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## *The World is on Fire: Choose Love*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder  
Proper 17 – Year B**

Friends, this has been a hard week. Last Saturday while I was attending the funeral of a friend, my spouse was driving around town looking for a Covid test because one child had a runny nose. It turned out to be a Covid-negative ear infection, which was a huge relief, but we kept the kids home on Monday and Tuesday because gone are the days where snot-nosed kids are expected in the classroom. And I'm actually ok with that—as kids and adults we're probably all better served when we allow ourselves to stay home for a sick-day and binge watch *Octonauts* (for the kids) or *Ted Lasso* (for the adults) rather than powering through feeling like crud.

By Wednesday, the kids were back in school, but I was down for the count—literally. My body, presumably in protest to the loopy side-effects of the sinus medicine I took the night before, decided to shut down. I lost consciousness. And the only reason I won the argument NOT to call an ambulance was because we all assumed that the Emergency Rooms would be too backed up. Turns out the ER is not as bad as we feared—which we learned last night when my beloved spouse needed stitches and an x-ray, but no cast. Thank you, Jesus.

Now, clearly, the only reason I'm sharing all of this with you this morning is because I'm fine. I'm fine, the kids are fine, my spouse is fine, we're all fine. But it has been a really hard week. And I bet the same has been true for many of you in a hundred different ways. Someone has lost a job, and someone has had to let an employee go, someone has been dumped, and someone has had to initiate a breakup, someone has had to make difficult decisions about a child, and someone has had to make difficult decisions about a parent, someone is struggling with PTSD as aspects of our communal life start to look like last fall once again... the day-to-day life of the week has been hard... and yet here we are, all seemingly fine.

This has been a hard week in the wider world, too. Between the wildfires out West, the insane amount of suffering in Haiti, and the heart wrenching news from Afghanistan—it feels like the whole world is on fire. If I think about it all at once it's as if the smoke is filling my lungs and I find it hard to breathe.

I listen to the news and ask: Where are you, God? And then I receive the gift of food from my neighbor and say: Oh there you are. I see people blow up at each other on Facebook, angry and tired: Where are you, God? And then I close my eyes and listen to the cicadas: Oh there you are. I sing through tears, feeling the weight of loss at one more funeral: Where are you, God? And then I snuggle in closer to the child who once again snuck into our bed: Oh there you are.

Death and destruction and anger and evil are everywhere. Loss and sadness and anxiety and emptiness are everywhere. And God is also everywhere. This hard week, this hard season is not hard because of the absence of God. It might be if we worshipped some far-off distant deity. But we worship an incarnate God—a God who comes down to us in the person of Jesus, who chooses to take on human flesh and blood and heartache with us, who lives and dies as one of us. God *is* with us.

I'm not pointing to God's presence among us to be encouraging, though reflecting on that truth does indeed grant us strength and courage. I'm not trying to minimize our discomfort by saying: focus on the positive, God's got this and God's got you. I'm pointing to God's presence among us because the truth is that the incarnate love of God made manifest to us in creation, made manifest to us in the person of Jesus, made manifest to us in the light of Christ in our neighbor—that incarnate love that abides with us exactly where we are—it calls us to a certain kind of life.

James tells us: *be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*. Some of us may hear those words and think: Oh... I need to do more... I need to volunteer for this, I need to sign up for that, I need to do, do, do so that people know I'm a good Christian... so that God knows I believe. Indeed, Martin Luther questioned the use of this book in the Bible, concerned that people would hear that it is our works that save us rather than grace. But as I reflect on these words this week, during this difficult season, what I hear is an invitation not to do *more*, but to do *differently*.

You see, if I allow the word of God, the incarnation of God, the love of God to not just penetrate my ears but penetrate my heart... if I believe that love is stronger than death, that nothing could ever separate us from the love of God, that God is love and that God so loved the world... if I allow that word to take root in my heart, then I won't just feel better, I'll do better. And not because belief will somehow make me more perfect or less sinful, but because belief will strengthen me and embolden me. Because love isn't just some fluffy feeling. Love is truly powerful transformative stuff. *God is love*.

And God's not fluff. God is omnipotent! Supreme! All powerful and all present and all love all the time. And that truth, taken seriously, requires something of me.

James reminds us that we don't just treat our faith like fine china, stored away in a cabinet, only brought out for special occasions. We get our faith out every day and we use it. Our faith is not some family heirloom book, passed down from generation to generation, collecting dust on a shelf. We take our faith off the shelf and hold it, smell it, read it, share it with others.

Our faith, as imperfect as it may be, is a perfect gift from God. A gift to be used. Believe that God is love and use that gift... do something with it.

I'm not suggesting you do something grand like start a non-profit to save the world, unless that's your call. What I'm suggesting is much smaller and perhaps much harder.

James says: *You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness*. Ooooooh. Quick to listen? Have you not heard the nonsense people are sputtering these days? Slow to anger? Do you not know the life-and-death implications of what we're grappling with right now?

No thanks, James... I think I'd rather show my faith in other ways. Preferably something that doesn't require so much... love... of my enemies... who are my neighbors. Oh, Jesus.

I read an article this week that hit home with me because it was—indirectly—about my family. The article was titled: "Why Some White Evangelical Republicans Are So Opposed to the Covid-19 Vaccine" [\[1\]](#), and it was written by a woman who grew up in Texas like me. One of the contributing factors to low vaccine rates was "end of times" thinking—the belief that the final day of judgment is drawing near.

I read this and immediately thought of the other preacher in my family, my uncle, who did in fact preach this Spring that the end of the world is approaching—and that Covid is proof. I know this because I heard a snippet of his sermon while visiting my grandmother—my grandmother who is not vaccinated, much like her neighbors and other members of my family.

Here's the thing. My uncle and I read the same Bible. We worship the same God. Our very different decisions about how to address Covid in our families and communities are both, in part, influenced by our Christian faith. We both love my same grandmother. Not only that... I love my uncle. And I know he loves me. He may not think I have a right to stand in this pulpit and preach, but he loves me.

And because of that love in the midst of what is of course a complex and at times difficult relationship, there's a human face to a viewpoint so different from my own.

Am I upset that my beloved grandmother, who I love fiercely, isn't protected from this pandemic? Yes. Will I be crushed—and more than a little angry with certain members of my family—if this virus takes her life? Absolutely. But am I going to yell into the void of social media, adding to the vitriol on our screens, or worse yet, cut off my family? No. Because I truly believe that we're all just doing the best we can with what we've got.

I choose love. Not because I want to gloss over the issues, or bury my head in the sand, or throw in the towel. I can still have strong feelings backed by bold actions in response to the injustices I see in this world. James tells us to be *doers*—yes! Another biblical prophet, Micah, tells us to *do* justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. Do something, yes. Do justice. But do it with love. Stand up and speak up, yes. But listen up too, so you

can stand and speak grounded in the powerful stuff of love.

Because if we stand up for what's right, and we fight for what's right, and at the end of the day we are proven right—but we do it while vilifying or dehumanizing our neighbor by reducing them to the opposition, then friends, we have won the battle but lost the war.

This world is on fire. And yelling at each other only makes the fire burn hotter. My prayer is that we would wake up every morning and ask ourselves: Do I believe that God is love? Do I believe that I am lovingly created in the image of this God of love? Do I believe that my neighbor is lovingly created in the image of this God of love? And if the answer is yes, then do the things—whatever things you have to do that day—but do them in love. Speak the truth—whatever truth you are called to speak that day—but speak it in love. Walk the path—whatever path you are called to walk that day—but walk it in love, as Christ *loves* us, and *gives* himself for us. Amen.

[1] <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-some-white-evangelical-republicans-are-so-opposed-to-the-covid-19-vaccine/>

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