

“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; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!

Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.’ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’

Then I said, ‘Here am I. Send me’ And he said, ‘Go...’”

Don’t we all usually say when we hear God’s call, “Yes, here I am. Send me.”?

But, wait just a minute here. Today I would be afraid, very afraid, of answering that call and saying yes, send me.

Why? Why am I so afraid? What am I afraid of?

Here’s what I’m afraid of. I’m afraid to admit that I’m a Christian.

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night....”

Why did Nicodemus wait until after dark to meet with Jesus? Do you suppose he didn’t want to be seen? Why was he afraid to be seen? He was a member of the religious governing council and also a Pharisee, a super-religious kind of guy. The religious authorities, his colleagues, his friends, were not exactly fans of Jesus. In fact they were more than a little nervous about how many fans Jesus was attracting, and his teaching was calling into question their

orthodoxy and their leadership and their power. Nicodemus' social standing, and his standing in the religious establishment, would be very much in jeopardy if the authorities found out that he had met with Jesus.

When I read this passage a few weeks ago when Amma Susan asked me to deliver the sermon today, the fifth Sunday of the month, I was dismayed. My initial thought was, "Oh no - it's John 3, one of the most misused and most frequently weaponized passages in all of the New Testament. ...you must be born again.... For God so love the world...."

It brought to mind every Bible-thumping street preacher and every hell-fire and brimstone television evangelist and every overbearing acquaintance who has accosted me with the "have you been born again?" question, or the closely related question, "are you saved?"

It brought back the trauma of being trapped, cornered with no escape when I was in a small room at little Grace Baptist Church in Englewood, Colorado, with the deacon and the pastor. The deacon did not let go of my hand when we shook hands as I was leaving the church, having been invited by a new kid in the high school. The deacon dragged me into the pastor's study, still holding my hand, closed the door, and the two of them, the deacon and Pastor Collison, talked at me until finally I gave in and repeated the words that the deacon insisted I say aloud, asking Jesus to be my personal savior. Did I know really what I was saying? No. I only wanted to get out of there and get home where I was safe. Only after I had said those words, did the deacon let go of my hand, fully satisfied that he had succeeded in winning another soul.

When Pastor Collison knocked on our door sometime later that week, my dad answered the door and told him that if he ever set foot on our property again he'd punch him out.

At dinner that night Dad told me to follow a strict rule from then on: never ever talk about money, politics, or religion, with anyone, ever.

The contents of John 3 also led me to think about a long list of examples of people and institutions who give Jesus and Christianity a bad name, an unsavory reputation, a reputation that I don't want to be associated with.

You likely have your own list, but here's a few of mine.

The Westborough Baptist Church.

Fundamentalist and Evangelical churches that are full of social conservatives, holier than thou types, who justify their personal prejudices by weaponizing the Bible - for example, rejecting anyone who is different, especially the LGBTQ+ population.

The Roman Catholic Church and all its rules and prohibitions and condemnations and guilt-producing messages, including telling parishioners that their only way to God is through their priest - they can't access God on their own - somehow the church has an exclusive contract to speak with God. Many of my friends, many of them, have been working for years to recover from this abuse.

So many of my friends over the years have shared stories of the emotional damage, sometimes quite severe, wrought upon them at the hands of so-called Christian churches and self-identified Christian people who have made them feel that they are worthless human beings who are going straight to hell unless they subscribe to a particular set of doctrines and adhere to a tightly prescribed set of behaviors.

Why am I afraid? I don't want to be perceived to be one of these judgmental and disrespectful (*insert your own favorite expletive here, aloud or in your heart*).

Let's go back to continue the Isaiah passage that Ann read for us. It left off with "Here I am. Send me."

It continues, "And He said, 'Go, and say to this people: Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see but do not perceive.

Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.' "

Why would I say yes to God's call only to have my courageous message fall on deaf ears? I'm actually wise to be afraid to waste my energy like this.

What to do then if I still want to respond to God's call? How's this for an idea? I spent much of my teaching career creating alternative pathways for students for whom the design of regular schooling did not fit - and it came to be called alternative education and I was an alternative educator who championed students whom the regular school rejected. How about I explore how to become an alternative Christian who champions people whom the regular churches reject?

How do I do that? Love. Love. Love. Provide a space where people feel loved - where they ARE loved - a psychological space, an interpersonal space, a physical space, and ultimately, a safe space. That's what *The Haven* has become, not by my premeditated design, but by being open to God's and Joyce's call with regard to how to transform Joyce's self-described sacred space where she said her soul resides: her furniture making workshop.

It began as a yoga studio. Then the St. Andrews Wednesday breakfast Bible study began meeting there. Then additional gardens emerged in the field behind the barn. Then a Reiki practitioner found it to be the perfect space for her healing ministry. And all along the way it became for many people a safe place to talk and be heard, to be genuinely heard, where a caring listening ear was always available, whether in person or via zoom or on the phone.

And what has been the outcome?

One frequent visitor said after a while, “Bill, this is the only time in my life that I have felt love, unconditional love. This isn’t just a yoga center. It’s a love center.”

One person said after about an hour of conversation, mostly with me listening, “Bill, my mom told me you would pray for me. Would you do that now?”

These two small examples are representative of what’s been happening at *The Haven* when I decided just to love, rather than to identify as a Christian.

How am I able to keep this up? How is such an intense state of being sustainable? A realization came to me just last Sunday when I was working in the garden with a couple of my frequent visitors who help out with gardening and other tasks. The Gospels have several stories of Jesus getting up early, before dawn, to sneak away to a lonely and quiet place to pray. My early morning time of reading, praying, and meditating is merely mimicking what Jesus did, following his behavioral example. This time has expanded to a couple of hours as additional inspirational texts find their way into this time, and as additional names find their way onto my prayer list.

A wonderful side-effect, if you will, of each morning's readings, is that frequently one of the ideas that I read in the morning is exactly an idea that a guest that very day needs to hear. Hmmm, that's not so much a side effect, is it? It's a primary purpose for beginning each day with the set of readings appointed for that day.

So what's the take-away for today? It's most certainly not an altar call for anyone to come forward to be saved! I do hope, and pray, however, that each of us would commit to love more, and listen more, and spend a little more time each morning with some sort of centering practice that works for you, so that God can prepare us to *be love* each day.

Oh - wait a minute! That was an altar call after all, wasn't it? Let's have another look at the Isaiah passage.

And He said, 'Go, and say to this people: Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see but do not perceive.

Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, (here it is, listen to this) *and turn and be healed.*' "

My friends are being healed at The Haven not because I am preaching at them, but rather because I'm loving them. And my morning time with God prepares me each day to love whoever shows up.

So I'll end with this challenge for you. Create your own Haven from which you can continue to share your love, which is ultimately God's love flowing through you.

Let us pray.

Ever-loving God, help each of us to say yes to your invitation, your call, to share your love each day with those whose paths happen to cross ours.

In the name of Love, Amen.