Thanksgiving 2026 – Christ the King Sunday

Good morning, Cedar Springs! My name is John Barber – I'm the Director of Adult Ministries here at the church and, for whatever reason, I've become the Thanksgiving guy here. The gratitude guy. This is my third year in a row doing the Thanksgiving sermon. James jokes that I'm like the groundhog in February, except that, for me, it's "when you see John on stage in November, that means it's time to defrost your turkey." Why am I the gratitude guy? Who knows. Maybe I just need it more than everybody else. But here I am. And the truth is, I'm so grateful (see what I did there) to be with you today.

As you've already heard this morning, today is Christ the King Sunday on the church calendar. If you're like me and you didn't grow up in a liturgical tradition, this might be confusing to you. Growing up southern Baptist, the closest thing we had to an annual day like this was when we took up the Lottie Moon offering. But suffice it to say that this is a day we set aside to remember where our allegiance truly lies. That no matter what is happening, Christ is still the King of all. He's King when our churches are flourishing, and He's King when they're struggling. He's King when our lives are full of joy, and He's King when we're walking through deep sorrow. Our confidence isn't ultimately in the things we can measure or see. Our confidence is in the risen Christ, who has conquered sin and death.

Today is going to look a little different than a regular Sunday. We are going to talk about gratitude (it is Thanksgiving week after all), but it's all going to be surrounded and permeated by the reminder that Christ is the King.

Because when we remember who's sitting on the throne, and who's building His church, we realize that we have more reasons to give thanks than we could ever count.

And the wonderful thing is that this isn't just wishful thinking. It's a promise grounded in who Jesus is and what He's done. Listen to how Paul describes Him in Colossians 1. This is13-20:

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by[f] him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

The same Jesus who holds all of creation together is the one who holds His church together. And He's the one who's promised never to abandon His people.

That's our King. And that's why we have reason to be grateful.

Let’s pray.

[pray]

Amen.

[section 1 – gratitude for our church]

So I counted. I did some math. In the month of November (which is a short month because of the holiday), there are 634 separate room reservations happening here at the church. These are Bible studies, Sunday School classes, ELL classes, women’s groups, men’s groups, mission partner events, students, sports, childcare, so on and so on. And that doesn’t include things that happen off-site—missions events, picnics, community

groups and so on. Do you ever drive by the church at a weird time – like 8pm on a Monday night – and say “there are a million cars in the parking lot - what in the world is happening at the church now?” It’s like that pretty much every day. And let me emphasize-- we don’t operate in an events-based spiritual economy – that is, we don’t get extra credit from God for having more things here. That’s not how this works.

A full calendar doesn't necessarily mean a faithful church. And a big number doesn't necessarily mean a healthy ministry. But behind those room reservations are people opening God's Word together, building relationships, caring for one another, and serving their neighbors. And that's what gives me reason to be grateful when I see that full parking lot.

In September, we released our annual Impact Report—you can find it on our website. It tells the story of the many ways God is at work through Cedar Springs as we seek to love God, love others, and serve the world. Let me give you just a few examples. There are 1,550 people enrolled in adult Sunday school classes. More than 850 of our senior adults are connected to our Generations Ministry. Our special needs Sunday school class has grown so much that they've had to move into a bigger room. Nearly 300 kids gather for KSG every Wednesday night. Our sermons have received over 51,000 views on YouTube.

And those are just a handful of examples. I could go on and on. But here's what I want us to remember: these aren't just numbers. Behind every one of those numbers are people—people who are learning, growing, finding community, and hearing the gospel of Jesus. And we take credit for none of it. It's evidence of God's kindness and faithfulness to this church. What a privilege it is to be part of what He's doing, and what a reason we have to be grateful. We don't share these numbers to celebrate how great our church is. We share them to remember how good our King has been.

We serve the King here. Whatever we do, whether it’s teaching a Sunday School class or rocking babies or packing Thanksgiving boxes or working with middle schoolers or doing conversation practice with an ELL student—

whatever it is, we do it out of gratitude to the King. We do it because **Christ is the King of our church**. He's also the king of our city.

[section 2 – gratitude for what he's doing in our city]

Almost ten years ago, I met a guy named Anthony who changed my life – changed our whole family. I was on staff at Providence Church and Anthony came on as our resident church planter. Kind of like what Scottie Hill is doing here. Anthony and I became fast friends, and after a short time, we planted Bridge with Anthony as lead pastor and me as the executive pastor. I served with Bridge for five wonderful years before God called us here to Cedar Springs. Here's me and Anthony (I'm the one on the left).

And what I want to do is to pull the camera back a little bit and state the obvious—even though it's something we don't talk about too much. Cedar Springs isn't the only church in Knoxville. In fact, there are hundreds and hundreds of churches in Knoxville proper and Knox County. Churches that honor the Kingship of Christ and serve him every day.

And to make this even more personal, I want to introduce you to my friend Anthony Burton. Anthony, come up here. Anthony is my church planting partner and great friend. He's still the Lead Pastor of Bridge. They've moved out of South Knox elementary and into a building off of Central Ave. I've invited him here today to give you a picture of what God is doing in another part of the city. Y'all welcome Anthony.

[8 minutes with Anthony]

1. Tell me a little bit about what you love about Bridge Church
2. How are you seeing God work through Bridge Church?
3. What are you grateful for when it comes to working with God's people in Knoxville?
4. Where do you see God working in the city of Knoxville?

We're grateful for you Anthony and for the hundreds of other churches that are carrying out the King's mission in Knoxville. When we talk about mission, we know what Cedar Springs' mission is:

It's to respond to God's love by following Jesus – in loving God, loving one another, and serving the world.

We may look different. We may worship differently. We may organize our ministries differently. But wherever churches are faithfully proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, we're serving the same King. We're part of the same great mission. We remember that Christ isn't just the king of our church, **Christ is the King of THE church.**

I wanted you to hear from Anthony this morning because I think we need to be reminded of something: we are not the only church in Knoxville doing the work of the kingdom. And every time another faithful church grows, every time another person hears the gospel, every time another congregation makes disciples, that's not a win for somebody else. That's a reason for all of us to give thanks.

[section 3 – gratitude for what he's doing globally]

Now let's pull the camera back even a little bit more, well, a lot more actually, and see what God is doing in the world outside Knoxville. To start it off, take a look at this. **(show Mission Prayer video)**

The prayer of gratitude in that video is striking for a number of reasons, but it's the visuals that get me the most. In that video, you see Cedar Springs people serving our church, our city, and the world. They're doing the work of the mission out of gratitude for what the King has done for them. Just a couple of days ago, one of our teams returned from a mission trip to England and Prague. Alex Widmer went on the trip and he texted me in the middle of it. I asked him how the trip was going and he said, "Incredible trip. Incredible ministry. Incredible God that we worship and get to be a part of

his grace and his beautiful projects across the world." When he got home, he told me that he was exhausted in the best way.

And that's just one trip from one church for one week. Imagine what's happening all over the world in his church. We don't participate in global mission here to expand our kingdom, to plant little Cedar Springs everywhere. We do the work of global mission to build His kingdom. Back to the Impact Report for a second. Last year, we took 12 short term trips and visited 14 countries. We've got almost a dozen global mission group teams that plan, pray, and work with partners and churches around the world. The conviction that God has given us to be a part of his global mission has led us to our 20:25:30 initiative – to be a part of planting 500 churches by 2030 through strategic partnerships around the world.

I can't help but think about the picture John gives us in Revelation 7. He sees a great multitude that no one can number, from every nation, every tribe, every people, and every language, standing before the throne of God.

And what are they doing? They're worshiping the King.

That's where all of this is heading. That's what God is doing as He builds His church around the world. He's gathering a people for Himself from every corner of the earth.

Our King's kingdom doesn't stop at the city limits of Knoxville. It covers all of creation. Because he's not just the King of our church or just the king of THE church. **Christ is the King of the world.** And in a time of global turmoil, conflict, and unrest, knowing that he is the King can fill us with gratitude.

[section 4 – Application]

Ok, so now what. What do we take away from all of this (besides remembering to defrost the turkey)? Three quick things.

The first is this: 1. Give thanks. As you're sitting around the Thanksgiving table this week. Or maybe after that, when you've got a belly full of stuffing and cranberry sauce, give thanks to the King. Give thanks for what he's doing here in our church. Give thanks for what he's doing in our city. Give thanks for what he's doing in the world.

I also want to acknowledge that for some of you here, you might not feel like giving thanks to the King. You might feel the opposite way. Whether it's because of a tragedy in your life or a loss that you're lamenting or you're just in the middle of a really hard time, you don't feel like giving thanks. Our King sees you. Our King loves you. Our church is here for you. Please reach out – emailing caring @cspc.net is a great first step. Or come grab me after the service. And even in the middle of your grief, you belong to Him. That's a reason for gratitude, even when gratitude is hard.

And for all of us, give thanks this week! But don't stop there. we want our gratitude to not just be a feeling that we feel when we sit by the fire with a with a belly full of turkey and dressing, but I want our gratitude to spur us on to do something. Something for the kingdom of God.

So that's Number 2: Serve our church, our city, and our world. I could give you a laundry list of what it looks like to serve the King is these ways, but instead, I'll let Petra Damms, one of our mission partners in Prague, do it for me. Watch this. **[Petra Video]**

"When you think about it, it's amazing that God has called us. How can we keep it contained?"

We don't serve to earn the King's favor. We serve because we've already received His love. Gratitude moves us outward—toward our neighbors, toward our city, and toward the world.

Where might the King be calling you to serve? There are so many places. One that's easy is our Come Serve With Us: Christmas Edition, which has a ton of places to serve our city. That's at cspc.net/news or they have the printed copy in the Welcome Center. Serve the King.

And the last thing is the simplest, and the hardest to do. Number 3: Bring someone to the King. Who in your life is far from God? A neighbor? A family member? A co-worker? Is it that teenager that your son or daughter brings over to the house sometimes? Who is it?

A 2024 Lifeway survey reported that 56% of U.S. adults who don't typically attend Christmas services said they would likely attend if invited by someone they know. Advent starts next week. Christmas is almost here.

Last week, I was in my office talking to Stewart Scott – our men's ministry director – and I was walking him through my outline for this morning. And he said the wisest thing (not an unusual occurrence with Stewart) – I told him that my last point was bring someone to the King and told me about someone he wanted to invite and then he said, "If he's really the King, then what am I worried about?"

This Christmas Eve, we've got family services at 1 and 3 and regular candlelight services at 5 and 11. These are a wonderful way to bring your friends and family who are far from God to the King.

So give thanks. Serve our church, our city, and our world. Bring someone to the King.

And remember what Stewart said: If He's really the King, what are we worried about?

Church family, Christ is building His church. Right here at Cedar Springs. Across our city. Around the world. He's our King. And that's something to be grateful for.

Let's pray.