

**Love in a World On Fire: A Fresh Start by God's Grace**

Isaiah 6:1-8, John 3:1-17

Good morning! It is so good to gather to worship! This has been a remarkable week, hasn't it? Massive peaceful Protests day after day, some looting, some violent responses. I saw a photo of State Street filled up with people lying down for 8 minutes to mark the 8 minutes George Floyd was held down as his breath was pushed out of him. What a powerful image.

Coming to grips with our legacy of racism is vitally important because racism contradicts the fundamental thing that the Bible teaches us about people—we are ALL made in God's image. Everyone has value and worth and should be protected because each and every person is a beloved fellow divine image bearer. To mark off some group as "other" or outside the human family is obscene. For me, the last 10 days or so have forced me to think about my own racism, and of the ways that I benefit—often unconsciously-- from my whiteness. I've thought about the sin—my sin—of seldom paying attention to the ways that people of color are disadvantaged. I heard Senator Cory Booker talking about how he hesitated to change into a t-shirt and shorts to walk home from the capitol because he was worried someone might be frightened of him and attack him. A SENATOR worried he might be in trouble if he wasn't wearing a suit! I never have to worry about that! It isn't fair. It isn't right.

The biggest thing though that these days of pain and protest have reminded me about is that each of us is full of brokenness and evil. You don't have to scratch anyone very deep to get to angry, hurtful, fear-driven behavior. I was interacting with someone on social media this week and it was so tempting to be sarcastic or condescending or hurtful. I really tried hard not to do that, but I was surprised to see how quickly I was ready to forget Peter's direction to treat others with gentleness and respect. Anyone can suddenly find themselves being part of the problem, not the solution.

How can we be people who make things better, not worse? How can we bring streams of living water and not be bringers of pain? The Bible word for that is LOVE. Agape. This love is acting for the benefit of the other person, even at cost to ourselves. As we move into the

summer we are going to be looking at practical ways we can love our neighbors during this hard time. I originally planned on calling this series “Love in the Time of COVID,” but it seems more fitting now to call it Love in a World on Fire. Love in a World on Fire. When the world seems out of control and scary, it needs us—it needs Jesus Followers—out there bringing help, bringing comfort, bearing love and good news and a cup of cool water to those in need. Our world needs love and we are the firehoses God has provided to douse the fires of hate and fear. Church, we are the firehoses.

Where do we start? Both of our readings today give us a surprising and reassuring answer. We start with God, not with our own striving. Our gospel reading today is one of the most famous passages in the whole Bible, Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee—that means he was part of the strictest, most dedicated, most observant group of Jews. He was a hard-core believer, living out his faith in every way. He was also a member of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin. In other words, this guy was a religious big shot. What does Jesus say to him—to this very accomplished and successful man of faith? Jesus says he needs to be born again! He needs to experience a spiritual rebirth. What a shocking thing for Jesus to say! It is rude—here is one of the most devoted religious people in the country, and Jesus tells him that HE needs to be converted. He needs to go back to step one. Do you feel the slap Nicodemus must have felt? Jesus says Nicodemus needs God acting in his life, not just his own striving. We have the same problem. No matter how hard we work at being religious, it is easy for us to slip into anger, fear, selfishness, or pride. We so quickly find our hands clenching into fists, ready to throw the first punch. Despite all our religious trying, hate is still in us, ready to boil over. Jesus *knows* how broken we are! His prescription is not more trying like Nicodemus. No, it is new birth! He doesn’t start with a list of things for us to do, he starts with God transforming us!

We see the same thing in our Old Testament reading. Isaiah was in the temple—someplace only very religious people can even enter—and he had this amazing vision of God’s presence with him. What was his reaction? He was devastated. He cried out “woe is me!” He immediately realized how unqualified he was to be in God’s presence. He moans “I’m ruined, I’m a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips!” Here is a very devout

religious person and he realizes that he has the same problem we all have. Scratch him even a bit and there is meanness, greed, envy, corruption.

Both of these stories remind us that ALL of us are in need of rescue. Everyone needs help. I love Isaiah's reaction—he gets a glimpse of God Almighty—the holy one—and all he can do is recognize how far he falls short. No one standing in front of the holy God will say “I'm not so bad, I'm not Hitler!” That is the wrong comparison. No—when we see God all of us will recognize how really broken and full of evil we are.

The Bible underlines what we see played out on our TV screens every day—people are messed up. We are quick to hurt, to wound, to divide into factions and fight. This is not a problem of THOSE people. Of those OTHER people, over there! NO—both of these stories go out of their way to show that even the MOST religious people need this rescue too. This is OUR problem. Religiosity can't save you. All of us are broken. It is a universal condition.

So how do we fix it? What do we need to do? We don't fix it! That is the key starting place—letting go of that trying to run the show. We CAN'T fix it! If we could, Nicodemus would have done it already. We are like a person in quicksand—the more we struggle and work to get out, the faster we sink into the mire. The only way out is to be rescued. To hold onto someone on solid ground. We need rescue from outside of ourselves. We need God's savior.

That is what happens in both of our stories—God intervenes to save us! Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born again, of water and the Spirit. What did you do to be born? Nothing, right? It is something that happened *to* you, not something you *achieved*. It is the same with spiritual new birth—that is the work of God's Spirit in us, not something we struggle for. The only way out of our mess is by God's rescue.

Similarly, after Isaiah recognized his sin problem, did he go do something to make it right? Offer a sacrifice? NO! He did nothing. Nothing—instead one of God's messengers—that is what seraphim are—flew to him and touched a coal to his mouth. Isaiah recognized that he had unclean lips—a dirty mouth—and *God* acted. God cleaned his lips.

The rescue from our mess, from our brokenness, from our pit of anger and hurt and pride-- is a free gift from God. God chooses in his love to save us. It is a gift we receive, not a wage we earn. It is a gift we receive.

Thomas Tarrants grew up in Mobile, Alabama in the 1960's. During high school , he came across some white supremacist, anti-Semitic literature that was circulating around his high school. The warnings in these racist handouts made him anxious. Soon his fears turned into anger and hatred. Tarrants began to view people of color as "America's enemies". He fell into a downward spiral of extremist ideology. He became involved with a terrorist group-- Mississippi's Klu Klux Klan. One night, Tarrants and another Klansman attempted to plant a bomb at the home of a Jewish businessman in Meridian Mississippi. They were caught in a police stakeout. Tarrants was badly wounded in the shoot out. The doctor told him he would die within the hour. He now believes it was a miracle that he lived. He eventually was sentenced to 30 years in the Mississippi state penitentiary, one of the worst prisons in the country.

In prison, he was confined to a 6 x 9 sale in a maximum-security unit. Apart from twice weekly showers, Tarrants was utterly alone. He says that to keep from going crazy, he read continuously. At first more racist poison but eventually he read the Gospels in his prison cell. He had been baptized as a child and thought he was saved, but in prison he says he encountered a new birth. Tarrants says as the meaning of God's word became clearer so did its relevance to his life. He says "I had been blind spiritually but was now beginning to see."

As he read more he started recognizing the huge mess of his life and began to repent of his many sins. He finally asked Jesus to take over his life and do whatever he wanted with it.

Starting the very next morning he says he was a new man. "God delivered me from hate, and I began to grow in love for others. Friendships developed with black inmates and others who were very different from me," including the Jewish lawyer who helped him while he was in prison. After serving eight years in prison, Tarrants was surprisingly given parole and was led into campus ministry, then a pastoral ministry in a racially mixed church. Eventually Tarrants enjoyed a long ministry of teaching, discipling, spiritual mentoring, and writing at the CS Lewis Institute. As Tarrants says, I marvel at God's continuing patience in my life. Truly, with God there is no sin too great to forgive, no bondage too hard to break, and no pit so deep that his love isn't deeper still."

How do we accept this gift? Jesus spells it out for Nicodemus. He gives us the good news in a nutshell. Jesus says we enter the Kingdom of God is by being born of the Spirit—by God’s action in our lives, and that everyone who trusts in Jesus as he is lifted up on the cross will have everlasting life.

Church, the gospel is very simple—just trust in Jesus and he saves us. Period. It is a free gift of grace. By faith, not by our efforts. We trust Jesus and are saved. God brings us into a new, free and happy relationship with Him that is *real* Life. Like Isaiah with the coal to his lips, our sin is blotted out, we are put right with God. All of our past mess is gone. The starting place is trusting God. It’s not about us. The launching pad towards being agents of love and reconciliation is accepting God’s gift to us of reconciliation.

John 3:16 is the heart of the Gospel—of the Good News that Jesus brought. Listen again to this verse and try to hear it fresh, because it is stunning news: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” God LOVES the world! He is driven by love, not anger. That is good news! Who does he love? In Greek it is kosmos—all of creation! How much does he love it? So much that he sent Jesus so that *anyone*—EVERYONE-- who believes in him—will not perish, but have life to the full. Life full of purpose and meaning and joy and love. Not maybe someday, but full life right now! We can start living in God’s kingdom today. As we do that God is shaping us, molding us, into the people he made us to be. He is repairing our brokenness. He is reforming us for His purposes. Like with Thomas Tarrants, he uses us to bring his justice and his mercy and love to the world.

Life with God is not a life of dreary striving or anxiously worrying “have I done enough?” No—it is a fresh adventure each day. We are resurrection people! People delivered from death to life and sent out to share the good news that the rescue is available to everybody, just for the believing. After the seraphim cleaned Isaiah’s sin, Isaiah heard God saying “Who shall I send? Who will go for us?” Isaiah couldn’t help himself—Here I am! Send me! That launched Isaiah on a remarkable career as a person who shares God’s word.

“Here I am” is the only way to respond to God’s saving rescue, to our new life in Jesus. God wants to include us in his rescue plan. The only answer is Here I am! Send me! What’s next Papa? How can I help?

God saves us by his free gift. He fills us with his Spirit and delivers us from death to life. And then he sends us out to join in his mission in the world. The promise of John 3:16 is not for just me or you, it is for *everyone*! It is world-wide! Even for whoever you see in the protests who drives you crazy—whether it is an overzealous cop, a neo-nazi or a rioter—the Good news is for them too! For God so loved the WORLD that he gave his only Son, that whoever—anyone at all—whoever! believes in him, whoever trusts Jesus, will not perish but have deep, abiding, everlasting life. Friends, we have good news to share. We have God’s Spirit moving in us and through us. We have a job to do, not because we are obligated to make God happy, but because *he* makes *us* happy.

Let’s pray: Lord Jesus—we are stunned. Stunned again by your amazing good news. By your remarkable gift to us. Thank you for coming to rescue us. For rescuing everyone who trusts you. Lord—for anyone today who is not trusting you right now—help us! Help our unbelief. Pull us to you. Lord—for anyone who wants to trust you now—we pray—Lord, we believe! I trust in you Jesus, save me. Help our unbelief. Help each of us to trust you and accept your love. Lord, fill us with your Spirit and send us out to be mirrors reflecting your love and care out to the world around us. Use us in your rescue mission Jesus, help us to advance your justice, your healing, your truth. In Jesus name we ask it, Amen.