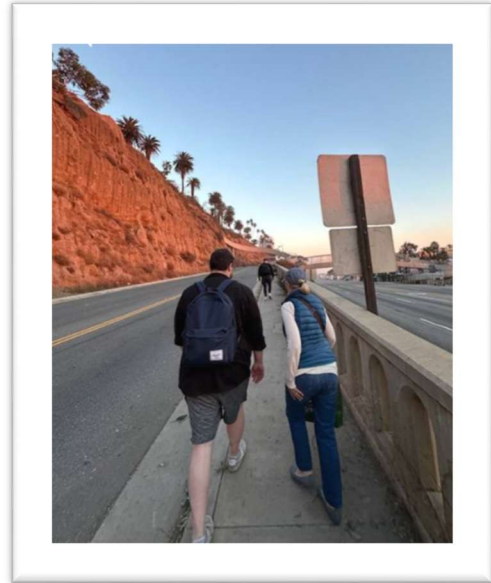


MESSAGE FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE PACIFIC PALISADES' FIRE  
(The Baptism of Our Lord)

## “Redeem, Restore, Rebuild”

Isaiah 43:1 – 7

<sup>2</sup> **When** you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you;  
and **when** you pass through the rivers,  
they will not sweep over you.  
**When** you walk through the fire,  
you will not be burned;  
the flames will not set you ablaze.



Our worship leader, Denisa, and I had just been looking at changing the worship service. We didn't know what it would be, but God did. And here we are!

How many of you went to a Candlelight Christmas Eve service? Didn't we just do that? And how many of you sang "O Little Town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie," and "Silent night, holy night, all is calm all is bright"? Didn't we just do that? The lengths Satan will go to get our minds off Jesus, a raging fire! He doesn't just want our minds off Christmas (Jesus), he wants to use this fire (and all sorts of "fires") to get our hearts to despair of a loving God. He doesn't fight fair. Never has; never will. As soon as the child of God turns their heart to the only good and gracious God, Satan comes along as quickly as possible to get our hearts all twisted up in knots. We barely got through the twelve days of Christmas. And I imagine most of us came today with knots in our hearts.

In verse 2, Isaiah doesn't use the conditional preposition "if." He states declaratively and deliberately, "when." "When" you pass through the waters, "when" you pass through rivers. And then, on all Sundays, Isaiah has the audacity to say, "And when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned." He even has the audacity to say, "the flames will not set you ablaze." (Or will they? Could this be a baptism of fire?)

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Clearly the prophet had lost his mind. Fire shows no mercy. Fire doesn't sleep. One man interviewed yesterday said, "I'm just exhausted. Too many days of this. I want my phone to stop ringing. All those alerts. It's endless. I'm waiting for a peaceful period." A "peaceful period" is coming, but not until that day when we all rest in peace in Glory. Until then we fight the good fight.

You know this fire has gotten very personal. It's not like those bush fires or even like those devastating fires that happen over there, somewhere else. No, this just got personal. And now I'm talking especially to my flock, and to those who had to evacuate. I'm talking to those who left their cars in the street and got out and had to walk out on foot with only what they could carry. We know the people it has happened to. This time it is completely different. It happened to us. It happened to our close friends. Yeah, it is personal.

What happened to the Christmas Passover Festival? I thought the angel of death, or in this case the angel of fire, was supposed to pass over, especially the believers. And when we had just pilgrimed to Bethlehem to adore our newborn King. What happened to the 12 days of Christmas? Yeah, this is personal.

And we say thanks be to God - it's personal! It's about time. It's always been personal to God. Let's take a moment and view things not from below but from above. When God the Father sent His Son into the world to suffer and die, it was personal. When the Son of God humbled Himself and became a man and suffered and died on the cross, it was personal. It's been personal from the beginning when God said, "Let us" make humanity in our image.

You know, God always makes it personal. He keeps turning the tables. One moment we think we are the outpost of hope, and the next we feel like we are without hope. We are the ones without a home and left destitute and in need. It got personal alright. It always has been. But sometimes we don't treat life as such. That is, we hold on to the things of this world far more than we hold on to Him.

What is God up to? It is as if He puts us in situations where we are forced into relationships: forced into transactions with each other but mostly with Him. It is true that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will ultimately be saved from fire and everything that destroys on this side of Heaven. (Rom. 10:13.) For Psalm 27:4 speaks of a house that is eternal, one that can never be destroyed by fire or

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any other threat: “One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.”

As of January 11, 2025, at least 13 souls are missing, and 16 souls are known deceased. And each of them is precious in His sight. This is personal. Living and dying is always personal. When God gave Adam life He got up close and He breathed into his nostrils (Genesis 2:7). God gets personal. He doesn't just give life He wants to share life with you. He says, “and rend your hearts and not your garments” (Joel 2:13).

That's the way God made us: to love Him, to be in relationship with Him. He comes to safeguard (fireproof) your heart, your very life and through Jesus Christ. Then and only then, are you and I able to walk through the fire and not get burned. The prophet knew what he was talking about after all!

This disaster is far from over. In fact, when it is over, another will emerge. At some point you must accept that for God your life is personal. It always has been. He redeemed you. He restored you. He will rebuild you into a new creation. Like the fires, and the conditions they create, our life on this side of Heaven is fluid.

We are not alone. God has not moved. He remains faithful. And we can join faithful Job in saying, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” (Job 1:21.)

Amen.