"Sing to the Lord, bless God's name;
tell of his salvation from day to day."

In seminary we were taught to
keep politics out of the pulpit.

The reason was that politics gets in the
way of people hearing the gospel, and

we Lutherans believe the gospel
must be preached and heard. AMEN!

And while there's some truth in that statement,
one thing I've learned in my 15 years of
pastoring two congregations is that when

one is faithfully preaching Jesus, that one
will inevitable preach in ways that
can often be viewed as political. (Pause)

For the next few weeks, the texts assigned pay
particular attention to the
political issues of ancient Israel,
the political issues of Jesus' day, and
the political issues during years
that followed…

noted in Paul's epistle to the church in Thessalonica.
(Pause)

Let's begin at Isaiah 45.

Like in other parts of the the text,
the writer reminds the audience that
the Lord is addressing his anointed.

The anointed's name is King Cyrus.

And the word translated "anointed" is the same
form as "messiah."

The declaration was/is quite an amazing
extension of God's sovereignty.

A sovereignty that not only extends outside of
Israel's geographical boundaries, but also
beyond Israel's religion.

AN amazing realization that God's not restricted to
the covenantal relationship of "I will be your God
and you will be my people."

This foreign king named Cyrus,
according to the oracle of Isaiah, was selected
by God, exalted by God, to be an instrument
to exalt Israel.

The people of Israel were able to return to their home.

Was he an unlikely vessel?

I'd say so!

A ruler outside the faith whose policies
advanced God's purpose.

Fast forward to the American context,
this understanding of King Cyrus gets linked
to the President.

The "Cyrus argument" they give - says
God may use an imperfect,
non-believing ruler to accomplish
a larger purpose.

Cyrus freed the Israelites to return home and
begin rebuilding their city and temple.

The President did not perform those actions and
he's not an OT king.

The analogy is strained further when we see the ways
this argument allows supporters to ignore
the unethical and immoral behavior of 45,

and brings about political loyalty into
a distorted prophetic certainty where
the leader's behavior is ignored even though

it screams against the teachings of moral standards
found in both the Old and New Testaments. (Pause)

Now for the Gospel of Matthew,
where we read about two groups who come
to Jesus looking to trick him.

No one would have expected the Herodians and
the Pharisees to join together, but their
shared disdain for Jesus unites them to ask
a question about paying taxes
to the occupying empire, Rome.

Their's was a loaded question.

"Is it lawful to pay taxes or not, Jesus?"

To answer, "Yes," meant that Jesus participated in
Roman occupation and to say "No," meant he'd
be in public defiance of an empire that
would imprison him.

Or worse.

The Herodians and the Pharisees,
knew full well the consequences of defying
the Roman Empire.

They'd been in participation with Rome for decades.

The Pharisees were often making deals with the empire
even though they privately opposed them.

The Herodians supported Roman rule, but did not
always agree on their political agenda.

Both groups though were in bed with Rome
in order to pursue political and economic agendas.

My mind cannot help but be drawn to
the violence and immorality witnessed in
the MAGA Party and the ways it has joined
with the branch of
so-called “Evangelical” Christians.

Two unlikely groups joining together.

(Pause)

But Jesus complicates their stance
by changing the paradigm.

When communities are dealing with oppressive and
violent regimes the choice is never as easy
as pay taxes or not.

Paying taxes does not mean you support
the regimes bad behavior, and
the denial to pay taxes has never brought
down an empire.

The question Jesus leads us to is this - what will?

And to answer that question we look to 1 Thessalonians.

Paul's letter to the church there was warm and pastoral.

There's no need to address disunity, discord, nor conflict.

In this opening section, Paul pointed to the truth
that God chose them and they became
imitators of Christ,

even amidst persecutions and because of them
they were an example of what God does
for those who walk in Jesus' ways. (Pause)

So we might wonder, "How do we be a church
like the one in Thessalonica?"

I'm telling the truth when I say
we aren't far from being one.

The first marker is to put faith into action.

We cannot only proclaim faith with word and voice,
but with hands and feet.

We must love neighbors in ways that require
time spent with them and sacrifices made
by us.

When the going gets tough, we don't abandon
hope amidst the despair.

Then finally, we conduct our life inside and outside
the church building with honesty,
seeking to respect of all people.

Perhaps the news we need to hear today is this:

today's Thessalonians church might not be
the one that everyone talks about or admires.

They are the ones whose faith becomes work,
whose love becomes service, and whose hope
holds steady when life is hard. (Pause)

When the factory closed, the people of
Lifesong Lutheran Church began an inventory
of what was left.

There were 44 members.

A leaking roof.

A furnace that often needed a kick to get started,
and now 11 families without a paycheck.

At the next church meeting the treasurer
laid down a sheet of paper on the table.

"If we stop using the fellowship hall," they said,
"we can lower the power bill.

That might get us through the winter."

It was a sensible suggestion.

Most everyone nodded in agreement.

Except for Pearl.

Pearl cleaned rooms at the nursing home and
her husband had worked in the factory for 23 years.

Pearl said, “It’s true, we will save money,
but where will people go?”

No one answered.

Pearl looked at her hands and said,
“I don’t mean on Sundays.

I mean on Tuesday and Thursday mornings
when they’ve filled out applications for work and
no one calls them back.

Where will they go?”

The pastor and treasurer put down their pens.

“What are you thinking?” They asked.

“Coffee, a warm room.

Someone who remembers their name.”

The vote was unanimous.

They'd keep the fellowship hall open
three mornings a week.

A small decision that was not a grand beginning.

The coffee was weak.

The church computer and internet was slow.

Only two people came and one of them
was a retired man that thought there'd be donuts. :-)

The other person was Daniel.

He was one of the ones who lost their job
at the factory and hadn't told his children yet.

He came, but sat with his coat and hat on.

"Want some coffee?" Pearl asked.

"No," he said.

"Alright," Pearl said.

She sat down at the table across from him.

"I don't want a sermon," he said.

“I don’t plan to give one.” Pearl replied.

“I’m not much of a church person,” Daniel said.

“You can still have coffee and sit here.”

The next morning the hall opened and
Daniel came back and had coffee.

By December the room was busy.

A retired teacher volunteered to
help people write resumes.

A teenager taught people how to upload documents,
and another taught basic english skills.

Then someone brought soup in a slow cooker that
had a broken handle.

Then, this one man came.

Each visit he’d simply sit looking out the window
and sip coffee.

He never brought anything and never applied for anything.

He just sat there.

After a few weeks someone whispered to Pearl.

“He’s taking up space and wasting our time.”

Pearl replied, “His wife died in October.”

After that people stopped asking why he was there.

Everything wasn’t all roses.

A grocery gift card disappeared, and
sometimes arguments arose when someone
thought they needed more attention
than another.

Coffee was spilled and a church member complained
that the room smelled like a wet dog.

And sometimes people doing the help needed
to be helped themselves.

One afternoon Daniel found Pearl
alone in the kitchen
staring at an envelope.

“Bad news?” Daniel asked.

“Our power bill,” Pearl replied.

He sat quietly.

Pearl said, “I’ve been telling everyone

to keep going," she said.

"Today I'm tired of hearing myself say it."

As the tears came, Daniel pulled up a chair
and invited Pearl to sit.

She wiped her eyes embarrassed, then apologized.

Daniel shook his head.

"You let me sit here with nothing to say.
I can do that for you." (Pause)

In January, there was a hard freeze
that broke a water pipe in the ceiling of
the fellowship hall.

The carpet was soaked and plastered crumbled.

The fellowship hall had to close.

On Sunday the congregation met for worship
in the undamaged sanctuary
with coats and mittens on.

The treasurer stood up before
the sending hymn and said,

"We can pay for the repairs to the fellowship hall
but it will leave us with next to nothing in reserve.

Silence fell and no one moved.

Then Daniel stood up.

He'd found part-time work repairing delivery trucks.

Far less from what he once earned,
but it was work and in brought home a check.

I can replace the pipe, but I'll need somebody
who knows how to hang drywall.

A woman raised her hand in the back and said
her brother did that.

The man who had come looking
for donuts, offered his shop vacuum.

The next day, six people went to work in
the fellowship hall and two of them
were church members.

Pearl brought sandwiches.

Daniel looked down from the ladder.

"Coffee, too?" He smiled.

"Better than the first batch," Pearl said.

“That wouldn’t take much,” Daniel replied.

For the first time in weeks Pearl laughed. (Pause)

This is an example of a Thessalonica Church.

Connection offered to everyone,
no matter the circumstance.

AMEN!