Summing Up

ACTS 3:25-26 (RSVUE) ***You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, 'And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' [26]When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."***

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HEBREWS 12:1-2A (NRSVUE) ***Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, [2]looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...***

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EPHESIANS 1:7-10 (NRSVUE) ***In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace [8]that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight [9]he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, [10]as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.***

The Word of God for the People of God…

We get hung up on details—can't see the forest for the trees. The old saying, "The devil is in the details" suggests "something may seem simple, but in fact the details are complicated (and I would add just plain not understood) and likely to cause problems."

We get hung up on details. Sometimes we need to back up and see the big picture—to see the forest: not just a bunch of trees, but a whole ecosystem.

We get hung up on details—verses and passages of Scripture jerked out of context—entire theological constructs built on otherwise unrelated verses.

Take a passage from Daniel—four verses from chapter 9—a prophetic interpretation—70 weeks, generally understood metaphorically to refer to the 70 years of Israel's Babylonian captivity. Retool it. Change the 70 weeks into "weeks of years," and make it 490 years from the time Jerusalem was rebuilt until the Messiah comes and the kingdom of Israel is reestablished as a dominant world power. Toss it into the book of Revelation—indiscriminately, like a boy rolling his marbles across a hardwood floor. 70 weeks/490 years…

The problem is, the numbers don't work; so you have to improvise: say the Jewish calendar stopped at 69, and we're in a time of dispensation—a time of grace in which God allows Israel time to get right so Messiah will come—again.

It's not in the Bible like that; but it's now the basis of a whole theological idea invented by John Nelson Darby, an attorney—not a Bible teacher—in the middle of the 19th century. It'd never been heard of or interpreted like that before; but now it's the primary model of Christian eschatology. And without those manipulations of Scripture, getting lost in the details, it all falls apart.

Toss in some verses from Ezekiel. Mix in an image from I Thessalonians about all Christian believers who are alive, along with resurrected believers, rising "in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air." Call it "The Rapture." That word's not in the Bible, either, and the context of I Thessalonians has nothing to do with the

context of Daniel or of Revelation; but, hey, it's in the Bible. And it sells books—even novels… You've heard of the "Left Behind" series?

But see, here's the thing: the devil is in the details, and sometimes passages from the Bible can be used in most unbiblical ways.

Yeah, but it's prophecy! Well… The Hebrew word for prophet is "navi," which literally means "trumpet" (picture a megaphone). Prophecy is announcement. Not all biblical prophecy is about the same thing. And not all biblical prophecy is a *foretelling* of the future; most often it's about *forth-telling*—announcing— how God is involved with God's people—how God's intentions and purposes can be fulfilled in very specific historic contexts. For the most part, that's biblical prophecy.

But the devil is in the details, and so we wind up chasing rabbits. *The details will never contradict the message of the whole*. And our texts today summarize the whole. Listen again to the text from Ephesians: ***"…he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, [10]as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth***. NOTE: heaven and earth are not mutually exclusive. It's not an either/or thing.

To "gather up…" The word in the original Greek is 17 letters long. It's a serious tongue-twister (ανακεφαλαιωσασθαι); a mathematical word. It means to "sum up a column of numbers." Jesus is the sum of God's will as revealed in all of Scripture.

And the passage from Hebrews is preceded by a roll call of some of the people listed in that column of figures summed up in Jesus. ***Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, [2]looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith…*** I think—I Think—***"..looking to Jesus, the summation of our faith"*** works.

The theme of the whole body of Judeo/Christian Scripture is the establishment of God's intention and purpose and humanity's response to it. God's intent and purpose can be inferred in the creation narratives and is stated clearly beginning in Genesis 12 with the Abrahamic covenant and repeated throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and summed up in today's text from Acts: ***You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, 'And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'***

Through Abraham God called humanity into partnership to accomplish God's intent and purpose, and all of Scripture looks toward its final fulfillment. That's biblical eschatology, and John Nelson Darby's distortion is a tragic and dangerous distraction from the intent and purpose God established in the covenant partnership with Abraham that ***all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'***

Every sermon I prepare faces two tests (they don't always pass, but…) The first test is, "So what?" And the second is, "Why do these people need to hear this

sermon on this Sunday?" Let's see if this sermon makes the grade.

Set aside my comments—my tirade, I guess you could call it—about John Nelson Darby's distortion of Scripture. That was just one illustration—and maybe a distraction in itself. Maybe my point got lost in the details. So, here it is again: *The details of Scripture will never contradict the message of the whole.*

God has made known to us the mystery of his will. Actually, it was never a mystery. It was made clear to Abraham. But we humans get lost in detail; complicate things—all those laws and rituals and sacrifices… So, part of Hebrew Scripture is an account of how we humans complicate God's will—make it a mystery.

The prophets were clear, summing up the covenant. Micah's familiar words may be clearest of all ***"He has showed you what is good…"*** same approach as in Ephesians: ***"God has made known to us…" "He has showed you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."***

Jesus put it this way: ***'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' [38]This is the greatest and first commandment. [39]And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' [40]On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets"*** **(MATTHEW 22:37-40)** ONE commandment from Deuteronomy, quite possibly written as part of Josiah's reform in the late 7th century BCE, the other from Leviticus, likely written in part as training of the priesthood when the temple was rebuilt following Babylonian captivity in the mid-6th century BCE… Coming from separate centuries, recorded in different contexts for different reasons, yet used by Jesus to sum up all the law and the prophets.

So What? Why do we need to hear it today? We are engaged in a process of Relaunching as a congregation. It includes Reimaging—both for our own self-image and for how we present ourselves in the community, a part of which will involve a Reevaluation and Refreshing of our facility, inside and out; and may even involve Renaming. It includes Reconnecting with our community and especially with our immediate neighborhood. In includes rebooting, with a new online presence which our youth will initiate; and it obviously includes a concern for Resourcing.

During the next few weeks, four task forces will gather to prayerfully discern God's guidance in initiating and implementing each of those concerns. And how will we know the difference between God's guidance and our own opinions and desires. We have a standard by which we can make that distinction. We find it in acknowledging that the details of the biblical message will not contradict its overall message. And that overall message is summed up in and by Jesus.

So, our task as a congregation as we move toward Relaunching, is summed up in our text from Hebrews: ***"…let us lay aside every weight, and sin—every distraction—which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, [2]looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter—the summation—of our faith..."***

Pastoral Prayer

Creating, Redeeming, and Sustaining God, you are gracious and merciful; therefore, your will is always oriented toward our benefit. You have laid out a clear path we can follow and live within your will. Your prophets and your Son have made it clear.

Yet, this world is cast in a darkness you didn't create, and sometimes its voices are louder than your "still, small voice." It can be difficult to understand your will for us. What seems to us to be good, is sometimes not. We need the one called "The Light of the World" moving before us, lighting the darkness around us. We need to hear clearly his Word, that we might understand Your will. Speak to us through your Word-Become-Flesh—the one who lived as we want to live, following him on the path toward the fulfillment of your will.

You have taught us that You have a plan for each one of us. You have given each of us all we need to become who you have created us to be—to do what you have created us to do. Guide us as we walk in the paths that You have laid out in front of us and lead us into the life for which you have created us. Amen.