I'd like to speak to those of you this morning who are hurting.
To those of you who are suffering.

Or, maybe a better way to put it, I'd like to speak this morning
to that part in each one of you that is suffering,
to that part in each one of you that isn't okay even if the rest of you is.

Because that's how we all are.
It only takes a minute of conversation to discover
that each of us is carrying something that drags us down,
carrying something or somebody that's not okay.

And yet, "The faithful are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season." That's what Psalm 1 says.

And so you are, but sometimes we skip past the "due season" part,
skip past the reality is that even the best of us go through seasons
where the only things our life seems to produce
are sour grapes and bitter fruit.

And actually, life is even more complex than just
good seasons and bad seasons, because in every season of life
we have some branches that are bearing that good fruit,
and other branches that are threatening to wither away and die.

And you can add one more layer of complexity,
because what's true of each individual tree is also true of the forest.
Communities go through hard seasons, too.

I say all this because those of us with pastoral roles in the parish
have been noticing that our community - our forest -
is going through a tough season,
that a lot of us are bearing more suffering and loss than normal.

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It seems like more of us than usual are grieving the death of a loved one,
or have parents struggling to hold on,
or children and grandchildren struggling with addiction,
mental health, or just finding their path in life.

More of us than usual suffering job losses and cancers
and all sorts of different illnesses - things that sound kind of generic
until it's your life, or your loved one's.

It's a heavy season for a lot of people in our community right now,
with more of us than usual walking through the dark valley.

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The funny thing about this season, though,
is that if I were to try and name the number 1 affliction in this parish,
the #1 cause of pain and suffering among the people of Holy Trinity,
the #1 cause I would name is…tomorrow.

People here are managing to get through today's pain pretty well,
but it's tomorrow that seems to cause the most worry,
the most tears, the most sleepless nights.

"What kind of future am I facing now that he's gone, now that she's gone?"
"What happens if the treatments don't work?"
"What if I can't find another job?"
"What if he never launches, if she never puts it all together?"

What if, what if, what if…?

I only know 1 or 2 of us who are worried about making it through today.
I know dozens of us who are worried about tomorrow.

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So if this season is especially hard for you right now,
I guess the first thing I want to say is that I see you, or I want to.
So do Amy and Christian and Will. So do Rhett and Ellen.
So do our lay pastoral callers,
and so do your friends here who love you.
We see you, or we want to.

We are ready to listen to you and to pray with you.
Yes, people are busy. Everybody's always busy.
But if you're hurting those other things can wait a minute.
We might have to put something on a calendar to make it happen,
but we are ready to sit with you, and listen, and pray.

More importantly, Jesus is ready to be with you.
Right now. Right this moment.
Jesus sees you, sees what you're going through,
and Jesus is ready to be with you.

Two Sundays ago I mentioned a beautiful memoir written by Kate Kilcup.
Here's what she wrote about a time in her life
when she felt surrounded by darkness
and found herself walking into an Orthodox Church in Russia.

"Again and again," she says, "Again and again, I pleaded for God's mercy… but I still didn't understand what I was asking for. I thought, then, that asking for mercy was mostly an acknowledgement of sin. 'How awful I am, Lord…' 'Will you make me good enough, Lord?'

(Hear that?
Will you make me good enough to get through this on my own…?)

"Only a decade later would a priest finally explain to me
that asking Christ for his mercy meant asking for him.
'Draw near, Lord….Be with me, despite everything."

"The mercy [of Christ] is his presence."[1]

The mercy of Christ is his presence WITH YOU.

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And if Jesus is willing to be with you now,
don't you think there's a pretty good chance
he'll be with you tomorrow, too?

A couple of months ago at Rock Eagle,
Bishop Wright spoke to us clergy about the future of the Church.

He said all the questions we were asking about the future are important, but the ultimate question is this:

Do we believe Jesus will be present
in the future we are scared to enter, or do we not?

Do we believe Jesus will be present
in the future we are scared to enter, or do we not?

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[1] Kate Kilcup, Between the Light and Me, pgs. 89-90.

Now, the bishop was talking about the church,
but I heard him talking about my life - my worries and fears
about my parents and children and my health and my life.

Do I believe that, come what may,
Jesus will be there with me…or do I not?

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This morning, St. Paul says,
"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters,
about those who have died,
so that you may not grieve as those without hope."

That's what St. Paul says this morning -
"… so that you may not grieve as those without hope."

At our All Souls service, Anthony Estes preached
one of the finest sermons I've every heard in my life,
and it was on that one sentence.

He reminded us that when someone we love has died,
that while grieving is good and right and normal,
we don't surrender to our grief.

We don't surrender because we ARE a people of hope,
a people whose hope is that the dead are resting in the arms of Jesus
and will continue to rest with him
until God's plan for all creation is complete.

I can't match the power of what Anthony said,
but I want to take those words from St. Paul
and expand them a little bit.

To ALL of you who are suffering today,
or to that part in every one of you that is suffering today….

WHETHER you are suffering the death of a loved one,
or the death of a marriage,
or the death of a way of life that had blessed you for so long….

Whether you are suffering a new reality of disease, isolation, or loss….

Suffering the reality that you can't do what you used to be able to do,
or suffering because the love and gifts you have to offer the world
aren't being seen or accepted…

Suffering poverty, homelessness, addiction, depression, or anxiety….

Suffering because the people you love are suffering and you can't fix it….

Whatever your suffering is,
it really is natural and appropriate to feel the hurt.
Natural and appropriate to cry and grieve and worry.

But.

We who have died with Christ and been reborn with Christ
do not suffer as those without hope.

We who have died with Christ and been reborn with Christ
do not suffer as those without hope.

No matter what happens to you,
you don't have to hurt as one without hope.
You don't have to weep as one without hope.

You have hope because the God of creation is not finished creating your life,
is not finished with you or with any part of his work.

God's mercies really are new every day.
Great is Thy Faithfulness, O God!

You have hope because God the Holy Spirit is not done with you, either.
God's Spirit of healing and wisdom and comfort
will not abandon you,
even if there are days when that truth is hard to believe.

And you have hope because God the Son,
our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
the same God who has already taken on this human flesh of ours,
with all of its pains and weariness,
is ready to be with you right now.

The mercy of Christ is his presence.
The mercy of Christ is his presence.

Softly and tenderly…Jesus really is calling for you and for me.

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.