FADE IN:

EXT. SWAMP - CHURCH - DAY

A one-story structure stands on pilings amid cypress trees and tangled understory. An old Sunkist crate lies by the front door. A sign reads:

Holiness Redeemer Baptist Church.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

The CONGREGATION, all dressed in black, fill the pews. The windows are closed.

PREACHER JAMES (62), draped in a black robe, stands near a casket on two sawhorses.

Beside him, MAE (6), sits in a chair, hands in her lap. A white bandana covers her eyes.

    PREACHER JAMES
    As far as the eye of God could see, darkness covered everything, darker than a hundred midnights.

    CONGREGATION
    Yes, it was, Preacher James.

    PREACHER JAMES
    This dear child...

He gestures toward Mae.

    PREACHER JAMES
    Has God’s eyes!

The congregation murmurs affirmation.

    PREACHER JAMES
    God was lonely in the darkness. He said, I’ll make me a world! And when he did, he said, That’s good!

    CONGREGATION
    Yes.

    PREACHER JAMES
    But God was still lonely. He’s said, I’ll make me a man! And when he did, he said, That’s good!
He raises a palm for silence. He turns to the casket.

PREACHER JAMES
God did not make this man.
(pauses)
Breathe him in, dearest brothers
and sisters, breathe him in.

He takes a long, deep breath.

The congregation inhales, exhales. Coughs, gagging sounds
fill the chapel. A WOMAN (80s) leans forward, vomits against
the back of the pew ahead.

PREACHER JAMES
No, not this man, husband of our
beloved Henriette, this child’s
mother. Not this man, who...
(pauses)
You know I must tell it, speak it.

CONGREGATION
Yes, Preacher James.

PREACHER JAMES
He rendered Henriette’s flesh and
poured it into Ruffin’s Pond.

The congregation cries out.

PREACHER JAMES
This man, father to our dear Mae,
whose eyes he smote with...
(pause)
You know I must tell it, speak it.

CONGREGATION
Yes, Preacher James.

PREACHER JAMES
He smote her eyes with drain
cleaner and oatmeal.

CONGREGATION
Ohhhh, ohhhhh, Lord, noooo.

PREACHER JAMES
But, oh, he was not finished with
his child. He was not finished.

He moves behind Mae, puts a hand on each shoulder. She
shifts in the chair.
PREACHER JAMES
He put this blinded child in the
trunk of his car and drove toward
Ruffin’s Pond. What dwelled in his
heart is too terrible know.

CONGREGATION
Nooo. Oh, no.

With a handkerchief, he wipes his brow, his mouth.

PREACHER JAMES
But God knew, God could see, God
saw this child, blinded and bound.

CONGREGATION
Oh, yes!

PREACHER JAMES
With His holy hand he flung the car
against the darkness, against the
biggest cypress tree on that road.
(pauses)
You know the one.

CONGREGATION
Yes, Preacher James.

PREACHER JAMES
Oh, yes, he smote this man, this
man made not by God, and he spared
this dear girl. Then God smiled,
and the light broke.

The preacher nods toward a back pew.

Two MEN (20s) rise and exit.

PREACHER JAMES
We gather, now, not to speak this
man’s name, not now or ever, but to
banish his darkness.

The two men re-enter, walk to the front. One carries the
Sunkist crate, the other a hammer and can of nails.

PREACHER JAMES
We feel it! We smell it!

One of the men opens the casket.

The CORPSE, naked, covered in dried blood, stares out.

Preacher James unties Mae’s bandana and helps her stand.
PREACHER JAMES
Can you see, my dear?

She blinks, her eyes filmy, red. She shakes her head. He leads her to the casket.

PREACHER JAMES
Verily, we send this man into oblivion, darker than a hundred midnights, yes, but we do not send him alone. We cannot, we dare not.

CONGREGATION
Nooo.

PREACHER JAMES
He must have a shepherd on this journey, oh, God.

The other man pulls taut a rope that extends from inside the crate. He opens the top, lifts out a cottonmouth snake.

The snake fights to free its head from the rope, but the man drops it in the casket and slams down the lid. The other man nails it shut.

PREACHER JAMES
And the darkness rolled up on one side, and the light stood shining on the other, and God said, That’s good!

CONGREGATION
That’s good.

PREACHER JAMES
Let us pray in silence.

The snake thrashes inside the casket.

Mae covers her ears, then her eyes. She bursts into tears. With hands extended, she embraces the casket.

Her voice wails, rises, reverberates:

MAE
Oh, Daddy!

FADE OUT.