive the nations until the thousand years were over.

And after this, he's got to be released for a little while. Then I saw thrones and people sitting on the thrones. And judgment was given in their favor.

[7:31] They were the ones who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and God's word. You're not going to act out beheaded. And those who had not worshipped the beast or its image, who had not received the mark on their forehead or hand.

And they came to life and ruled with Christ for one thousand years. The rest of the dead didn't come to life until the thousand years were over.

This is the first resurrection. Favored and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, for they will be priests of God and of Christ and will rule with them for one thousand years.

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from their prison. Boo. And Satan will go out to deceive the nations.

Sorry, I lost my spot. Deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog. He will gather them for battle and their number is like the sand of the sea.

[8:37] And they came up across the whole earth and surrounded the saints' camp, the city that God loves. But fire came down from heaven and consumed them. Then the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet also were.

Their painful suffering will be inflicted upon them day and night forever and always. Yay? We'll get there. Then I saw a great white throne and the one who was seated on it.

And before his face, earth and heaven fled away and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne and scrolls were opened.

And scrolls were opened. The great white throne person. Great white throne person opens the scroll.

And the dead were judged. And the dead were judged on the basis of what was written in the scrolls about what they had done.

[9:53] And the sea gave up the dead that were in it. The death and grave gave up the dead that were in them. And people were judged by what they had done.

Then death and the grave were thrown into the fiery lake. This is the fiery lake, the second death. And anyone whose name wasn't found written in the scroll of life was thrown into the fiery lake.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to Katie, Aslan, and Madison. So, with maybe not like stroll flashing, that is something like how a letter would be experienced by a first century audience.

It was not just a dry reading. It was usually dramatized in some way. You might have multiple people read. You had a congregation reacting in some way. And remember, Revelation is first and foremost a letter to a set of churches that is trying to give them hope, bolster their hope, in a time of oppression, in a time of empire.

So, what we're going to hit today is the millennium debate. We're going to talk about the books of life. We're going to talk about the lake of fire. So, a bunch of reminders. What we're reading in Revelation 20 is not a newspaper from the future.

[11:11] It is not a literal timeline of end times events. It's apocalyptic literature. It is a set genre that would have been known to first century audiences. A genre of writing from oppressed people that uses purposefully wild symbolic imagery to communicate hope under empire.

If anybody needs some hope tonight, say amen. When John wrote this, Christians were being persecuted. Not systemically at this point, but there were pockets of persecution by either the Roman Empire or by local authorities.

Being killed for refusing to worship at the temple, for refusing to worship Caesar. And what God's people, what the churches needed to know was, does God see this?

Is God going to do anything about it? Does Rome win? And Revelation has an answer. The answer is no. Rome does not win. The lamb who is slain wins.

Death itself will be defeated. Justice will come. But, that message had to be coded. You couldn't just write in the inside sleeve of your jacket, Caesar sucks.

[12:21] God's going to take him down. And then mail it around the empire. Okay? There's such a thing as encoded resistance. Encoded resistance is when you use things like songs and poetry and story and narrative in order to tell a better story that the dum-dums of the empire aren't going to recognize immediately so you don't get yourself thrown in jail.

You see this in African-American spirituals. You see this in persecuted communities around the world where why don't they just go out and say that their dictator, that their leader is all for terrible?

Because they are using encoded resistance. And you're reading the same sort of thing in Revelation of dragons and beasts from the earth and the sea. So, you write in symbols that your community is going to understand but wouldn't get you immediately beheaded.

So, when you read about a thousand years and Satan being bound with a lake of fire, we need to read it the way the original audience would have. Symbolic literature communicating theological truth, not a playbook for the future.

So, let's talk about the millennium. The millennium is this, you know, centuries-long debate about in Revelation you have this thousand-year period. What does it mean? What does it represent? And when does it happen?

[13:35] When does it happen? And there's, I want us to understand the three main views because you might hear these views tossed around online, theological books or things like that. And I want you to understand how these three different views change the way that you might understand the church's mission.

So, view number one, the one that's most famous, is premillennialism. Let me hear you say premillennialism. Well done. Well done. Jesus will return before the millennium in this view, and usually the thousand years are taken to be literally.

It describes a literal one thousand years. Jesus is going to come back, set up an earthly kingdom in Jerusalem, and rules for precisely one thousand years, and then you get the final judgment.

And this is the view behind the left-behind books, rapture theology, the idea that things all have to get worse before Jesus can come back. The sort of mechanistic thinking that says that you need a war in Israel and Palestine, you need Russia to invade different nations, you need everything to go in hell in a handbasket before Jesus can return.

And the problem with this view that I've seen is that it makes Christians passive. It leans itself into escapism, that we just need to, there's nothing we can do, everything's going to get worse and worse until Jesus returns, and so the best that we can do is that we'll sing, well, I'll fly away, hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away, and we wait until that day.

[15:03] And Jesus is going to come back and fix everything anyway. Why bother working for justice? If God is going to burn up the planet, why bother about climate change? Why care about the environment?

And this theology has been used to justify apathy about climate and poverty and systemic injustice. You will always have the poor with you, things are always going to get worse, we can't do anything about it until Jesus comes back.

Now, the opposite of that view is a view called post-millennialism. Let me hear you say post-millennialism. If I have to say all these syllables, you have to say all these syllables.

And the idea here is that Jesus is going to show up after the millennium, and the thousand years are semi-symbolic, depending on who you read. It is a literal amount of time that Jesus has to come back after, about a thousand years, maybe longer.

And it arrives only after the success of the church. And this is a view that says that the gospel is gradually going to transform the world, that Christianity is going to spread until there is a golden age of peace and righteousness on earth, and then Jesus will come back to a world that's pretty much already fixed.

[16:14] And this perspective was actually pretty popular during the 19th century into the turn of the 20th century, during the rise of the missionary movements, where you would send these people around the world to save the world for Jesus and the social gospel of the late 1800s, early 1900s, that we can transform the world on our own in order to prepare for the return of Jesus.

And this is where you have the origins of things like, movements like Christian socialism, things like that, because they believed in postmillennialism. The problem is that this view took a real serious downturn after World War I and World War II, and a century of genocides that killed more people in the 20th century than any century before it.

Plus, it can lead to this idea of Christian triumphalism, the idea that Christian cultures are going to dominate and Christianize the world, which, no surprise, has historically been used to justify colonialism and cultural imperialism.

So the third view, the one that I hold to, is called amillennialism. Let me hear you say amillennialism. Ah, meaning not. And the millennium is fully symbolic.

And in this view, the idea is that John is describing the church age in general. And remember, one of our tools of reading Revelation is that you can't read it chronologically from chapters three after the letters forward, and this sort of, this happens, then this happens, then this happens, and this happens.

[17:43] It's much more of a spiral where lots of things are happening simultaneously. So in the amillennial view, that thousand years is describing the age of the church.

That the thousand years are symbolic, like everything else in Revelation, representing the entire period between Jesus' first and second coming. The idea is that Satan was actually bound at the cross.

That the cross, what Jesus was victorious over the powers of hell and Satan, and that although Satan was not completely eliminated, his power was limited.

This, you get this idea from passages where Jesus says things like, I saw Satan fall like lightning. Or in first John, where it says that the work of Jesus was to destroy the works of the devil.

And this binding of Satan enables the gospel to go into all the nations. The first resurrection was the spiritual one. What happens when we come to faith in Christ?

[18:40] When the effects of the cross and the resurrection happen on earth? Paul says that we are already, in Colossians 3, we're already seated with Christ in heavenly places. And at the end of this age, Jesus will return with a final judgment, and there's new creation.

And I prefer this view for a couple reasons. One, it takes Revelation's symbolic genre seriously. The number 1,000, 10 times 10 times 10, represents completeness and fullness.

It's not a literal 1,000 years any more than the 144,000 in Revelation 7, our literal head count. And secondly, it puts urgency on our work now. We're not waiting for Jesus to come and fix things.

We're not just escapists waiting for a rapture. We're not assuming that things will just automatically get better. We're living in the tension of the now and the not yet. But Christ has won the victory, but we're still working it out.

It's like when the losing team knows that they're going to lose and they start playing dirty, even though the end is sure. Satan is bound from gathering nations to destroy the church, but we all can believe that there's still a force of evil active in the world.

[19:50] We're called to be faithful witnesses in a world that's still broken and violent and unjust. And it also, thirdly, keeps us from the arrogance of thinking that we can just build the kingdom ourselves, like post-millennialism, or the despair of thinking that God doesn't care about the world at all, like premillennialism, and we'll just ultimately create a brand new one.

Instead, we work knowing that our labor is not in vain, that God is at work in and through us, that the final victory belongs to God alone. What's interesting in Revelation 20 is that even with Satan bound for a thousand years, when he's released at the end, he immediately gathers nations from the four corners of the earth in number like the sand of the sea to make war against God's people.

A thousand years or some era of time without Satan actively deceiving the nations, and the moment he's let out, people immediately follow him into rebellion.

And I think this tells us something about human nature, that the problem isn't only external temptation. I think some of the problem does lie in us.

Now, I've written and talked a little bit before about what I call total dependence, as opposed to a theology of total depravity. In the Reformed or Calvinist tradition, they talk about the idea of total depravity, the idea that every single part of us is corrupted by sin, that we're incapable of choosing good without God.

[21:21] And I think this ignores Genesis 1's refrain, that creation is good, good, very good. On the other hand, I do believe in total dependence, that God is creator and we are created, and therefore we are dependent on God, not just for salvation, but for every breath and moment and impulse toward love and justice.

The second law of thermodynamics says that we are destined for entropy and the heat death of the universe, and we only have to look around and see the evidence of systemic injustice and violence and oppression.

And Revelation 20 demonstrates this, that even in these ideal circumstances, a thousand years without Satan's active deception, humans still rebel. We still need transformation.

We still need resurrection. We still need God to do what we cannot do for ourselves. We live in that reality right now. We live in a society that's fully capable of feeding every person on the planet, of providing every person with housing and health care and education, but we don't.

Most deaths aren't a matter of necessity, they're a matter of policy. And I think that should humble us as humans, should make us gracious towards others, it should kill any sense of collective self-righteousness.

[22:41] Because if people in ideal circumstances can still choose rebellion and death, then clearly the problem is deeper than just circumstances. The problem, according to scripture, is a human heart that needs to be made new.

Okay, so that's the millennium, the binding of Satan, it's moved to great white throne judgment in the book of life. So there's this two-book system in Revelation 20. There are books, plural, containing records of everyone's deeds.

And there's the book of life containing names of the redeemed. And traditionally, theology is often presented to the book of life as a fixed, predetermined, unchangeable book. If your name is in it, you're saved.

If it's not, you're damned. Case closed. But that's actually not what the rest of scripture suggests. The book of life is not a new idea to Revelation and John, its author.

The book of life is actually referenced in the Hebrew Bible throughout both the Old and New Testaments. And the book of life is presented as dynamic, not static. It can change. Names are removed and added to it.

- [23 : 43] We see this in Exodus 32 in the Psalms. Don't blot me out from your name of life. You have added your people into your book of life, God. And we are given very clear statements in scripture about what God's goals are for the work of the world.

In Colossians chapter 1, we read, Because the fullness of God was pleased to live in Christ, he reconciled all things to himself through Christ. Whether things on earth or in the heavens, he brought peace through the blood of his cross.

Or in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, All these new things are from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us, the church, the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ by not counting people's sins against them.

He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. So, what I think is happening in Revelation chapter 20 is that the judgment by works, that first set of books that is open, is not about anybody earning salvation.

It's about demonstrating the reality of your relationship with God. Works are evidence, but they're not payment. Ephesians 2 makes this clear. For by faith you have been saved through faith.

- [24 : 58] Not that of yourselves, it's the gift of God, not of works, lest anybody should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.

So, we're not saved by our works, but we are saved to a purpose for good works. I can make my wife breakfast, I can help my friends move, I can snuggle with my children, not because I'm trying to earn their love, it's evidence of my love.

We are judged by our works here in Revelation 20 because they reveal that our name does belong in the book of life. And, more radically, that second book, the book of life, I also believe that it's written in pencil.

Even after the judgment in Revelation chapter 20, when we get to chapters 21 and 22, the gates of the new Jerusalem are never shut. The spirit and the bride say, anyone who is thirsty may come and drink the water of life freely.

Pastor Tanetta is going to say more about this next week. Names can be added. Transformation is always possible. God's love is relentless.

- [26 : 09] This is where my own personal belief in universalism comes in. I believe that God's love, fully revealed, will eventually overcome all resistance. That the lake of fire itself is not about eternal torture, but about God's refining fire that purifies and transforms and heals.

As the psalms testify, God's mercy endures for how long? Forever. So let's talk about that lake of fire. I know this is where a lot of us can get hung up.

Verse 10 says that the devil is thrown into the lake of fire to be tormented day and night forever and ever. Verse 14 tells us that death in Hades or death in the grave are thrown into it, calling it the second death.

Verse 15 says that anyone whose name is not in the book of life is thrown in it. And traditional theology has read this as eternal conscious torment. Hell is a torture chamber where people suffer with no hope of redemption.

But I want to offer another way to read this rooted in three things, the way the early church read it, in the Greek text itself, and in the character of God. So first, notice what gets thrown into the lake of fire.

[27 : 20] Death and Hades. Death and Hades are not people. They are abstract concepts. They are powers, enemies of God. You can't literally throw death into a fire, which signals to the reader that the lake of fire itself is symbolic.

Early Christian theologians, folks like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, who helped write the early creeds, understood that the lake of fire is a refining crucible.

In the ancient world, when you wanted to purify gold, you put it in the fire. The fire wasn't there to destroy the gold. It was there to remove the impurities, the dross.

The gold would be heated until the worthless material burned away, leaving pure gold. The early church read passages like Malachi chapter 3. God will sit as a refiner, as a purifier.

He will purify His people and refine them like gold and silver. Or Hebrews chapter 12, our God is a consuming fire. So, in this view, the lake of fire is not God's torture chamber.

[28 : 25] It's more like God's surgeon's knife, removing the tumor. It's God's refining fire, burning away everything that keeps us from being fully human and fully alive, fully ourselves as God created us to be.

Think about it medically. If you have cancer, the surgeon cuts. It's painful. It's violent in a way. But the violence isn't the point. Healing is the point.

The surgeon doesn't cut to hurt you. The surgeon cuts to save you. Think about physical therapy after an injury. It hurts. Sometimes it hurts worse than the original injury.

But the pain is purposeful. It's breaking down scar tissue. It's rebuilding strength. It's restoring function. And so, in this view, this is the way I think what the lake of fire represents. It's not God's sadism, but God's fierce, relentless love that won't let us remain in our brokenness.

It's painful because transformation is painful. Death is painful. Letting go of our false selves and our false beliefs and our sin and our pride, all of that is painful.

[29 : 32] But pain isn't the purpose. Healing is the purpose. Now, you may be saying, arguing with me in your head, but Anthony, the text says, torment a day and night forever and ever.

Sounds pretty eternal, right? So, let's talk about some Greek. The phrase forever and ever translates the Greek *aistos ionios tonionion*. I won't make you say that.

Aistos ionios tonionion, which literally translates into the ages of ages. Some translations might say forever and ever. And the root word here is the word *ion*, where we get the word *eon*, which is an age or an era or a period of time.

And this does not inherently mean eternal or endless. The Greek language actually had perfectly good words for eternal if that's what someone wanted to say.

I've got some examples on the screen. What looks like the Spanish word *adios*, it's not, it's *adieu*, means eternal or perpetual. *Aparantos* means unlimited. *Aparantos* means unceasing.

[30 : 35] *Aparantos* means endless. There's lots of words that a writer could have chosen if they wanted to convey the idea of an unceasing or unending amount of time. But those are not the words used here.

Instead, we get the word *ion* or *age*. David Bentley Hart, one of the best living New Testament scholars, translates this phrase in his translation of the New Testament as the *age* rather than *forever*.

And he argued, along with many other scholars, that *ionios* in the New Testament typically refers to the quality of the age to come, not the endless duration. And this gets lost in translation.

And I put this next part of my sermon on the screen just so you could follow along with me. When Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, which is what the Catholic Church would use for centuries, when Jerome translated the Bible in Latin in the Vulgate, he used the Latin word *eternus* to translate both *ionios* and *idios*.

and this collapsed the distinction between age and eternal, a quality of time and a duration of time. The Greek-speaking East maintained the flexibility, which is why you're more likely to find universalism in Greek-Orthodox Christianity, whereas the Latin-speaking West, where Catholicism and eventually Protestant theology, we lost it.

[31:53] So for centuries, Western Christians has read eternal, unending duration punishment into texts that have originally meant the punishment of the age to come or the punishment that belongs to that age, a punishment that is pretty ultimate in significance and everlasting in effect, but not necessarily endless in duration.

So this does, you know, not going to settle the debate for anybody. Smart people disagree about this, but what I'm saying is that eternal conscious torment, somebody thrown into the lake of fire so they stay there forever, is not as clearly biblical as many of us are taught.

And when we couple that ambiguity with what we know about God's character, that God is love, that God desires all people to be saved, that God's mercy triumphs over judgment, I land on the side of hope, I land on the side of believing that God's refining fire will accomplish its purpose, that God's love will eventually melt all resistance, that death in Hades thrown into the lake of fire means death itself dies and only life remains.

So what does this all mean for us? What does it mean to live between first and second comings? What does it mean to be people of the resurrection while death still seems to have power?

So here's where I want to land. Giving birth to justice will be painful, but it will be worth it. The metaphor of birth is biblical. Jesus uses it in John 16.

[33:24] A woman giving birth has pain because her time has come, but when her baby is born, she forgets the English because of the joy that a child is born into the world. Creating a just church and a just neighborhood and a just city and a just world, it requires going through fire.

Not because God is punishing us, but because transformation is inherently difficult because tearing down systems of oppression is hard, because confronting our own complicity is hard, because change is hard.

When you work for racial justice, you go through fire, you lose friends, you face backlash, you have to confront your own racism, your own blind spots, your own participation in white supremacy.

It's painful. When you work for LGBTQ inclusion in the church, you go through fire, you face condemnation, you're called a heretic, you watch people leave, you have to sit with your own internalized homophobia or transphobia or the way that you've harmed people.

It's painful. When you work for economic justice, you go through fire, you face accusations of being a socialist, of class warfare, of not understanding how the world works.

[34:32] I had me and Tanetta were texting earlier today about what was going to happen during communion. And I said, yeah, you can go ahead and be a communist. I mean, go ahead and do communion. And it was a typo.

But it was great. You have to confront your own relationship with money and privilege and comfort. It's painful. When you work for immigrant justice, you go through fire.

You're told that you don't care about the law or national security or about real Americans. You have to face your own nationalism and your own supremacies. It's painful. But the good news is that the fire is not there to destroy you.

The fire is there to refine you, to burn away the dross, to make you more fully human, to make you more like Christ. And the fire isn't just personal. It can be communal.

When we work for justice together, we collectively go through the refining fire. We're becoming the beloved community. We're being transformed into people who will live in the new Jerusalem where the gates are never shut, where healing is for all nations, where death itself has died.

[35:37] And speaking of communal fire, we're in some right now. Tonight is the last service that will be held in this space by this church. And that hurts.

I know some of us are angry about it. I know some of us are scared, scared that you won't have a church home anymore, that the morning service is no longer accessible, that something precious is being stolen from you.

And I know how many of you found this community in this space. This was your first experience of a church that didn't hurt you. This was the place where you met Jesus again after the church had driven you away.

This was where you found out you could be gay and Christian, trans and beloved, agnostic or questioning and welcome. So I want to be clear that this is a loss.

This is a grief. This is a kind of death. And I don't want to stand up here and pretend it's not. I'm not going to spiritualize it away or tell you it's all part of God's plan.

[36:43] Sometimes things die. Sometimes good things that you put a shit ton of work into die. Sometimes communities that meant the world to people come to an end, not because they were bad, but because resources shift and circumstances change and we can't sustain everything we want to sustain.

and you have hindsight about decisions that you wish you would have made. I think about it over my own career about leaving churches and watching the ministries that I had poured my life and my soul and my time into and then when I leave, it all goes away.

And it makes me what question? Was it worth it? But what I also know that death never gets the last word.

Even when something dies, even when something good dies, I believe resurrection is possible. And I don't know what that looks like yet. I don't know if it means some of us will make the drive to morning service and find new life there.

I don't know if it means that some of you will start something new in your own neighborhoods. I don't know if it means we'll reimagine evening worship in a different form somewhere down the road. I don't know, but what I do know is this, that the table church is not a building or a time slot.

[38:05] It's not a service. It's a people. It's you. It's this weird, beautiful, broken, beloved community that keeps showing up for each other and keeps choosing love over fear and keeps working for justice even when it costs us, even when it hurts, even when we have to let things die so that new things can be born.

And that community and you, we, us doesn't have to end tonight. It can change shape and change always feels like fire.

And this is why I prefer amillennialism because it says we're in this now. That this is our work. Not building the kingdom through our own power but participating in God's already active, redemptive work knowing that Christ has already won the victory but the full manifestation of that victory is still to come.

We're like the midwives in Exodus helping to birth liberation even when Pharaoh is trying to kill it. We're like the women at the tomb showing up in the dark to anoint a dead body and instead finding resurrection.

We're like the early church living as if the kingdom has come even while empire still stands. And here's the ultimate good news of Revelation 20. The news that should make us shout and make us weep with joy that should reorient everything that death itself dies.

[39 : 29] Death. Not people, not sinners but death itself is thrown into the lake of fire. Death is defeated. Death is destroyed. Death itself dies. And if death itself is destroyed then the lake of fire can't be a place where people die forever.

That would be death continuing not death dying. No, death is thrown into the lake. It means death is done finished and over. And what's left when death dies only life only resurrection only the new Jerusalem where death shall be no more neither shall there be mourning or crying or pain anymore for the former things have passed away.

Yes, justice work is painful. Transformation requires fire. Yes, we will suffer. We will lose things. We will die both in ways literal and metaphorical but death does not get the last word.

The lamb who was slain gets the last word. Resurrection gets the last word. Life gets the last word. Love gets the last word. But let me bring it back to where we started.

What's your personal health? Maybe it's wet sleeves after washing your hands. Maybe it's bigger than that. Maybe your personal hell is the trauma you can't seem to shake.

[40 : 46] It's the relationship that broke you. The addiction you can't beat. The depression that colors everything gray. The guilt over ways that you've hurt people. The fear that you're not enough.

That you've never been enough. That you'll never be enough. Maybe it's a church disappointing you yet again. But what I want you to hear is that God's refining fire is for you.

not to destroy you but to heal you. Not to torture you but to transform you. Not to condemn you but to make you whole. And I have to admit that it will hurt.

Healing always hurts. Death always hurts. Resurrection always comes through a tomb. But the fire is not the end of the story and the pain isn't the point of the story.

The point of the story is that death dies, that God wins and that love never fails. So let the fire come that the transformation hurts.

[41 : 46] Let justice be painful because death itself will die. What's left will be life. Abundant, eternal, resurrection life. And it will be worth it.

Amen.