

Dear Salem Family,

Last night before heading to bed, I saw a news clip with the title, "It has happened yet again." My heart sank as my mind began to replay - like a movie in reverse - all the painful stories of those who have suffered loss these past years. We are barely a week removed from the mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas when another happens in Tulsa. Just previous in Buffalo, NY. And unfortunately, the list continues. It's no surprise that as a world we have been left reeling in the aftermath, with feelings of anger, hurt, and betrayal. Last night as I sat praying, I felt the Spirit nudge me to write this if even only so that we know it's OK to talk about these things. The truth is that often times we don't have simple answers to some of life's most difficult questions. But what I do know is that when Jesus enters into the story, his light is the light for every single kind of darkness. My prayer is that these tragedies, and tragedies like this, are never lost on us - that we never grow callous or accustomed to these. Rather that our heart grows akin to our Father who gravitates to these people because he loves them.

In our study through the book of Jeremiah, we found that at the center of the human condition is the human heart. Apart from God's saving and redeeming grace it is utterly and completely lost. I hate that we live in a world where it seems that these kinds of events are to be expected. And while as Christians we are called to hate evil (Psalm 97:10; Romans 12:9), we also can choose to see the brokenness of the world through the lens of Christ and his story of redemption. Certainly, we wait patiently for God to bring what only he can bring - a full and final resolution. But he has also ushered us as ministers of reconciliation into the kingdom of God here on earth (2 Cor. 5:20). As we'll see in our upcoming series, just prior to his arrest, betrayal, and ultimate death, Jesus himself prays over his disciples to the Father, "*I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one*" (John 17:15). Just after he says, "*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world*" (17:18). We are sent like Jesus was sent - to see the hurting, the oppressed, the widowed, who each apart from the gospel is left in anger, despair, hurt, and hopelessness. I long for us to be a people who don't wait for God to bring eternity, but rather consider it a privilege to participate in the kingdom that God is building now - to engage in mercy and justice. Though not to be discounted, I believe that the issues in front of us are bigger than politics and race. The issues in front of us are the deep and spiritual realities of the world that we live in. We can be the light to a world in darkness - a people who build bridges to the people in our country and also in our community. I am reminded, yet again of the powerful words in Jeremiah 29:7, "*But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*" We are

lanterns in the midst of a very dark world. Separately we are small, but collectively we are bright. And at the center of that light is Jesus.

Here is both my prayer and my encouragement, that we have more interest in those around us, never missing those that God puts in our path. That we would have eyes that search for and ears that listen to the hurt in the world around us. And for those who don't outright show it, that we take the time to engage in conversation to see what's underneath. We remember that the suffering in our world extends beyond these kinds of news clips, and we pray to the God who hears us and knows our suffering and promises to be near to us. May He show comfort and light to families, communities, and our nation. I am so deeply thankful for those involved in our kids and student ministries, as they can come alongside kids and families who need it. If you or someone you know needs help, please let us know.

Let us be a people who like God - do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

Praying and participating with you,

Seth Dunham

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