

Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • January 16, 2022



The Scripture
Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

The Message
"What Is STRONG with Me? – Word"
Mark Briley

If reading digitally, click on this link or if reading from a printed copy, it will be very helpful if you find this link address to watch vintage footage of the *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*, produced by the SALT Project.¹

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4woEuG7_Ls

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/>. SALT offers extraordinary efforts through media, video, and beyond as a relevant, theological voice for and in our time.

That, of course, was archival footage from the *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom* held on August 28, 1963. More than 250,000 people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. drawing attention to the continuing challenges and inequalities faced by African Americans a century after emancipation. You saw Dr. King in the video as he shared his famed and beloved “*I Have a Dream*” speech.

Do you know anyone who was there in person? I know someone who was *almost* there... had intended to be and was close but ended up being unable to attend. I know someone who was *almost* there.



Do you have any *almost there* moments? A friend from Tulsa was with his boss at Game 1 of the 1988 World Series in Los Angeles. Kirk Gibson was held out of the lineup due to injuries in both legs. Bottom of the ninth, two outs, down a run, Coach calls Gibson’s number and he hobbles to the plate and with hardly any strength in his legs, he cranks a pinch hit, two run homer to win the

game. My friend’s boss insisted they leave the inning before to beat the traffic. He *almost* was there for that home run.

When my wife was young, she thought her dad was friends with Willie Nelson. Turns out, her dad was friends with a Willie Nelson impersonator. His name was, and I kid you not, *Almost Willie*.

We’ve all got an “almost there” story. But more than a quarter of a million people committed to show up for each other and seek something for the betterment of humanity. They *were* all the way there. I love the video – made by our friends from the SALT Project – that shows King, yes, but also the faces of so many others, young and old – some stapling signs together, others sharing food, singing, swaying, serving. It doesn’t show the glory moments only. It shows the tiny moments, combined with the moments of 250,000 friends that led to something as momentous as the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Just a shout out this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend to the committed who made that day, that gathering, that speech, that movement happen; a fitting tribute on a weekend we focus on commitment in week two of our “*What’s Strong with Me?*” series.

Last week, as we asked that question, “*What is strong with me?*” we focused on the Word – the Word that was *with* God and that *was* God from the beginning – the one we

claim in and as the person of Jesus. If you were with us in person or virtually and either drew your own unique card – no repeats in over 600 words – or you sent a request to our office and we dropped yours in the mail, I hope you're spending a little time with your word and how it might be a companion this year to get you curious, get you studying, get your prayer life jump started anew. Maybe this year it would be more effective to make routines, not resolutions. Work on what gets you there, not simply wishful thinking about the end destination itself.

I've got to tell you that my youngest son, Hayes, drew "*Helpfulness*" as his Star Word. He told me I could share that with you this morning. Since we shared this practice in Tulsa where he spent his earliest years, he's been drawing a word nearly every year of his entire life. Would you believe he's drawn "*Helpfulness*" twice and a variation of the word a third time? Unbelievable. And his mother and I couldn't thank enough the person who planted that card just for him year after year. He's been working it this week and whenever he remembered and did something inspired by the word, he would finish by declaring aloud for all to remember, "*Helpfulness!*" Right on, buddy.

If you didn't draw one, you can today in the narthex or shoot us a word at the office and we'll mail you one drawn at random. But today? Commitment – that's what's strong with you. How so? Well... that's the real question, isn't it?

We look at the baptism of Jesus today for inspiration. We didn't hear that account in today's reading from the prophet Isaiah, of course, but the prophet's word is the assigned reading today that partners with Jesus' baptism story. The baptism story is fascinating and kicks off Jesus' move to the wilderness for 40 days to think things through before he comes back and launches what we now know as the beginnings of his three years of ministry. His baptism came about 30-years-old; which is weird that such a story falls so close to Christmas, right? We jump so quickly from Jesus' birth to his baptism. Other than a story of 12-year-old Jesus going MIA on a trip he made with his folks to the temple, we have few accounts of what life was like for Jesus between birth and 30 years based on the Gospels we have in the Bible. Imagine telling your life story and leaving out the first 30 years. My, how we are shaped in those decades! Even so, we come to this story of Jesus' baptism that would launch his ministry. The question is often asked, "*Why baptism, Jesus?*" "*Wasn't he sinless? Did he really need to be baptized?*" It's been a long debate, of course.

Some theologians are quick to explain that Jesus didn't *need* to be baptized, but he let his cousin push him down under the muddy water purely for our sake. Like a swim teacher who tumbles into the water and shows the students the way by doing it herself, Jesus *models* repentance, but he's not *actually* repenting.

I met a triathlete this week who said when he started, he was strong on the bike, good with the run, but didn't know how to swim beyond a doggie paddle. But a few YouTube instructional videos later, swimming is now his strongest leg of the three. Modeling, not doing for his own sake. Interesting angle and fascinating how we are so careful to protect Jesus. He didn't need it himself; he was just "*asking for a friend*," right?

This thinking may actually miss the point altogether. We may be over thinking this. What Jesus received from John that day in the Jordan River was not a Christian baptism, but a Jewish one. Many first-century Jewish sects – including the one led by John – believed the pathway into any life of serious religious discipline leads through water. The Israelites passed through the Red Sea, right? Any serious believer was to do the same. You didn't want to be *almost* committed. You wanted to be *in*, in. Baptism was a rite of passage experience for Jesus that was faithful to his Jewish heritage and important to his own spirit's work to see his commitment through to the end.²

To what are you *that* committed? Not *almost* committed to but all the way committed? What commitments are strong with you? These commitments are the things you show up for consistently. These commitments are the people for whom you show up consistently. Successfully committed people do consistently what other people do occasionally. These are often the little things that go unnoticed by others. No one knows the private price you pay to make the commitment work. Head nod to you super moms and dads who set the alarms, make the sacrifices, find the match to the wayward sock... whatever it is again and again that you just do because that commitment is strong with you; even though it often goes unnoticed and unappreciated.

It's the word of Isaiah – a Jewish prophet who, like the committed act of baptism, says on God's behalf: "*I have called you by name. I'll be with you through the rivers. They won't overwhelm or consume you.*" This kind of a love is one that sticks through to the other side. Making through to the other side of anything insinuates the struggle. It ain't easy.

Life a bit overwhelming this week for anyone? Somebody said, "*Life is like a helicopter. I don't know how to operate a helicopter.*" I know my life kind of felt like a cassette tape with people just pulling out that magnetic tape as fast as they could. And I'd grab my No. 2 pencil and try desperately to wind it all back into place. If you missed the '90s, that reference probably misfired, and I'm sorry.

But these weeks just keep happening. Carrie will tell you I'm that guy that says, "*Just gotta get through this full and challenging week, and we'll be good.*" But what

² Commentary for today's message most highly influenced by Brian Kaylor, Senior Writer and editor for Homiletics Online.

happens? That's this week, and next week and the next. These are the rough waters the prophet speaks of. This is the muddy and rushing water Jesus is looking at when he slips down the muddy river's edge into moving water. John's reaching for his hand. Both have that "*I ain't playin'*" look in their eyes. "*This is serious.*" "*This is tough.*" I see it in your eyes, too.

People were going down hard this week. Many with COVID. A buddy hollered at me and said he'd show up for work the next day and be like, "*Where's so and so?*" and the next day, "*Where's so and so?*" It might be the rapture, but turns out it's COVID or close encounters with Omicron. We all know. We all know. Most cases of the vaccinated are mild and we are grateful for that, even as we pray for those suffering much more. Others yet, with whom I recently shared happy tears with miraculous news, brought up a well in the throat this week as the news took a downward shift. Every day, the pain is full... even as every single day, we're given opportunity to lean into what is strong with you and what is strong with me. What does this mean when it comes to strong commitments?

It means we pre-decide. I heard Craig Groeschel say it this way: "*Decisions determine direction, and direction determines destiny.*" If your life is moving in the direction of your decisions, do you like the direction your decisions are taking you? If not, maybe it's time to pre-decide to do something different. You can say, "*I let life come at me*" or you can say, "*I am coming at life with intentionality.*" Pre-deciding is important if we want to live a committed and focused life. What's a pre-decision? Simply, it's making the commitment that when I'm faced with some particular decision, because of who God is and because of what I value, I've pre-decided how I will respond.

Now, there's nuance to a lot of things, but I'm working at this from a broader level. If I'm trying to make better decisions about my health, I must pre-decide what I'm going to eat, when I'm going to pray, schedule when I'm going to exercise. If I *don't*, I *won't*. It's part of what cognitive scientists call, *Decision Fatigue*. And we're living in a time that pushes decisions before our eyes, our bodies, our spirits at a rate like never before. How many decisions do you think you make in a day? Just take a guess. On average? Roughly 35,000 decisions a day. I don't know who counted them one day but thank you. So many!

And here's what happens: as the *quantity* of decisions increase, the *quality* of our decisions decrease. Its why, if you're watching your diet, you can do well all day long at work and you're *Boom! Boom! Boom! decision, decision, decision*, and then you get home and eat the whole bag of salt and vinegar chips. Or its why you're working on your spending and doing so well, and then decision overload hits you, and you impulse buy whatever you heard about during the day that you thought, "*Sounds interesting.*" Decision fatigue all the sudden makes it a must have.

Sometimes we are frozen in our decision making because it's not the perfect scenario. It's not the perfect person. It's not the perfect choice, and so we make no decision at all which is actually a decision. Indecision is the enemy of progress. When we pre-decide ahead of time; aligning our values with what Jesus valued most – which was measuring every decision against what love was leading him to do – we set ourselves up to be clear(er) in the moment. Such clarity makes our commitments stronger. So... what are you committed to... really committed to?

In his leadership podcast, Craig Groeschel asked it this way.³ What do you want to be known by... characterized by? When people describe you, what do you want them to say? What about deep down... your own sense of integrity... what do you want to *know* to be *most* true about yourself. When your values are clear, he says, your decisions are easier. He spoke of our tendency toward emotional responses when we have not thought intentionally about our pre-decisions. “*Your kid upsets you. Logic says, ‘Be patient.’ Emotion says, ‘Yell as loud as you can.’ When temptation comes – logic says, ‘That’s dangerous.’ Emotions say, ‘Let’s party.’ But it’s the emotional decisions that hurt us or others the most.*” And then he offered this gem: “*Don’t make permanent decisions based on temporary emotions.*”

Commitments are made and then built with every small decision along the way. Why do commitments mean so much? Because ultimately, we make our commitments, and our commitments make us. One of the best ways to make a committed, God-honoring life is to decide before what you'll do later.

Now this sounds easy enough, right? But that nuance I named before is real. Because we're human. And we're busy. And we're tired. And we are emotional beings. And passion is important. But what is strong about our commitments is that we decide ahead of time, discerned in prayer, the who we want to be. We don't start with do-goals. We start with who-goals. This is who I am. This is who God says I am. And when I'm committed and confident in that truth, my passion and emotion feed my commitment more than it fights against it. That's how movements are built. That's how one committed soul, comes along side another, comes along side another, comes alongside 250,000 others, and we speak of dreams, and we commit to values, and we make the world more like God longs for it to be.

So, pre-decide today... and don't let it overwhelm you. Pick something. One value. Sit with it this week. Pray over it this week. And make some pre-decisions about how that commitment is going to be what's strong with you. Amidst the struggles of the pandemic'd life, January 2022 edition, I've loved seeing those of you rise to say in

³ <https://www.life.church/leadershippodcast/>. Groeschel offers a monthly word to leaders to encourage and guide through the current seasons of life. His January edition was helpful in shaping thoughts about pre-decisions especially and is reflected in the message.

word or deed, *“I’m pre-deciding to be kind. I’m committed to being kind.”* And such is so important when our emotional responses are lashing out at each other, at institutions or general groups of people.

I heard from one friend who said this week as many were frustrated with their schools across the country, *“I decided to be a voice of kindness.”* She reached out to her kid’s teacher and sent a word to some of the other staff at the school saying, *“I know I may not be able to come in and help with things right now given the state of the virus, but I want you to know I see you, I thank you, and I’m willing to help as you have need. I can come up and pick up this... I can do that...”* and she named any number of things. Little things. She didn’t give an *I Have a Dream* speech... but she was one of the pieces in helping someone press through another tough moment.

And you know what her pre-decision did for me? I sent some encouraging emails to my kid’s schools, too.

This is what happens when we pre-decide to be *for* each other, not against one another. It’s what God offers us through our prophet companion today, and I leave that word with you now: *“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you....”*

And that’s a committed God... a God who is not *almost* with us... but an all-the-way-there-God who is with us... no matter what.

May it be so.

Song of Focus
Words and Music: Ed Varnum
“Be Not Afraid”

*Be not afraid, I have redeemed you.
Do not fear, I have called you by name.
And when you pass through storms, I’m with you,
in rushing rivers, you’ll not be overwhelmed.*

Be not afraid, do not fear. Follow me.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH