

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from November 22, 2020

Thanksgiving - Reign of Christ the King



Intro to Service

If you are familiar with the Christian Calendar, the new year begins next Sunday with **Advent**, which prepares us to be ready to celebrate Christ's birth and anticipate his return, moves quickly through the **Christmas Season** to **Epiphany**, the arrival of the wise men, and the baptism of Jesus and the beginnings of his ministry -- all revealing to us who Jesus is; and then we enter **Lent**, in which we observe and re-live with Jesus his unrelenting journey to the cross, followed by the joy of the **Easter** in which we discover death has been conquered and our Lord lives forever and so can we. Then Jesus ascends and sends the Spirit of the **Pentecost Season**, which is followed by **Kingdomtide**, or **Ordinary Time**, following the expansion of the church and the growth of his people in Christian living until the year ends and climaxes with the last Sunday of the year (today); Which used to be called *Christ the King Sunday*, now is called *Reign of Christ Sunday*, and which I call **Reign of Christ the King Sunday** (when we celebrate that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, recognizing Christ's rule over all). Then we start the new year again next Sunday, preparing for and anticipating Christ's birth and return.

I say all that to say this: we have reached the end of the Christian year. We have reached the end of our in-person services for a while. We have reached the end of this "Children of Light" worship series. We get one last look at our growing, expanding number of all types of candles on our altar -- different shapes, sizes, styles, and colors, all representing the growth of the church that is open to people of all ages, nations, and races.



It is also Thanksgiving Sunday, so let's begin with that emphasis, and while the candles are lit, let's listen to an instrumental, a traditional thanksgiving hymn -- which most appropriately for this day concludes with the lyrics that call us to honor and praise the name of God, our triumphant leader and defender.

Special Flute & Piano Duet *We Gather Together (with lighting of Candles)*

Call to Worship

Come, all the earth, shout for joy to the God who saves us!

We will come before him with thankful hearts.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord!

We will be glad to worship and serve him.

Sing your way into his presence with great joy!

We know the Lord is God, the greatest King above all.

The lowest depths of the earth to the highest mountain peaks are engineered and sculpted by his hands.

He is our Creator, and we are his people.

Come, then, enter his courts with thanksgiving and praise!

We will bow before him in worship and bless his beautiful name.

The Lord is good. His love endures forever. He is always ready to receive us with his amazing love and kindness.

He faithfully keeps his promises through all generations.

(Inspired by a blend of Pss 95:1-7a and 100, NIV and TPT)

Now let's express these same sentiments in song.

Music *Now Thank We All Our God*

Theme

Today's theme is expressed by this story... Once upon a time, in a world far away, birds ruled. Their power was held in their eyes and wings. The beloved king and queen soared above their earth. Their love for their world was found in their special ability to see the needs of all, and the power to do something about it rested in their mighty wings. All in the land were at peace.

One day the exciting news went out that the royal couple were going to have a daughter, and all rejoiced that the majestic couple's wonderful reign would continue yet another generation. Then the sad news followed that the princess was born early, small, and permanently with weak eyes and no wings at all. They named her Rakaskulta (řahkahs-coal-tah) (which means beloved baby sweetheart). Everyone felt much sympathy for the parents and the baby.

As Rakaskulta grew from baby to child to teen and young adult, her parents wisely did not spoil her with servants to tend to her every need. She had no choice but to

strive to excel at what she might be able to do, and to find and rely upon the help of others for things impossible for her. In either situation, she was always pleasant, grateful, smiling and friendly; and never took unfair advantage of anyone. Therefore, everyone in the land was delighted to help when it was needed.

Time passed. It was nearing the time for the royal couple to relinquish their duties as leaders. Since eyes and wings were where birds held their compassion and power -- some powerful birds wondered whether she could realistically fill the role as queen of the land, and what kind of ruler she would be. There were many discussions, sometimes heated -- between her supporters and her doubters. This doubting dissension disturbed Rakaskulta very much. The groups finally came to an agreement. The dissenting group would create a challenge to test her ability. If the princess could prove she had the compassion and power to lead as her parents did, then the dissenters would wholeheartedly support her. If she couldn't, then they would have to search for someone else to take the throne. A process predicted to drastically disrupt the peace.

Naturally, Rakaskulta (řahkajs-coal-tah) was extremely nervous. She struggled to see and barely had enough power to move herself around. How could she ever pass this experimental assessment testing her leadership in seeing the world's needs with compassion and meeting them with her power? She took a short walk (since she couldn't fly) hopped on a low limb that reached over a flowing stream -- it was beautiful spot and her favorite place to perch and meditate, and in this case -- be alone with her fear and sadness. She felt so helpless.

Her spot was no secret. It didn't take long before the limb sunk lower toward the water, in fact all of the limbs of the tree sagged with weight from her flying friends, and even more non-flying animals gathered on the shoreline beneath her. As more and more animals arrived, even the princess was amazed at how many friends she had developed over the years. She felt better, knowing that she wasn't alone, but she still didn't know what to do about her test.

Soon an owl came and landed next to the princess and batted his big eyes. "We spied out WHO needs help. Way up on the mountain, in tiny cave, lives a PRIDE of mountain lions that have been HUMBLLED. The adult is injured and the rest of them are too young to navigate away from the cave on their own -- if they don't get food soon, they'll starve.

When the princess heard this, she immediately forgot about the test and her own challenges and began to work out a plan. She recruited some animals that were excellent food gatherers, who then handed it over to others who were good food

transporters, and they got the food to the base of the mountain, where some monkeys tied it to the backs of several mountain goats, the only animals that could leap up the tricky mountainside to the cave and the lions in danger. In no time, the lions were cared for until they could care for themselves again...

Some in the land, the mockingbirds and the hyenas, cried, "FOUL" -- which the mockingbirds thought was a terrible pun (since they were fowl) but the hyenas LAUGHED and LAUGHED. But their derisive point was made -- she didn't do it alone. She had been a CHEETAH. Those particular cats didn't appreciate the association or the accusation, but were also quick to argue that flying solo was not named as a requirement of the test. That started to raise a lot of hackles, but a loud screech from the still current king stopped everyone.

Then the queen spoke. "We have flown over our land and lived in peace, as have our parents before us and their parents before them -- going back many generations. We've looked down on our land with compassion and seen every need we could see and with our mighty wings have provided for every need. But to be honest, lions starving deep in a cave would have never been caught even with our great eyes, which also meant our powerful wings could not have flown to their rescue. This test was designed to make our daughter to fail."

In reply some denied this was even the test, but the king picked up the conversation. "Our daughter Rakaskulta sees little, yet the whole community has become her eyes. She has no wings, yet the whole community has become her strength. Her compassion and strength are multiplied exponentially by bringing us together as one in ways they we never could. Her new system teaches us that real compassion is not in our eyes but in how we perceive our fellow beings, and real power is not contained in wings, but in how true friends work together."

Then everyone was satisfied and gave thanks, knowing that as long as everyone worked together, the land would continue to be filled with the same compassionate, powerful care and peace it had known for generations. The end.

Prayer Chorus *Give Thanks*

We too can give thanks for the compassionate care God has shown us in Jesus, who with the Thessalonians and others back then, and with us today, continues to freely offer strength and blessing. Let's sing, "Give Thanks" as we prepare our hearts for prayer.

Give Thanks

Give thanks with a grateful heart,
 give thanks to the Holy One,
 give thanks because he's given
 Jesus Christ, his Son.

(Repeat)

And now, let the weak say, "I am strong";
 let the poor say, "I am rich because of what
 the Lord has done -- for us."

(Repeat)

Give Thanks.

Pastor's Prayer Almighty God, on this special Sunday, we remember that you have already appointed your Son Jesus as the King of all kings and rulers, and have begun to restore all things through him. May your powerful, compassionate mercy free and unite the people of the earth from all division and captivity caused by sin, that we may live in peace under your gracious rule, rejoicing in your unfailing love and under your blessed name.

We know that someday your kingdom will come to full fruition in this world as it is in heaven. We pray your kingdom will rule in our hearts even now. A kingdom of fair play, of right living, of hope, love, peace, mercy and grace for all. Lord, even though a king, we thank you for coming to us on our level, demonstrating in a way we can understand the kind of people we are to be -- good, kind, generous, loving people that are unlike any other. It is why we share our praises and requests with you. Since last worship we have lifted up the family, friends and SVSU community as they mourn the suicide of faculty member Denis Gray, Harold Winegarner, who is now home and recovering, Lone Bennett is also home, Jamal Cheatham who is fighting through some difficult family issues, Ann Martin who had a fall, but is okay except needs physical therapy, and of course we continue to pray for the direct or indirect impact that covid is having on all of us. We now pause in silence to lift these thanks and concerns as well as those who have been previously mentioned in earlier weeks or are known only in our own hearts and minds. We also listen for your Spirit to speak to us as well as we pause in silence. **SILENCE** And it is because of our confidence in you and what you want to do for us and our world that we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray. **LORD'S PRAYER**

It is God's kingdom, power and glory, and he exercises it through his Son Jesus Christ. So we now shift gears from Thanksgiving to Christ the King -- not that the two are unrelated. Let's sing Majesty...

Prayer Response Chorus

Majesty

Majesty, worship his majesty;
 unto Jesus be all glory, honor, and praise.
 Majesty, kingdom authority,
 flow from his throne unto his own;
 his anthem raise.
 So exalt, lift up on high the name of Jesus.
 Magnify, come glorify Christ Jesus the King.
 Majesty, worship his majesty,
 Jesus who died, now glorified,
 King of all kings.

Bible Reading Philippians 1:3-6, 9-11

As we wrap up this worship series studying 1 Thessalonians, the earliest of Paul's letters in the Bible; we hear what Paul hopes they will become -- by reading what he wrote years later to his beloved Philippians.

All my prayers for you are full of praise to God! When I pray for you, my heart is full of joy because of all your wonderful help in making known the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. And I am sure that God who began the good work within you will keep right on helping you grow in his grace until his task within you is finally finished on that day when Jesus Christ returns. And I pray that your love may still increase more and more in knowledge and every insight. This will result in your approval of the things that really matter, so that you will be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:3-6 (TLB), 1:9-11 (EHV)

The more we know about our Father God, Son Christ, and Holy Spirit, the more we know that he leads with powerful compassion that never fails and can be seen everywhere if we only look for it.

Music O Worship the King

Message ***“Three “Ts” of Trouble”*** **1 Thessalonians 5:16-24(-28)**

As the first letter to the Thessalonians ends, let’s review their legacy one last time. Paul started the church at Thessalonica. Opponents didn’t like it. They rounded up a mob of bad characters to take them out. Their strategy failed because the mission team had already left the city. The opponents did two things. They dragged the church leaders before the city officials and accused them of welcoming world-wide troublemakers, which made the leaders and the whole city see the new church as a dangerous threat. They also sent a delegation to Berea to chase down Paul’s mission team. They successfully chased them out of Berea, but the team moved on to Athens. From Athens, they sent young Timothy back to encourage the Thessalonians and to find out how they were holding up under the pressure. Meanwhile the team moved on to Corinth, where Paul began this letter in which he imagines the worst – that the pressure of circumstances had turned the church against him and against the faith, and that they had reverted back to their idol-worshipping culture. He begins the letter by defending himself and his love for them, the reality of the Christian faith and reminds them what a wonderful thing Jesus has done in them – filling them with love for each other and for everyone; and noting that their example of love in a harsh society was getting to be known everywhere.

Timothy has now returned mid letter-writing and informs the mission team of the great news that the Thessalonians have not turned their backs on them or the Christian faith. Paul is overjoyed about the good news. But Timothy has also come back with questions from them about Christ’s return and the fate of their loved ones who died in Christ, and what to do in the meantime. (They should work hard at their spiritual growth and in jobs that do not compromise their Christian ethics)

Last week, we heard Paul saying that all this is better accomplished if we strive to live at peace with each other and with all and while it takes both sides to create peace, (and it works better if both sides follow his instructions), but we, at least, should do all that is within our power to live in peace by being patient, refusing to retaliate, being consistently kind, and filled with joy. He asks us to do these things, or as he says throughout the book, he appreciates that we are doing these things, only do them more and more.

<p>Be patient Refuse to retaliate Be consistently kind Have constant joy</p>

Today, he concludes his final instructions by giving some additional strategies to help us live like Jesus and in peace while remaining faithful and growing even in

the midst of a culture that is indifferent and even antagonistic to our faith, pressuring and tempting us to give up. Listen to what he now adds that will help us stand strong in trouble.

Sermon Reading 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

¹⁶ Be joyful always,¹⁷ pray at all times, ¹⁸ be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not restrain the Holy Spirit; ²⁰ do not despise inspired messages. ²¹ Put all things to the test: keep what is good ²² and avoid every kind of evil. (GNT) ²³ May the God of peace himself make you entirely pure and devoted to God; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept strong and blameless until that day when our Lord Jesus Christ comes back again. (TLB) ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (NIV)

This week we begin on the verse we ended with last week -- about being joyful, because while for some people it comes naturally, for many of us, one of the most challenging character traits to master is joy. Maintaining a positive attitude in difficult circumstances is -- well -- difficult.

Some time ago, a person was a nervous wreck. He called on a famous doctor to deal with his depression. The

**To Keep Faithful in Troubles (KFIT)
-- Have Constant Joy (v 16)**

doctor advised, "You need to laugh. Go down to the theater and hear Grimaldi, the famous clown. All London is holding its sides laughing at him."

It sounds like overly simplistic advice, but in some cases, laugh therapy has done wonders for the spirit, which in turn does marvelous things for the body. This has been known for a long time – even the ancients had a saying, "A cheerful heart is good medicine". (Proverbs 17:22) A positive attitude has amazing power to help us hold up in the face of challenges.

But it is easier said than done, especially in this case, for the patient protested, "But doctor, I am Grimaldi."

For us who have faith, rejoicing is a bit easier when we take the time to remember that God is in control and is working out his plan and purposes and promises no matter what life may throw at us.

And it is for that reason that prayer is to be frequent and our attitude thankful. Sometimes

KFIT -- Thankful prayer (v 17)

it is easy, in our "scientific five senses culture", to forget about the importance of the spiritual dimensions of life, and how it radiates out into every other dimension

of life. Prayer recognizes our trust and dependence upon God for all we have and are, and to learn what God desires for us, and to yield ourselves to his will and not give in to the powers and the circumstances that want to destroy our faith.

We can be thankful because the spiritual battle has already been won in Christ Jesus. As Paul later wrote, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28) so while we may not be thankful *for* our difficulties, we can be thankful that *in* our difficulties, God can make something good come out of it – be it making us stronger, helping us to understand, empathize, and help others in similar or other struggles, and if we allow it, these trials may draw us back into the security of the strong arms of our loving God where we can feel his hugging comfort.

It is in this place where we can carefully listen to the Spirit who

KFiT -- Testing Everything (vv 21-22)

enlightens, empowers, cleanses, and warms the hearts of his people. We should not hinder these encouragements. But in stressful times, it is sometimes easier to listen to easy, empty promises, confusing our own voices, or the voices of others with the promptings of the Spirit. Therefore, Paul goes on to say, take encouragements seriously, but unthinking acceptance of *anything* that we think sounds good in the moment can be dangerous. So, we are to test everything. The word is the same word used for checking the purity of metals, such as they did with their coins.

We tend to test on more superficial terms (e.g., the eloquence of the speaker, what makes us feel good, if it lines up with what we already want to hear and like to do... And sometimes what we want and what God wants do dovetail nicely together, our desires do align with the purely tested truth the Spirit wants to lead us toward (See John 16:13). But sometimes our desires and God's truth do not line up, so we need to test everything so that we can tell the difference between the sweet sounds of error and the sweet taste of truth.

Apply multiple spiritual tests. Test your impressions and desires against the Bible, against the true traditions, against wise and trusted Christian counsel of loving friends, against the logical examination of pros and cons, of actions and projected consequences, along with your gut impressions – just to name a few.

But it is not enough to apply the test. Once we discover the evils (notice it is plural representing many varieties) of evils to avoid --- and the good (notice it is singular) that we are to be and do in Christ; then we must humbly move

**KFiT -- Transforming in
total commitment (v 23)**

forward, believing it, obeying it, and living it; and being open to the Spirit's guidance to tweak our understandings to deeper, higher, and wider levels of growth.

It involves our whole being — our religious life is not separated from our physical, mental, emotional, and social life — nor is it separated from our job life, our school life, our home life, our recreational life, or our church life, or any other way we tend to compartmentalize our living.

Too many people, too often, stop short of seeing and experiencing the joy and gratitude that comes from the pure devotion (total commitment) to obey God's will with the essence of our being. On more than one occasion, Jesus challenged seekers to commit themselves, and some did, and found unshakable joy within that commitment -- but we also read of those who, for *temporary* happiness, were unwilling to leave a new field, or old ties, or to give out of their wealth to the poor, and they went away sad (Luke 9:56-62, Matthew 19:21-23), missing out on the greatest invitation to the greatest adventure and the fullest life and brightest joy possible... (See John 10:10, 15:11).

This joyful, prayerful, thankful, blameless life – lived even in trials, discerning truth from falsehood; and choosing to be transformed through and through by clinging to the good and avoiding all evil -- all this is impossible in human strength, but Paul's prayer directs us to the source of the only power – God's power -- that enables us to live this way.

God will do it (v 24)

In the deepest sense, our through and through sanctification (in today's version, it is translated as “entirely pure and devoted to God”) – is not what *we* do -- but it is the God of peace who makes it happen within us. But he will not do it without our permission, our willingness, our yearning and longing for him to do it in us – or to use the old word for it – surrender.

That is an emotionally charged word that makes most people cringe these days... And one of the biggest criticisms of faith is the “obeying a bunch of rules” that [allegedly] removes our freedom to be who we want to be. Rebellion against rules, especially institutional rules, is often seen as “a noble endeavor against oppressors” while following community norms is often seen as a cowardly act of conformity.” All these connotations and more may be felt in the word “surrender”. The spoof movie *Galaxy Quest* picked it up as their banner, their motto that was repeated throughout the movie – “Never give up, Never surrender”, and when their situation got bleak, they would trot out the phrase to keep them going... And even here, in Thessalonians, the main thrust of this whole letter we've been looking at,

Paul is begging, encouraging, and finally rejoicing that the Thessalonians did not surrender to appease the pressures of their peers in the city.

Winston Churchill is well known for his not giving up attitude that filled many of his wartime speeches. There is a story turned legend in which Churchill visited his alma mater for a commencement speech, and began by saying, “Never give up, never give up, never give up,” or some versions have it “Never, never, never give up.” and with those 5 to 9 words, he sat back down. The truth is that he did give a speech to his alma mater on Oct 29, 1941 – but it was not that short. Within a fuller speech he did say this: “Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never-in nothing, great or small, large or petty - never give in **except to convictions of honor and good sense**. (emphasis added). He went on to talk about how Britain had had to stand alone against the enemy and most of the world had already written them off and their whole history as “liquidated” from the face of the earth, but instead they “stood in the gap [with] ... no flinching or giving in” and by what seemed like a miracle to outsiders, though they never doubted it, they now find themselves in a position where “we only have to persevere to conquer.” Back up to the legendary sentence about not giving in – the completion of that very sentence is “except to convictions of honor and good sense”. We do give in, and we do make choices about what we give in to.

Too often, too many attach the noble sentiments of not giving in and standing in the gap, but apply it to justify what they *want* to do as opposed to what they know they *need* to do and sometimes we offer other power laden emotive words and phrases like freedom and I’ve got to be me.

The fact is, we are always standing for something and giving in to something. Whenever we eat, we have at least minimally surrendered to our appetite, and sometimes much more. Whenever we turn on and tune in to the television or other recreation, we have surrendered our time to that endeavor. Whenever, out of love or other motivation, we follow the suggestion, advice or command of a spouse, parent, child or friend, boss or associate (or even pastor 😊) we are surrendering. - No, “pastor” isn’t part of the script!

None of these things, in and of themselves, are necessarily bad, and in fact are often good and honorable and the best thing we can do. If we never gave in to our hunger pangs, we’d die of starvation. If we never recreate, we fail to re-create our bodies, minds, and spirits; if we never follow another’s wisdom, we not only live in strife, we also may be doing it to our own detriment. Surrender is not as dirty a

word as some people make it out to be – the bigger and more important question is – to what principles do we surrender, to who do we surrender (and when), and are we intentional and deliberate about those choices – or have we already surrendered to our appetites and desires and pride and stubbornness and been imprisoned to them without us even knowing it?

My experience is that the more I surrender to God and his will, the more free, solid and stable my life becomes, and the better my life is. That doesn't always mean better circumstances, but I do believe it makes us better people in every circumstance.

If we doubt God's ability to work in us (as we allow him to) – Paul assures us that the One who calls us to be children of the Day-of-the-Lord, to be children of light, to bring out the God-colors in the world – to shine as light-bearers for Christ– that *he* is faithful and *he* will do it, or as he says in Philippians that he who began this saving work in you will make it grow to completion until Christ comes again. (Philippians 1:6)

God has proven his loving faithfulness over and over and over again – If you know the Bible, think about how he was faithful to us in the exodus, how he was faithful to us in the exile and return, in the sending of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as proof of his love for us and within us.

God gives himself to us again and again, surrendering more to us that we could ever surrender to him. Can we not give ourselves back to him? With each passing day, more and more of ourselves back to him? Do you let him live fully in you -- through and through – through who you are, and in every area of your life? Do you live life God's way, the best way? Or some other way?

Music Intro JW Van Deventer understood the wisdom of carefully and wisely chosen surrender to the right things and the right Person when he crafted his hymn lyrics about surrender... Crave the wisdom involved in following God and his directions for your life...

Music *I Surrender All*

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, the source of every good and perfect gift, grant us, your people, the ability to joyfully and thankfully pray. We know your desire is to provide us with discernment and power to cling to the good and avoid all kinds of evil. You promise to be faithful and do this purifying work for all who receive you into their hearts.

But we also confess that we are too weak to walk in step with the Spirit without your help; that from time to time, too often, we have our own plans and agendas and want to rule our own life, and even the lives of others. We confess that we over-admire the powerful and popular, the beautiful and the brawny, those with wealth and magnetism. Forgive us. Be with us as a strong and wise friend. Teach us to walk by the light of your truth. Remind us that you are merciful and gracious, endlessly patient, loving and true, showing mercy to thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon. Our Holy God, help us to realize that it is you who created, and who, in Christ, re-creates us from inside out; through and through, you live in us - and work through us! Lord we offer ourselves to you, and now through us, continue to re-create your world. Now through this table, grace us again, so that those with whom *we have influence* will find us encouraging, not threatening; as humble, not humiliating; as motivating, not manipulating; as protecting, not persecuting...

Now Lord, as followers of Jesus, the Light of the world; as children of the Light, may the everlasting God, the radiance of faithful souls, the hope of all nations who come to His light, and kings to the brightness of His rising -- May He fill our world with His glory, and show himself as the true light, the bright and morning star to all the nations, until the day dawns when His star rises in each of our hearts, and every heart around the world. Amen.

Let's sing one more joyful, thankful tribute to our King and Savior, Jesus on this Thanksgiving, Reign of Christ the King Sunday.

Music *Rejoice the Lord is King*

Closing Blessing Now as we leave, let us go with the assurance that God's grace and power always goes with us and guides us toward his light. As his children, then; like a city on a mountain that cannot be hidden, proudly hold high the light of Christ -- be a beacon of hope to those around you -- that all may be drawn to him. Amen.

