Introduction to the Theme of Our Good Friday Meditations:
The Long Road to the Cross

 *We have not gotten rid of the Tenebrae service. It will be back next year. This Good Friday we will take a look at the events that led to the cross. Not just events of the weeks and months before Good Friday – though that could be of value. Nor even the events of Jesus’ life that led to Good Friday. This evening’s service follows a concept similar to the Nine Lessons and Carols of Christmas. This service is one of many ways to appreciate what God has done for us on Good Friday. Rather than looking at the day in detail, we back up and admire God’s plan of salvation – not a last minute slap-dash operation, but a carefully thought out plan, brought to fruition after thousands of years of planning, preparation and implementation. This evening we map out major points of The Long Road to the Cross. We begin our admiration of God’s great plan for our salvation in the choir song,* The Power of the Cross.

Choir The Power of the Cross
*Word and Music by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend; Arranged by Mark Hayes*

Heaven on Earth
First Scripture and Meditation Genesis 2:8-9,15-17

 8Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. 9And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil… 15The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

 *One question goes this way: Why did God have to put that tree in the middle of the garden? It’s a reasonable question. But I don’t have the answer. I think only God knows and everyone else is just guessing.*

 *I would ask you to consider this: God created Adam and Eve for fellowship with God. But any friendship, requires space for each to contribute to the relationship. God had provided so much to Adam and Eve. He had created, literally, an entire universe for them! No sin, sorrow or sickness. Plus a truly free will that could decline any temptation to sin. Their contribution could be to simply show their respect for God by not doing one thing. That’s how they were to show that they respected him.*

 *That’s how God designed it to be. Perfect. No shadow of sin. Leave the questions alone. Let heaven on earth be what God designed it to be: heaven on earth.*

Hymn The Tree of Life
Hymn 754:1 & 2

The Disaster of Our Own Making
Second Scripture and Meditation Genesis 3:1,6-13

 1Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”… 6When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. 8Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” 10He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” 11And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from? ” 12The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” 13Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

 *Sometimes I see news stories of wicked, perverted, hateful people and deeds too terrible to repeat publicly. I see them and wonder, “How could he have done that! That is beyond evil!” I must always remember that only God’s grace has kept me from such shameful sins. Yet I still see those stories and wonder.*

 *Not this one. We make no excuses for mass murderers. But we have all internally made excuses for Adam and Eve – “Come on, it was only one piece of fruit.” “But Satan tricked them.” “Couldn’t God just give them a warning, a freebie?” The fact that we have made excuses for them, shows our how sinful we are! Even asking why God put that tree in the garden is actually finding fault with God! We instinctively side with Adam and Eve because we can remember ourselves desiring the forbidden. We know the wickedness we have done, which we hope never comes to light.*

 *But God had plainly stated his requirements (and made them simple too!) God had made the punishment clear. God had given them the ability to not sin. What more could he have done? Yet our forebears went barreling through all the guardrails. Then after it all, stood before God like drunk drivers after a failed breathalyzer test making excuses, insulting the cops and calling a lawyer. “You’ll never make this stick!”*

 *The wages of sin are death. Instead of making excuses, we should repeat he Apostle Paul’s words, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?”*

Hymn There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood
Hymn 112:1,4,5

The Promise of a Deliverer
Third Scripture and Meditation Genesis 3:14-15

 14So the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. 15And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

 *Indeed, who will rescue us from this body of death? After God had silenced Adam and Eve’s excuses, after he pronounced the sentence of a life of hardship ending in the futility of death, God provides another hope. A right relationship through obedience proved to be impossible, even for perfect people. So God provides another way.*

 *God promises a deliverer, a Savior. There will be one, one born of a woman, who will destroy Satan and reverse sin’s curse. It will not be Adam and Eve. They could not do it. It will be Another. Notice too, that the first stones of the road to the cross are being laid in the words, “And you (Satan) will strike his heel.” A deliverer would come, but it would not be without cost.*

Choir Behold the Savior of Mankind
*by Samuel Wesley and Wes Cameron*

 *God made his promise of a Savior in Genesis 3. But he did not leave it as a single obscure passage. God clarified his promise and multiplied prophecies and pictures. Through his prophets, God explained how the promised Savior would save his people from sin—it would be beautiful, but it wouldn’t be pretty. We will hear two examples from the Old Testament. There are many others that we could have read: the Passover Lamb, Isaiah 53. But here are the two chosen for today.*

 *Leviticus 16 describes part of the Israelites’ annual celebration of the Great Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). In it God demonstrates that even his beloved people cannot come near to him without atonement for their sin, and that atonement can be achieved only through the shedding of blood. It is a prophecy of the Christ, and his death.*

 *The psalm which follows, Psalm 22, foreshadows the circumstances of Jesus’ death—that he would die righteous, yet in great suffering. It matches so closely Jesus’ death that the Gospels refer to it several times, and Jesus himself quotes it from the cross. We sing the psalm, and the Israelites would have too. Thus in both word and song God’s people for centuries had portraits of a suffering Savior before their eyes.*

What He Will Look Like
Fourth Scripture and Meditation Leviticus 16:11-22

 11“Aaron [the priest] shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering. 12He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. 13He is to put the incense on the fire before the Lord, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the Testimony, so that he will not die. 14He is to take some of the bull’s blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover; then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover.

 15“He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull’s blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. 16In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness. 17No one is to be in the Tent of Meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel.

 18“Then he shall come out to the altar that is before the Lord and make atonement for it. He shall take some of the bull’s blood and some of the goat’s blood and put it on all the horns of the altar. 19He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites.

 20“When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. 21He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. 22The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.

The singing response to this reading is the next portion of Scripture, Psalm 22

Another Portrait of the Promised Savior
Fifth Scripture and Hymn Psalm 22 *selected verses*

Sent in the Fullness of Time
Sixth Scripture and Meditation Matthew 1:18-21

 18This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

 *Christmas is a time of joy. It should be. The long-awaited gift is finally given. A Savior has come! “He will save his people from their sins,” said the angel. Yet in light of our readings from Leviticus and Psalms, there is a hidden sting in these words of hope. Yes, “He will save his people from their sins,” but God’s word also teaches “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” (Hebrews 9:22) The promised Savior was born to die.*

 *If it seems strange to read a Christmas reading on Good Friday, just wait. We are going to sing a Christmas song. When we get to verse two in this hymn the author and we realize that the Christmas story is not the end of the road, but the first step of the most important leg of the journey.*

Choir What Child Is This
Hymn 67:1-2

Alone and Willing
Seventh Scripture and Meditation Matthew 26:36-45

 36Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” 37He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” 39Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” 40Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. 41“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” 42He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” 43When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. 44So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. 45Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.”

 *Jesus lived his 33 years perfectly, to fulfill God’s law in our place. Thirty-three years of never giving in to temptation, never letting a stray thought get away from him into the brambles of hatred, lust or resentment. What self-control! What love for us! That was one half of his job. And dare I say it, it is the easier half. Never in his thirty-three years of obedience do we hear Jesus plead, “Father, take it away from me!”*

 *Now remains the other half of Jesus’ work, the last twenty-four hours. Time to pay for our sins. In an evening moment of solitude in a place called Gethsemane, Jesus faces the punishing payment for our sins. Now Jesus cries out, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.” While his prayer is such, and he repeats it at least two more times, it is never an unwillingness to save us. Each of the three pleadings ends with the sentence, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.”*

 *When we get to the final reading, remember what Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. The death we see on the cross is only a small part of the agony that Christ endured for our sin, abandoned by the Father, so that our sins might be paid for. A punishment so great that even the Son of God asked if there were not another way!*

Hymn Go to Dark Gethsemane
Hymn 104:1-2

The Death of Jesus
Final Scripture and Meditation John 19:17-30

 17Carrying his own cross, [Jesus] went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). 18Here they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle. 19Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews. 20Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. 21The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.” 22Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.” 23When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. 24“Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by lot who will get it.” This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, “They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.” So this is what the soldiers did. 25Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son,” 27and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

 28Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” 29A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. 30When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

*It is finished. Thank you, Jesus!*

Hymn Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted
Hymn 127