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Sermon 37

Genesis 31:1-55

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Open up to Genesis 31. It’s good to see y’all. My name is Rob. I appreciate y’all having me.

I don’t know how many of y’all have messed around with Google Earth any; it’s an app that you can get on your laptop or your phone. I love it – I love it for a few different applications but I love it when I’m studying. Especially when we were going through the gospels and we did the Sermon on the Mount, I loved to use it to zoom in to those places, especially where it seems like in the text the geography or the topography really comes into play with what’s going on. I love to go there and see what it looks like now and then try to imagine what it would look like back then. I remember looking at the Sea of Galilee. I love that you can zoom it. I mean, it’s stupid and a little scary, because I’m like, “If they let *me* have this, what are *they* looking at?” It’s crazy how far in you can zoom down and then zoom out and see the globe. You get the perspective and you can zoom down to the Sea of Galilee and get at the level of the sea and look up at the mountains, or come from the perspective of the mountains looking down at the sea. Then, you can zoom way out and see where it is on the globe.

As we come to this chapter tonight, the approach I want to take is more of that zoom out approach. As we come to the close of Jacob’s time with Laban, and it’s been a crazy 20 years, a wild 20 years, I want us to zoom out and see where does this story come to play in the big picture of God’s plan for salvation, God’s big picture in redemptive history? Stop and think. Who was the original audience for the book of Genesis? That’s right. You nailed it Emma. The Exodus generation, the people that God brought out of slavery. They had been in slavery for 400 years. The offspring of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and then all of Jacob’s kids, most of whom are now born in the story. They go into Egypt just like a tribe and then they come out a nation. So, God is reintroducing himself to His people and they are learning who God is, and they’re learning about their history, but not just for history’s sake. There’s a theological emphasis to the stories that are being told and they are to have a practical application in their life.

So, what I want us to see is where does this story fall in the history of redemption, what did it mean to this Exodus generation, and then how does that apply to us today? Deal? It doesn’t matter. I’ve got the mic and I’m not wasting it. Alright. I thank Zach for reading the whole chapter. That’s really helpful. Now, I want to look back at what God says here because I think this is the key verse.

So, Jacob has wanted to leave for a while and Laban has all kinds of hooks in Jacob. Right? He’s tricked him and deceived him. The worst layaway plan for a wife ever; he kept him for fourteen years working and now he’s had him for 20. There was deception, and lies, and trickery, and the whole nine yards, and he’s working for Laban, and he made Laban a rich man. Now, he’s like, “I want to go. I want to get out of here. I want to go back to the land of my fathers.” But Laban says, “No, stay on, and listen. I’ll make the deal sweeter for you.” Laban still tries to manipulate the situation where he continues to get rich off the blessings that God is giving to Jacob, but every time he changes the deal of what type of goat Jacob gets to keep, God just provides that type of goat for Jacob. Jacob has gone in as one man and now he’s got multiple wives. That’s not okay, but that’s what he has. And they’ve multiplied children and now he has all kinds of livestock. He’s leaving wealthy and he’s ready to go. He wants to get out of there but he knows that he’s lost Laban’s favor. Laban no longer wants to see him as a son but he’s more of an adversary, now. He wants to go, and God’s given him the green light, and He does it through this dream.

Verse 11, Jacob was talking to his wives out in the field. He said,

“Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob,’ and I said, ‘Here I am!’ 12 And he said, ‘Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you.”

Here’s where I want us to focus.

“…for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. 13 I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.”

So, we’re reminded of what happened in Genesis 28, where Jacob makes this vow. He says, “You will be my God. You’re going to be with me. I’m going to follow you. I’m going to obey you.” He made that promise to the Lord and now the Lord is saying, “I’m that same God and I’ve seen what’s happening to you. I’ve seen the oppression from your uncle/father-in-law, Laban and I’m going to bring you out. I’m going to bring you back to your own land.”

So, right away, again, for the original audience there are two things that should come up into our minds. One is that this is super similar to how God talked to Abraham when He called him out in the first place. Abraham was just a pagan dude, living with his family, and God said, “I’m going to bring you out from among your kindred and I’m going to give you a land.” Then, He begins to tell him about the Promised Land and how a nation is going to ultimately come from him. So, there’s an echo of those promises but there’s also, for the original audience, the Exodus generation – their minds would immediately go to the language that God used when He met Moses.

I couldn’t help but think during, I think it was the second song that we sang tonight – all the songs were awesome but I was so thankful for just the way that the meaning of the songs were lining up with where the text is tonight. I’m not going to sing and I’m probably not going to get the words right, but here’s the gist. It was, “We look back and see that you are faithful. Then, we look forward and see that you are able.” That’s the same song they were singing thousands of years ago as they were learning this same lesson. Yeah, look back. Look back to see how God was faithful. Looking back at the faithfulness of God should give us the confidence that He is able to do what He’s promised to do. That meant everything to the Exodus generation, because when they were learning these things they were out of Egypt but they were not in the Promised Land yet; they were in the wilderness wanderings.

So, let me read from Exodus 3, when God speaks to Moses. It says this,

And the angel of the Lord appeared to him (Moses) in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. 3 And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” 4 When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” 5 Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” 6 And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

7 Then the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey,…

See the consistency in the language. We have these small exoduses, right? Abraham leaving Ur and now Jacob leaving Mesopotamia, leaving Laban. There are all these parallels. Jacob goes in as one man and comes out with a family. He doesn’t have any possessions and then he comes out with all this livestock. Israel goes into Egypt with just a handful of families and comes out as a nation after plundering Egypt because God so decimated the gods of Egypt that they were just giving them their riches just so they would get out of there. They leave, headed toward the Promised Land, and then there’s a pursuit. Just like Laban pursued Jacob, Pharaoh in Egypt pursued Israel. But God intervened in both situations. He intervenes with Laban by coming to him in a dream and saying, “Hey, man…” No, He didn’t say that. To paraphrase… I feel like I should just read it now; I don’t want to be sacrilegious.

“But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, ‘Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.’”

What God is saying to Laban is, “Don’t try to get him to come back to you by promising awesome things and don’t try to get him to come back to you by threatening him. You’re letting him go.” Compared to Pharaoh in Egypt, Laban gets off easy. We know what happened to Pharaoh and his army. They drowned in the bottom of the Red Sea. But, in both cases, God intervenes and His people leave, headed toward the promised land, greater and wealthier than before. So, we see these parallels playing out.

So, here’s the main point of the sermon. Here’s the main point of the sermon: In all the mess (and Adam alluded to it in our time of corporate prayer) … Everybody in this story is related at least twice. Right? This is messed up. These are weird stories and it’s hard sometimes because we’re so wired to try to see whoever is being focused on as the hero. It’s hard. There are times with Abraham where you’re going, “I’m trying to find something redeemable here.” A lot of times, what you have to do is get your eyes off of Abraham. He’s not the main point. Get your eyes off of Isaac. Get your eyes off of Jacob. Where is God in this story? That’s where we see redemption, because it’s a mess. The lies and the deceit. For a while, Jacob and Laban are in a competition to see who can be the biggest trickster, who can be more deceptive. At least, in this chapter we start to get a glimpse, and it looks like Jacob is maturing. He’s maturing in his faith. He’s trusting in the Lord and taking steps of obedience, but you don’t always get that chapter-by-chapter. It’s a mess. So, in the midst of the mess, what are we supposed to learn, what are we supposed to see?

We see this: God is patient. God is slow to anger. God is faithful to His Word. He’s faithful to His promises. He’s loyal to His people. God is loyal to the people He brings into relationship with himself. God has increased Jacob both in family and wealth, and now He is bringing him home. This is huge for the Exodus generation. They should make the connection that God has brought them out of slavery, and has provided for them, and has promised to bring them into their own land. Moses is telling them this story to fill them with faith, to fill them with trust in the Lord, so they will trust God during their time in the wilderness, no matter how bad it is.

You might think, right now, “Great. I’m not an ancient Israelite. Thanks for the sermon.” So, what does it mean for us? We’re not in the Sinai wilderness, walking around. No, but this has everything to do with us. Because while Abraham and Jacob were a shadow of the Exodus, which, in the Old Testament is the great redemptive story of the whole Old Testament – everything is either building up to it or referring back to it – that in and of itself was just a shadow. The whole story of the Exodus was ultimately played out in God’s sovereignty so that we would better understand the salvation that we have in Christ. Because we know – Jesus has brought us out of slavery. Not to a pharaoh on the Nile, but out of the slavery of sin and the deception of the god of this age. He’s rescued us from an eternity of only knowing the wrath of God. He’s saved us from death and damnation. And He’s promised us that we’re going to the Promised Land, the New Heaven, the New Earth, where we will stand with our joy complete when we look Jesus in the face. We will be given new bodies and we won’t even have the potential to sin against God anymore. We will be given a body that’s made, designed just to worship, and love, and honor the Lord. That’s our future. That’s our Promised Land. That’s our Canaan. That’s our rest. But right now we’re in between; we’re in this wilderness where we are afflicted, where we will suffer. So, we have to learn the same lessons that they learned because we have a greater salvation. We have a greater promise. Jesus is the One who led our exodus.

Look at Luke 9:28-31. It will be on the screen behind me. This is on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus is going to go up there with His disciples.

Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. 30 And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, 31 who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Alright, raise your hand if you have the ESV. Next to “departure” – and probably the other translations have this, too – there should be a number 1. You see that “1” and you’re like, “Oh, this word has a 1 next to it.” Now, look at the bottom of the page and there’s another 1. What does it say? Instead of “departure” what does the Greek say? Say it loud. “Exodus,”—because that’s literally what it means. They came to talk to Jesus about the exodus that He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Okay, pause. Why don’t they just say “exodus.” It literally means exodus and it means so much more. Instead of just “departure,” you’d go, “exodus, I know exodus.” Jesus is doing the same thing Moses is doing, but greater. Why they don’t do that, I don’t know, but that’s why the pastors get paid the big bucks. (Laughter). Right, so we could have moments like this.

It’s so clear, though, right? They came to talk to Jesus about the exodus He was about to accomplish. It’s the greater exodus. Just stop and think. Thousands of years of human history, with God interacting, revealing himself back to humanity. Why did He choose to do it the way that He did it? Why would He use such jacked up, messed up people? All of it was building up to this moment, so we could understand what it would mean that Jesus was about to lead an exodus. Because when Jesus led His exodus, He didn’t do it the same way that Moses did. Yes, God was absolutely showing that He is God and there is no other. There’s no power over against Him; no power greater than Him.

If you’re visiting with us, the pastors here don’t get paid. It’s awesome. That’s the joke I was making. If you’re thinking, “Did he just brag about how much he’s getting paid?” I’m sorry. It was a bad joke, I feel convicted, we’re moving on. Okay?

It wasn’t like Moses’ exodus. It wasn’t that death was going to pass over so take the blood of a lamb and put it on a doorway and death will pass over. Then, everyone is going to come out because Egypt will be so beaten down … No, no, no – it’s greater than that. Jesus is the Lamb of God. It’s His blood that was shed on the cross and He went into death, into death, so that He could destroy death. He faced off with Satan’s greatest enemy. This is where Genesis 3 gets fulfilled; where He’s crushing the head of the serpent so that all of our enemies, all of those who would oppress us, all of those who would have claim on us, are destroyed, and we go free. It’s our salvation; it’s our exodus, and now we’re moving as people who have been freed from that slavery, moving toward the Promised Land, but we’re still in this world under the curse of sin. We’re still striving and fighting against our flesh, and all it wants to do is serve itself. All it wants to do is bow down to idols. We’re constantly in this fight so we’ve got to learn this same lesson.

Listen to the way Peter talks about this in 1 Peter 2:9-12. He uses this language to compare us to ancient Israel. He says, talking to the Church,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim…

See it – this is who God has made you to be. You have a new identity. To what end?

… that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

So, we should look back at these stories and walk away encouraged because God is faithful to His covenant, to His people. He keeps His promises, and His promises and covenant in Christ are so much better. We looked at it last week. It was awesome that Joseph made this point of application where he said, “Yeah, Jacob is about to walk out of here with a bunch of wives and a bunch of goats.” Isn’t it crazy, those of us…I love this church. You guys love the Bible. You love sound doctrine and you try to walk it out. For us, the temptation is the same. We want to see God’s favor based on material blessings. We’re still battling this flesh and it’s so easy to fall into that trap. That’s why human religion, demonic religion, is all about idols. It’s about manipulating a god to get what I want from it. We’re so easily drawn to that. Joseph made this point of application that Jacob is walking out with this.

The point of application isn’t that if your boss is mistreating you that the new job is right around the corner with double-figures. Double figures? Is that a thing? Double your current figures. What do we make? I don’t know. Your truck has been breaking down. The enemy is tempting you with a new truck. God’s got a new truck for you. That blessing is coming. We don’t talk that way but sometimes we think and act that way. That’s not the blessings that we get. No one in here, when you said the sinner’s prayer, got bonus wives and a flock of goats. Right? That’s not what we get. Our blessings are spiritual, and they’re eternal, and they are in Christ.

Joseph went to Ephesians 1. Our blessings are spiritual in that we’ve been chosen in Him, before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless. He predestined us in love. He’s forgiven us; He’s redeemed us; we’ve been reconciled to God. Our inheritance has been guaranteed because God has given us His Holy Spirit and sealed us. He will never leave you. He’ll never forsake you. Jesus made this promise, “If I go to prepare a place for you, I’ll come back and get you, so that where I am you may be also.” Those are our blessings, those are our promises, and that’s what we hold fast to. We look back and we know that He’s faithful. We hear these stories and it should enrich our faith. We look forward and we say, “Yeah, my life isn’t about the here and now.” It’s about an eternity spent with Jesus, worshipping Him in His presence, where sin is no more; where the pain, and the temptations, and the disappointments, and all the mess of life is wiped away as if it were just a tear on your cheek. It’s gone. It’s not remembered anymore. We look into the face of Jesus and there’s only joy and pleasure, and we celebrate for all of eternity. We need that confidence right now, while we’re in the in between, while we’re trying to be faithful. What did Peter say? Why do we need to know that? “That you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you.” We sang it, right? “Oh, how awesome are your ways. How majestic is your name in all the earth!” We should proclaim that, not just in here amongst ourselves, but this week, as we go our different directions, proclaim it. Proclaim how good Jesus is. Proclaim how good His exodus is. Offer that exodus, offer that freedom, to people you work with and people that you’re going to be around.

So, the story continues. Most of it is pretty straightforward, but there’s this weird moment. They timed their escape to when Laban is going to go to the field and sheer his sheep. Jacob is like, “We’ll do that later. Camel-up and let’s go.” Rachel sneaks into Laban’s tent and she steals his idols, his household gods. You’re like, “Okay. There are all sorts of speculation about why she did this. Were they fertility idols? Were they a mark that whoever had them had the right to the inheritance? Or was she still going to worship multiple gods, like, “Yeah, I’ll follow Yahweh and all these other gods”? Or is she thinking that, “Laban will use them to pray to them and find out which direction we’ve gone, so I’ll take them and he can’t use them”? There are all kinds of speculation. We don’t know; maybe it’s all of those reasons. But she takes them, and when Laban catches up with Jacob and they face off, and they’re just yelling at each other, picture it in your mind. He’s accusing Jacob and says, “Why would you run away?” Jacob says, “Why?! You’ve been ripping me off for 20 years. Why did I run away?” They are blasting away at each other and Laban says, “Why did you take my gods?” Jacob says, “We didn’t take your gods, man. If you find somebody here that took your gods, you can kill them. I don’t have your gods.” Then, Laban goes looking around the tents. Look at verse 33,

So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two female servants, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's. 34 Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. 35 And she said to her father, “Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.” So he searched but did not find the household gods.

Then, Jacob blasts him some more. 20 years has built up and he gets it off his chest. It’s such a weird part of the story. What’s going on? It’s fascinating, because Laban, who doesn’t trust anybody – he’s a liar and a trickster – this is his baby girl and she’s sitting on a saddle. In my mind, I’m like, “Come on, dude.” But whether or not she’s telling the truth when she says it’s her time of the month, “the way of women is upon her,” she can’t stand up. That excuse – she’s not the first one to use it and she’s not the last. I remember any time that my coach said, “We’re playing dodgeball today,” five hands went up and they went right to the bleachers. So, whether she’s just using that excuse or it’s legit, either way, the reason why it works is that Laban couldn’t conceive that Rachel, even if she’s lying, would treat his gods that way. Why? Remember, this is the Exodus generation hearing this and this is the first place in the Bible that idols are talked about. That should get our attention. They are coming out of a culture that was saturated with idolatry. It has its hooks in them. 400 years of slavery and their idea of who God is, passed down through the generations, is all messed up. This is all messed up. That’s all they have seen is Egypt, the people in power, with all these different gods. They are going to be tempted with idols; we know the story. Laban can’t conceive that she would treat his gods this way because in the ancient world that was the most unclean, impure time of the month for the woman. She was considered unclean, both outside of Israel, but specifically, in Israel. In Deuteronomy 15, God teaches His people that they would be unclean during that time. Everything that came in contact with them during that time was to be considered unclean and discarded. It’s been made unholy, impure. So, he can’t conceive that she would treat his gods that way. But that is exactly how God wants His people to see idols and to see false gods. At best, they are just a little piece or wood and stone that people are praying to. At worst, it’s demonic. It’s demonic. It’s absolutely demonic, where people are trying to manipulate spirits to get what they want and it takes them away, and their worship away, from the One True God. He can’t conceive that she would do something so sacrilegious, so he doesn’t even ask her to get up. He’s like, “No, she wouldn’t do that.” What it says about Rachel and her view of the idols speaks volumes.

But here’s what struck me as crazy in thinking about this part of the story. The language is about the same that the writer of Hebrews uses in chapter 10 to talk about professing believers who fall away from the Gospel. It’s the same language that’s used to speak about people who that at one time claimed to be Christians, loved the Lord, and have walked away from the faith. Listen to Hebrews 10:26-31.

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. 28 Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

I think the connection is valid, because it was that same generation, it was the Exodus generation, that is held up in the New Testament as the prime example of apostasy. They fell away. They didn’t enter into the Promised Land. God made them walk around the wilderness until they died and let their kids go in. Why? What the Bible tells us is that they didn’t have faith. They didn’t trust God, and that manifested itself in their idolatry, in their turning away from the Word of the Lord, and in seeking out other gods, seeking purpose and meaning in other things, seeking hope and salvation in other places.

So, the warning comes to us. The same path that starts with just neglecting God’s Word, just neglecting time with the Lord, can lead to – and I hope you see it – trampling the body of Jesus under your foot, profaning His blood. What is he saying? Treating it like filthy rags. That’s heavy. That’s graphic. The way that Laban couldn’t conceive that his daughter would treat his demonic gods; he’s saying that those who walk away from the Gospel, those who walk away from the Church, that’s how they now treat Jesus. They see His sacrifice as meaningless, and empty, and a throwaway. They trample it underfoot. That’s what they would do with salt in the ancient world to clear a path. That’s all it was good for, certain types of salt. You would just throw it on the ground and it was only good for stepping on. That’s how they now view Jesus. They profane the blood and say His blood is unholy, impure, dirty, and a lie.

It’s intense and I want to say it for two reasons. One, because that’s the warning that we need to learn from the Exodus generation. They have the greatest moment of salvation in the Old Testament and they fell away by and large. Not everyone, but by and large. It’s a picture of our ultimate salvation that we have in Christ. He’s saying we need to learn the lessons. We need to have the same kind of faith and we need to heed the same kind of warnings. But I want to say this, because sometimes Christians hear the warnings in Hebrews and they get spun out. They sin – I’ve been doing this – salvation, Heaven – until you get here you are going to sin. Christians will sin and they’ll read a warning like in Hebrews and they will think, “It’s too late. I’ve committed apostasy and there’s no hope for me.” But what I always say to somebody in that situation is this, “Are you ready to say that Jesus isn’t God? Are you ready to say that His sacrifice meant nothing and that, in fact, it was a joke and that He was just some guy that died on a cross and His body should have been ripped down and trampled over and that His blood that was spilt meant absolutely nothing? It was unholy? It was impure? It was just blood? Are you willing to say that?” Of course, the answer is, “No, I would never say that.” A believer, somebody who has tasted the truth of the Word of God, who has been sealed with the Spirit, would never say that about Jesus. So, okay, you haven’t committed apostasy. But there is a warning. So, for the believer, we hear that and what it does is turn our attention back to Jesus. And for those who are on that path, who maybe grew up among us, and at some point worshipped with us, and maybe even served alongside of us and have walked away, they need to hear that warning and realize, “I am rejecting the only sacrifice that has ever been given that can save me from my sin.” And the hope there is that they would repent and turn back. The only person who is alive who is in a hopeless situation is the person who is knowingly rejecting Jesus. But if they will just repent – yeah, as long as you are rejecting Jesus you can’t be saved because there is salvation in no other name. But if you’ll repent of that and trust in Christ you can be saved, no matter who you are or what you’ve done. That’s the hope of the Gospel.

So, what do we do? We look to Jesus. We look to Jesus. We look to how God has been faithful in the stories of Scripture. We look back to how He’s been faithful in our own story. And we look forward to what He’s promised us and we trust that He is able. So, I’ll hold fast to those promises, I’ll heed the warnings, but I’ll hold fast to those promises, looking to Jesus, our great Savior, the One who led a greater exodus, and freed us from sin, and death, and Hell, so that all we have to look forward to is an eternity of worshipping Him.

Pray with me.

Lord God, we love you. Thank you for your Word, thank you that you came to save us, and thank you that you led such a perfect exodus out of sin and into righteousness. I pray, Lord, that you would save souls tonight. I pray that, in your kindness that you would lead people to repentance and faith who don’t know you, and I pray that, as a church, that we would be mindful of the warnings and hold fast to your promises, and keep our eyes on you, trusting in your goodness and your Word. We love you, Lord. In Christ’s name, Amen.