

Things You Need to Know

Isaiah 6:1-8

John 3:1-17

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In seminary there were two words that we dreaded to hear in association with a reading assignment: Karl Barth. Karl Barth was a Swiss theologian in the early and middle 20th century. He was part of the intellectual resistance to Adolf Hitler. Barth was one of the authors of the Barmen Declaration, which is a part of our Book of Confessions; the Barmen Declaration decried the idolatry associated with the German church's allegiance to Hitler.

The reason we dreaded hearing Karl Barth's name for our reading assignments in seminary was because Barth was extremely verbose. His systematic theology titled *Church Dogmatics* consisted of thirteen volumes, and spans more than three feet on the bookshelf. Not only were the reading assignments long and tedious, but much of the important information is contained in his extensive footnotes.

The story is told of one time after Barth had given a speech, someone came up to him and asked, "Dr. Barth, is it possible for you to condense the complexity and sophistication of your theology into just one sentence?" After a moment of thought, Barth replied, "Yes, I can do that: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

It is true, the Bible is an enormous book. No matter how many times you read it, you will never be able to put your arms around everything that it has to say to us. Never will we be able read the Bible and say, "I've finished it; there's nothing more in it for me."

But even though it is an endless fountain of knowledge, still there are a few very basic things that we simply must know. Like Karl Barth, we need to be able to take everything that the Bible says, and distill it down to just a few of the most essential tenets. If you don't ever learn anything else from the Bible, there are a few things you really need to know.

And we can find those things in our scripture lessons this morning. We have two classic texts before us this morning. Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus contains what is perhaps the most well-known verse in the whole Bible – John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son, that whosoever would believe in him will not perish but have eternal life." Martin Luther called that little verse "the gospel in a nutshell," and he's right. It tells of God's undying love for you and me, and indeed for all the world; it tells of how God deals effectively with our sin by sending his Son; and it tells of the eternal hope that we have because of God's love for us. There you have it – the gospel message in a nutshell.

But you don't have to limit the proclamation of the gospel to the New Testament. The truth is, the gospel of salvation by grace goes back to the third chapter of Genesis. Salvation has always been by the grace of God. That's why one of my favorite texts in Scripture is this morning's text from the sixth chapter of Isaiah. It's one of my favorites because in these eight verses we find a clear proclamation of the gospel that Jesus Christ fulfilled some 750 years later. I truly believe that in these eight verses you will find those essential elements of the gospel, those things you need to know.

The first thing you need to know is that the gospel always begins with God. In our text from Isaiah, it is God who suddenly fills the temple with his presence. In John 3:16, the gospel begins with God: "For God so loved the world that God sent his only-begotten Son..." We are tempted to believe that the gospel begins when we search for God. But the truth is, even before we begin to turn our hearts in search of God,

God has already moved in our hearts to plant that desire within us. The gospel doesn't begin with us. One of the things you need to know is that the gospel begins with God.

When the gospel message does touch upon who we are, the message is clear: we are sinners in need of forgiveness. That is the very first response from the lips of Isaiah when he finds himself in the presence of God: "Woe is me, for I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts!"¹ Isaiah is referring to something much more profound than the words that come out of his mouth. In the biblical world the lips are identified as the locus of sin, because the lips are the audible and visible gateway to the human heart, where all sin originates. And so it is for Isaiah that when he finds himself in the presence of the God who is described as Holy, Holy, Holy, Isaiah realizes how far from true holiness he really is.

I'm sure you've had that kind of feeling before. You find yourself in the presence of true greatness, and you realize that you have a long way to go before you can reach that kind of greatness. I find that to be true every year about this time. This is the time of the year when we take the boys to the same summer camp I attended when I was their age. Stuart will be a counselor, and Ben will be a camper. The same man is the director of the camp today who directed it when I was young. I always looked up to Malcolm as a young man, and I still do, though now his stature is somewhat smaller than I remember. But in terms of integrity, and character, and humility, Malcolm is a giant. No matter how much I aspire to act with decency and goodwill, I don't think I will ever be able to rise to the level of Malcolm. Standing side by side with Malcolm reminds me that I still have a long way to go.

That's true of our encounters with God. On the one hand, we can be overwhelmed with the glory and majesty of God. But on the other hand, when we stand in the light of God's holiness, we see just how small our holiness really is. We will always fall short of the glory of God. It is a gap that we are unable to close by ourselves. Being in the presence of God will always remind us that we have a long way to go. One of the things you need to know is that the gospel is very clear in its declaration of our sinfulness.

And the gospel is very clear that there is nothing that you or I can do on our own to erase our sins. Isaiah believes his case is hopeless; he is powerless to do anything about his sinfulness. The same goes for us. We can try to obey every law to the letter, but we will always fail. We can try to live with a spirit of pure, unadulterated altruism, but we will always be influenced by self-interest. We can dedicate our lives to doing good deeds for others, but there aren't enough good deeds to bridge the gap between us and God. One of the things you need to know is that the gospel proclaims that there is no way we can save ourselves from our sinfulness.

But you also need to know that the gospel does not end with our sinfulness. The gospel addresses our sinfulness by proclaiming that God rescues us from our sin. In Isaiah's vision there is a poignant moment when an angel takes a burning hot coal from the fire and touches it to Isaiah's lips and says, "See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has been taken away, and your sin atoned for."² And with that simple gesture comes one of the most profound truths of the gospel, namely, that God does for us precisely what we are unable to do on our own.

I remember it vividly today, some 40 years after the fact. As a young boy, I hadn't taken any swim lessons that I can recall. I had lived near a beach when I was in kindergarten and first grade, so I wasn't afraid of the water. Playing in the water along the beach, though, doesn't truly qualify as swimming. But I didn't know that at the time.

I thought I was a good swimmer. But when I went to the pool to take a group swim lesson, I discovered that I really didn't know how to swim. When the instructor told me, I jumped into the pool. Only, the water was deep, and I found myself in over my head, literally. I flailed around and was terrified for that

¹ Isaiah 6:5

² Isaiah 6:7

brief moment before the instructor jumped in and brought a kickboard to me for me to grab onto while he brought me back to the edge of the pool. Where I was unable to save myself, the lifeguard came to my rescue.

Isn't that what God does for us? He doesn't sit idly on the edge of the pool of our sins and bark orders at us, as if we can somehow pull ourselves out of the mess we're in. God jumps in, offers us the lifeline, and says, "Take this, and come with me." God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son! One of the things you need to know is that by sending Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, God does for us precisely that which we are unable to do on our own.

And there's one more thing you need to know: Life is just beginning when we accept the salvation that God offers to us. At the end of the lesson in Isaiah, the prophet hears a conversation God is having with the angels, and he hears God asking, "Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?" And without hesitation, Isaiah said, Here am I—send me!³

You see, when God had delivered Isaiah, Isaiah responded by offering his life in the service of God. Isn't that the best way to respond to love—by loving in return? Here am I, Lord! Send me!

In a few moments we will pause in our worship service to give thanks to God for a man who has been an exceptional servant of the Lord through the employment of this church for 25 years. For 25 years, Ray Thompson has brought energy and joy to the job of cleaning and maintaining the church property. But for Ray it is more than just a job—much, much more. For Ray, every minute he spends here is time spent in service of the Lord. For Ray, the work he does in the hallways and in the classrooms and in the offices and in the bathrooms and outside on the lawnmower is all done to the glory of God. For Ray, the work he has done around here for 25 years is his way of saying to God, "Here I am! Send me!"

And we are all the more blessed because Ray continues to say, "Here I am! Send me!"

I began this morning with a story about Karl Barth, and his one-sentence synopsis of the gospel: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

He's right, you know. I truly believe that anywhere you turn in Scripture, you will find the basic message of God's love and redemption of a sinful human race, a race that includes you and me. I'm sure a man named Isaiah realized that, some seven hundred years before Christ walked the earth. I'm even sure a man named Nicodemus recognized that truth, even though it didn't fully manifest itself until Jesus had died on the cross.

How about you—how do you understand the essence of the gospel message?

³ Isaiah 6:8