

Let's start this morning with a trivia question: can anyone tell me what major US event happened 118 years ago this past Thursday, the 18th? At 5:12 in the morning, Pacific Standard Time, a 7.9 magnitude earthquake hit San Francisco. It is still to this day, the deadliest earthquake in United States history. More than 3,000 people died and 80% of the city was destroyed. However, it wasn't the earthquake that did most of the destruction. You see, even in 1906 city planners were precise and detailed. They knew that San Francisco existed in a precarious position, near a fault line that caused the ground to shake with zero warning before it hit. Foundations were built strong and sure, buildings were girded in an effort to prevent minimal damage should the earth shake. However, there was one thing they didn't account for as they planned...fire.

Fire was what caused the majority of the devastation to San Francisco's infrastructure in the wake of the earthquake. Fire departments responded in record time to flames around the city, caused by candles falling, gas mains cracking, any number of things that might cause fire. However, it didn't matter how fast the fire departments responded once they realized that the earthquake had caused one major kind of damage...it had broken the water mains in the city. There was no water readily available for their hoses to hook up to. Bucket brigades and other means of getting water

to the sites of the fires were attempted, but there was no stopping the flames once they started. The city was helpless. From the packed in community streets of one of America's first Chinatowns to the opulent mansions of Nob Hill, no one was immune once the fires began to rage. Which they did, for three days after the initial quake. Three days of burning, which caused 90% of the overall damage to the city, destroyed 25,000 city blocks, and cost an estimated \$350 million dollars at the time. In today's terms, that's 8.9 *billion* dollars worth of damage. It didn't matter how sure the foundation, once fire was able to creep in, destruction ran rampant.

I've been thinking about this a lot this week, partly because I just finished a book that took place during the days leading up to the earthquake and its aftermath, but also because of the lessons laid before us this week. There's a lot of conversation around cornerstones and buildings and also who we are called to be in this world, even as we're built upon the foundation of Christ, and well, my brain just kept spinning around all of this, wondering, what happens when the foundation gets shaken or worse yet, what happens when the foundation holds, but the tiniest spark creeps in?

Let's start with the first lesson. We see quite clearly that the apostles are taking the call of the Great Commission seriously. Peter and John are out and about in Jerusalem preaching and teaching about Jesus being raised

from the dead. They are proclaiming resurrection, much to the annoyance of the Sadducees, who didn't believe in resurrection in the first place, and all the members of the Jewish council who thought this whole Jesus business was over with. And on top of all of that, prior to all of this preaching, right within the gate of the Temple, Peter had healed a beggar who was unable to walk. So what do they do? They arrest the two of them. They've just had enough. Between the healing and the teaching, well it just feels a bit like Jesus 2.0 so they decide to step in and do something.

The next day, all the important players are assembled, including Caiaphas and Annas who were pretty intricately involved in Jesus' arrest, and they basically ask Peter and John to account for their actions. By whose power and authority are they doing and saying these things? And here comes Peter, who for all of his moments of foot in mouth disease, who may still have memories of his denial of Jesus in his head, he just stands up and speaks from his heart. They did this in Jesus' name, and are they really being arrested and questioned because of a good deed? A man was sick and now he's healed, where is the problem in that? He then goes on to quote Jesus and the Psalms, that Jesus is the chief cornerstone, the foundation upon which they do everything, and even if others reject that cornerstone, even if

the earth literally quakes, they will not be shaken. Jesus is the foundation upon which they stand.

It seems that finally, Peter has taken everything Jesus taught them to heart. He trusts that Jesus is his shepherd and that it is only to his voice that Peter will listen, no matter what slings and arrows, arrests or persecutions, may come his way. He knows that Jesus told them that he had other sheep that needed to be brought into the flock and Peter is taking seriously his role in helping usher people into the kingdom, through word and deed. Long gone is the Peter who acts brashly and then backs down. Here stands Peter the rock, the one with the keys to the church, the one who will be bold and brave for the sake of the kingdom and for the sake of his siblings that he knows Jesus sent him out to minister too. He has a shepherd he trusts in and so he must become a shepherd in his own right, calling to those who are in desperate need of a healing voice to hear.

Now, it kind of sounds like, Peter has it all down pat. So you might be wondering where on earth the whole earthquake, foundation, fire thing comes into play. Well, that's less about Peter, and more about us. More often than not, I think we tend to group ourselves in Peter's camp. We know that Christ has made the sure foundation, we know that upon that foundation our faith stands. I think we are all very well acquainted and comfortable

with the fact that Jesus is our good shepherd and we know his voice and we are called to follow. If we're extending my metaphor here, I think we all would feel a bit like the architects of San Francisco. We have built ourselves upon a solid foundation, I mean we're here aren't we? We pray, we sing, we take communion, we have faith, we can handle the shake when it comes, can't we?

But what we learned from the San Francisco architects applies to our faith lives too. Sometimes the shake isn't the problem, the foundation can be as sure as possible, but cannot always withstand the spark, and frequently that spark comes from within our own hearts, and this is where all of our lessons come together, because this is exactly what the author of 1 John is talking about. Everyone can claim a solid, sure, faithful foundation, but what happens when the flame is ignited by someone asking for help that we just don't want to help? The author asks pointedly, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" How does God's love remain solid in anyone who sees a neighbor in need and let's the life of that neighbor go up in flames? Like I said...we tend to be the spark...

We have a tendency to think that the foundation is the only thing that matters, but what we build upon that foundation is just as vital, and if what

we build upon it isn't connected to, shored up by the foundation, then it will still be far, far too easy to have it all crumble down. If we say our foundation is Christ, then we can't be building rooms upon that are centered upon greed, selfishness, inaction, or hatred. Those are the sparks that will ignite flames to our faith in next to no time.

This is precisely what 1 John is getting at when it draws the distinction between words and speech versus truth and action. We can say all we want that Christ is our foundation, we can expound about how much we love Jesus, about how important our faith is to our lives, but when the rubber meets the road and we are asked to put that faith into action and we refuse, or we distort Jesus' words in order to make ourselves more comfortable, then we are eroding that foundation bit by bit. Our faith is about more than just saying the right things, putting on the right face to our beliefs. Having a Good Shepherd means actually *following* him. A sheep that knows it has a shepherd and is like oh yeah that's him over there, while continuing to wander through the wilderness, isn't really a sheep that cares about the shepherd, but simply likes being able to say that they have one.

To have a shepherd means to see them, hear them, heed them, and follow. Jesus laid the path before each of us, he laid the foundation, and said it is ours to build upon. We have made choices about the faith lives that we

have built, about the church life we have built, and it's up to us to examine those lives and ask if we have built something worthy of the foundation it rests upon or if we need to be in the business of rebuilding. We cannot build houses of exclusion and judgment upon a foundation based on inclusivity and radical love. We cannot build houses of insular amassing of goods upon a foundation of caring for others. We cannot build houses of prejudice upon a foundation of a God who shows no partiality. We cannot build a house that looks nothing like Jesus upon a foundation of Jesus, it doesn't work. It will crumble quickly or go up in flames at the slightest spark.

When you go to buy a house, one of the first things you have to do is get it inspected, but that can't be a one-time thing. You constantly have to be in a state of assessing, making sure things are stable and secure. The same goes for our faith. We need to be in the business of assessing what we have built, being on the look out for sparks that could turn into infernos, reshoring up our foundation upon our Good Shepherd, and rejoicing that when we do find those sparks, the waters of baptism are there to rush in and douse them with the promise of a fresh start, rebuilding anew upon the foundation that calls us his own, that claims us as his sheep, who knows our names, who laid down his life for us, so that we could proclaim his name to all the world, to all God's children. **AMEN!!!**