In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today’s readings speak of God’s magnificent power, eternal will, and everlasting dedication to establish the Kingdom of God throughout the earth. Likewise, we hear of God’s ominous threat of punishment of those who would stand in God’s way. The reading from Deuteronomy says: “Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD you God but turn aside from the way which I command you.” Our Lord Jesus reiterates the consequences for failing to obey God: only those who do the will of God will enter the Kingdom. He says further: “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like the foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell. Great was the fall of it.”

Clearly, God has a word and will for us, and it is equally clear that God intends for us to take heed and act accordingly. There is an urgency in these readings: we need to get busy doing the work of God. But how? These readings allow me the opportunity to speak to you today about a distinction between a Theology of Glory and a Theology of the Cross. This distinction was treasured by Martin Luther, as he understood it as the means for discerning true discipleship and stewardship of God’s word from a false piety that is puffed up with human arrogance. A Theology of Glory assumes that we have all the answers, that its all written down, and that we may presume to speak for God. A Theology of Glory hears the words of God’s promise to vindicate the righteous and distorts them, such that we disdain others, especially non-Christians and those not as pious as ourselves. Ultimately, it deludes us into trusting not in God but in our works righteousness and vanity. A Theology of the Cross, however, is the true response to God’s word of promise to bless all nations. A Theology of the Cross leads us to see that we — like all the world — are the unworthy recipients of God’s grace. Instead of speaking for God, a Theology of the Cross allows us to speak of God: to proclaim the promise of the gospel: which is, as Paul reminds us, “the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith.” Rather than telling people what they should do, a Theology of the Cross leads us to show people what true faith means; namely, performing works of love in humble and self-giving service to the most vulnerable and powerless in our world.

Let me begin to elaborate how this is so by reflecting on the “big picture” presented to us in these readings. The four lessons today are an abridged articulation of salvation history: what God has done for us in and through time; how God has acted in this world to redeem and sanctify our reality. The first lesson from Deuteronomy is God’s address to the ancient people of Israel, whom God has just delivered out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt into the freedom of the promised land. God has just given the people of Israel the Ten Commandments, which are the foundation for their law. Their lives are to be so governed by God’s law that they are to “lay up these words . . . in your heart and in your soul. . . . you shall teach them to your children.”
continually, with visible reminders on the doorposts and gates of their homes.

God, in his infinite mercy and grace, made an everlasting covenant with the Jewish people, a people who — at that time — were but slaves in a land not their own. They were most despised and pitiful, yet God lifted them up, gave them a home of their own, flowing with milk and honey, and made with them an everlasting covenant. This covenant is not limited to time and place, but, as the reading says “wherever the soles of your feet tread.” In his song of joy, the Psalmist from today’s reading understood that the blessing of Israel was entirely dependant upon the grace and mercy of God. He sings to God in humble confidence: “How great is your goodness, O Lord, which you have laid up for those who fear you, which you have done in the sight of all for those who put their trust in you.” God seeks out the sick and oppressed to bring healing and liberation. Israel is the passive recipient of God’s active mercy and unconditional love.

In today’s readings, Paul reminds us that God is not only the God of the Jews but also of the Gentiles. That is a striking statement, for we need to remember that — unless you are a convert from Judaism — we are the Gentiles; the descendants of those who were the recipients of God’s universal declaration of unconditional love through merits of Jesus Christ alone. God gave Israel (and thus, the Church) the Law not as an end but as a means to an end. That is, God is not interested in our vanity, such that we might claim to have fulfilled the letter of the Law. We certainly abuse the Law if we use it to separate ourselves from others; those whom we deem beyond or unworthy of Christian fellowship. Therefore, we may be so bold as to update Paul’s message for our own time: God is not the God of pious Christians only; he is the God of all people, of every nation, of every station in life. God demands that we love them all.

Yet, Paul also declares that the Law will not save us. We are a broken people who live in a broken world. Many of us know the pain that comes from doing the right thing, of performing the noble and loving deed, only to reap ridicule and mockery. The Law will not save us, even when we accomplish mighty and pious deeds in the name of the Lord. In God’s name, many have written just laws, composed sonnets and hymns of great beauty, and even prophesied and cast out demons. Nonetheless, empires fall, the just may suffer, and even the most holy among us are subject to temptations and failures. In our grand schemes to make of ourselves a righteous and holy people, we often lose sight of the content of the Law: loving others as God has loved us. Hear me well: I am not denying that there is an objective truth. God’s Word remains forever. God’s demand for justice, mercy, and righteousness are real and pressing. I submit to you, however, that our problem is not in speaking the truth to one another. Rather, we most often fail to speak the truth in love. People of good faith will disagree; but our faith is no longer good when we break fellowship because we think that another person is no longer worthy of love.

The will of God is less often made manifest in the grand schemes of humanity. God does not seem to care very much for our plans. In fact, God always seems to topple them. Abraham had to wait decades for the birth of Isaac; Moses wandered for forty years in the desert, leading a people who were often unruly and ungrateful; Solomon’s temple, meant to manifest God’s glory, was repeatedly destroyed; and Paul’s earnest desire to carry the gospel to Spain — the farthest point of the Roman Empire — was cut down when he was martyred by the sword. Rather, God has revealed the kind of plan he has for us in the Incarnation of Jesus. The Word and Wisdom of God who created the world was born in a filthy stall; this divine king urged his disciples to take the form of a servant, and — for his own preaching and miracles — was unjustly executed upon the cross. As followers of God’s word and will, what does this mean for us? Are we to sit idly by, captive to our realization and fear that our plans will most likely be toppled? By no means! We are called to be active; to serve the Lord and one another. God has given a promise of
salvation to those who trust him. God has given us the Law to guide us. But we do not always have the wisdom to know how to act. We flail about and make mistakes. That is inevitable. The sin comes when we decide that we know better than God, that we deserve praise for our deeds, or when we harden our hearts when God corrects us.

I wish I could tell you today what you should do — after all, I am nearly a doctor of Theology! However, despite what I may think on my best days, I am not God. And if I were to try, would that not be just another grand scheme for God to topple? But, I can bring to you the message that we have heard in the readings today. As Jesus asserts: “only those who do the will of my Father will enter the Kingdom.” The will of God among us is accomplished when we love others as God has loved us. It occurs when we forsake praise and glory and take up the cross in self-giving love to others. The will of God is most often accomplished in unnoticed acts of humble, self-giving service: in a kind word to an enemy, in an anonymous gift made to someone in need, in giving dignity to those who cannot care for themselves, in an act of mercy to someone who seems incapable of appreciating it. Its getting up in the middle of the night to sooth a child, it is in bathing our elderly parents, it is even in laughing graciously at that same old, boring joke your spouse always tells at a dinner party. In short, it is in those sometimes difficult act of love which builds up others and maintain community.

So, let us have those controversial conversations about welfare reform, universal health care, the war in Iraq, the ordination of openly gay and lesbian seminarians, about a new roof, or whatever we feel compelled to discuss as a result of God’s demand for mercy, love, and righteousness. But let us also remember that (whether we “win” or “lose”) these conversations are all for naught if they do not have at their heart — in our hearts — a firm trust that God is in charge. Let our confidence in God’s promise of salvation to all who have faith (though we are unworthy) give rise to the service of those whom we are tempted to deem as unworthy of our love and attention.

Faith that justifies is faith that God is in charge. Faith that justifies follows the words and deeds of God, as made manifested in Jesus Christ. Faith that justifies is founded on the Cross. The Theology of the Cross is the law God wishes to have inscribed on our hearts. The Theology of the Cross is the motivation for our desire to fulfill the Law. The Theology of the Cross is the foundation for our lives together. It is in the humility of the Cross that God’s majesty is revealed. In today’s gospel, Jesus spoke of the rock upon which we may build a house (God’s house, if you will) that rain, floods, and wind (that is, the tribulations and frustrations of life) cannot destroy. That rock is the Cross. Serving others as theologians of the Cross, let us pray for the faith to affirm with Paul: “I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” Only then may we lay claim to the blessing of God.

Amen.