

# We Can't Breathe

John 3:1-21  
Sermon by: Joanne Gallardo  
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**3** Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. **2** He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

**3** Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.<sup>[a]</sup>"

**4** "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

**5** Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. **6** Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit<sup>[b]</sup> gives birth to spirit. **7** You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You<sup>[c]</sup> must be born again.' **8** The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."<sup>[d]</sup>

**9** "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

**10** "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? **11** Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. **12** I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? **13** No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.<sup>[e]</sup> **14** Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,<sup>[f]</sup> **15** that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."<sup>[g]</sup>

**16** For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. **18** Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. **19** This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. **20** Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. **21** But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

We can't breathe.

I realize the strangeness of me saying that. In our current context, many of us are free from the worry of having someone's knee crushing our neck, of being shot in our own home, or having the police called on us for something as simple as birdwatching. In that sense, many of us can breathe.

But if our liberty is bound together, in the words of activist Lilla Watson, if one of my siblings in Christ can't breathe, if someone in my extended communal family feels unsafe because of the color of their skin, then I can't breathe.

We can't breathe.

I don't say this in the sense of us claiming some kind of part of this certain side of oppression ourselves. I'm not saying that many of us understand the kind of fear, anger, and anxiety that come from being black and brown in a society that was built on the systematic oppression of black and brown people.

I say this in the sense of our own inability to look at our own biases and our own participation, whether actively or passively, in the contemporary culture of white supremacy. I say this in the sense of some of us benefiting from being white without giving it a second thought. I say this in the sense of us sitting in the idea that "we're not racist," or "those folks need to stop looting, that doesn't make any sense," or "I'm so glad I'm not like (fill in the name of whatever racist political figure), I don't say or do things like that."

It's great if you don't do those things, but those things I just mentioned gives us a false narrative. It lets us off the hook, it makes us detached, it keeps us comfortable. We let this go unchecked and before we know it, we're weighed down with a sense of guilt but inability to really understand why.

We can't breathe.

In our passage for today, Jesus has a teaching session with Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, approaches Jesus and says, "We know you come from God because of all these things that you're doing." He comes to Jesus at night, which leads us to the question, why the nighttime?

Jesus could have responded a number of different ways. He could have said, "Thank you for acknowledging who I am, albeit in the dead of night." He could have sent him away, denouncing Pharisees, telling him that he's never going to get it. He could have made it personal. "So now you believe me!"

Jesus instead turns this into a teachable moment, giving Nicodemus the keys to what it means to be saved and inherit the kingdom.

From this passage, we get one of the most famous verses of the Bible, one that many of us can recite by heart. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Even as I typed this into my Google doc for this sermon, all I had to type was "For God so loved the world" and the whole rest of the verse came up as a "suggestion." This is how popular this verse is.

We could talk for hours on what it means to be saved. I could talk for hours about how I was taught what it means to be saved. We likely all have a story about it. For some of us, this story of salvation may not be our own.

Some of us may have very personal stories of salvation and I'm not discrediting those, but some of us don't have some huge story of salvation involving a wayward life being

turned around by the grace of God. Growing up, both in the denomination were all in right now along with the other denominations I've been a part of, I heard lots of redemptive stories. These stories came from people involved in gangs, or drugs, addiction, poor choices, bad behavior.

These were inspiring stories, and upon hearing them, I thought that was great. I thought it was wonderful someone's life did a 180 after discovering that God loved them more than any one thing they were doing. I had a hard time applying it personally, though. My friends and I didn't really have any dramatically wayward behavior. We didn't do drugs, we obeyed our parents, we went to church each week, and we asked forgiveness when it was appropriate. Was this Damascus road moment, this epic story of salvation, really for us? I mean, it's great for some people but is it really for us? Is it for me and my boring life? We were in a false sense of security.

If we limit the story of salvation to things that I listed above, then it may not seem like it's for us. Salvation is a heartening story that happens to other people. But my friends, I'm here to tell you that we all need to be saved. We all need salvation.

We need salvation from this sin of white supremacy, for one. This sin that's a millstone around our neck, drowning us, keeping our heads below water so we can't see what's happening on the surface. Except we don't drown. Our black and brown siblings, they drown. They're drowning. And we can't breathe.

This sin is so insidious that we don't even recognize it as sin half the time. White supremacy is overt and covert. Overtly, it's not ok. "Good people" denounce the KKK, racist jokes, and neo-Nazis. We go to protests over the killing of black and brown people at the hands of police. But you know what? Covert racism is death by a thousand little paper cuts. Those cuts are "all lives matter." Telling a person of color, "You're so articulate." Finding ways to make your people of color employees so uncomfortable they have no choice but to leave, or treating your person of color employees in an unequal way in comparison to their white colleagues. The school to prison pipeline. Not challenging racist jokes. Tokenism. White silence. White fragility. These are all perfectly acceptable, but are as sinful as anything that's overt.

And I know we try. We try to avoid sin like that. We go to protests and post on social media and feel appropriate levels of guilt. I know I do. We try so hard.

But that's the thing about salvation. If we could do it ourselves, if we could just change our behavior ourselves, if we could just "be good people" we would. But we can't. We literally need Jesus. We need God. We need to be born again, in Jesus' own words.

We're all a little bit like Nicodemus. How is it possible? He says, "How can we go into our mother's womb and be born a second time when we are old?" We say, "How can I be saved? I don't say racist things! I can't "not" be white! How do I change being white?"

And it's true. We can't change the color of our skin and we can't say "we know" what it's like when we don't know. Being in solidarity doesn't mean we "know." But to modify what Jesus says back to Nicodemus, "You're a teacher and you don't know these things?" "You have all the privilege in the world and you don't know these things?"

It's not about not being white. It's about how God so loved the world that God sent Jesus, God's only son, so that we do not drown, but so that we can breathe.

When we are able to breathe, we're able to help our siblings to breathe by our change. Our change from being "unsaved" to "saved." That same liberation you have you want everyone else to have. Being saved means being free, and using that freedom to free others.

Are we living like we're saved?

What does it mean to live like we're saved?

A saved people know it's not about us. It's not about our ego. It's not about how being anti-racist makes us feel. As a saved people we know that being saved is about grace. That grace is extended to others, and to ourselves, as well.

It's not about asking a person of color how we can go about being anti-racist, although that may be tempting to do. Part of being saved is working out our own salvation, and no one can do that for us. We have to do it ourselves. The onus is not on other people to educate ourselves as how to live as a saved people. And part of that education is going to involve messing up. We're going to make mistakes and hopefully we'll get called out on them. And getting called out is not an attack, it doesn't mean that we've become racist, it can come from a person of color simply letting you know that you have some more learning to do.

Just as saved people have certain practices like attending church regularly, prayer, being Christ's hands and feet, saved people also embody anti-racism. And there's a lot of talk lately about there being many lanes in the work of anti-racism. Some people attend protests, but that's not for everyone. Some people are really vocal on social media but again, that's not for everyone. People create things, or write letters, or patronize businesses owned by people of color. Everyone works out their own salvation in different ways, and just because it doesn't look like the way we do it doesn't make it any less valid. But doing nothing at all, remaining silent in word and action, that can get us to fall into complacency. So we work it out. Encourage your neighbor to work it out. Don't get frustrated if it doesn't look like what you're doing. We don't have to move fast, but we do have to keep moving.

Here are some more thoughts about how saved people educate themselves. Just as you are committed to reading your Bible, we might also commit ourselves to educating ourselves with authors of color, or attending an online lecture by a person of color, or simply listening to people of color who talk about their experiences of racism. BE

CURIOUS. If you don't understand people who burn down police precincts or throw a rock at a window, instead of denouncing it or shaming folks for having that type of reaction, be curious. Ask the hard questions, have some curiosity about why folks might feel the need to do that. You don't need to condone it to have some curiosity, not unlike the curiosity of Nicodemus.

And as said before, while we're doing all of this work, we're going to get it wrong. We're going to say the wrong thing, or do the wrong thing, or get ourselves into an awkward position. But part of being saved, children of God, is learning to be comfortable with growing pains. We need to learn to be comfortable with being told "no," or "that's coming off as racist," or "I don't think you meant to say that." And that is ok.

As a saved people, let us all take to prayer and action. Let's pray for what God might be calling us to and act in ways that demonstrate to others that we are recovering from the weight of the powers and principalities of this world, working on things so we can breathe.

Our denominational executive director, Glenn Guyton, has urged congregations to take a moment of prayer this Sunday. In his words, a prayer "to lament the violence, pain and injustice that is plaguing our country." In a few moments you will see a graphic created by Raf Barahona that includes the names of people of color killed by police violence in our country. To guide our prayer time, he has some wonderful questions regarding this piece. I'll put these in the chat window:

- What do I feel when I look at this?
- Why?
- How do I currently engage with people of color?
- Do I listen? What am I hearing? What am I learning?
- Do I advocate? If so, how?
- How can I actively use my privilege to help people of color?
- How can I be more active in working for justice?
- How can I make this more personal?

And so we will take 5 minutes here to pray silently, to meditate of Raf's questions, and you are highly encouraged to also use the chat function here on Zoom to submit your prayers, which Dan will read.