

Today, January 26, may not mean much to most of us, but for those nearly ten thousand miles away, it is Australia Day. Nearly ten thousand miles away from us, the island has endured the most horrifying havoc, with bushfires taking over nearly the entire mass of land. Of course, it is one of those stories that seems to be all about the numbers: at one point, NASA satellites photographed 70% of the island overwhelmed by the unstoppable fires. Around 15.5 million acres, over half the size of our own state of Ohio, 15.5 million acres of bush, forests and parks have been incinerated. Then, some estimates even claim that a billion animals have been affected, many of which have died from the flames.

Nevertheless, for many of us thousands upon thousands of miles away, our standard operating procedure begins with unleashing the basic human respectful sympathy from our living rooms, but then, we move on about our day. For one, the story often brings up the dreaded climate change issue, and that only makes us roll our eyes and change the channel as quick as our fingers possibly can, before the politics get in too deep for us to handle. Not to mention, we tend to ultimately look for the number of human lives taken by such natural disasters to truly grip us over. Unfortunately, the latest estimates

of 28 is not nearly enough to frighten us anymore. After all, we have seen far worse from hurricanes on our own shores. It's not nearly scary enough. Even looking at the number of fire-fighters: only four have died, an additional 3 from the U.S., which absolutely pales in comparison to those who suffered death on September 11, 2001 in New York City.

Nevertheless, you would not know that from the children of those Australian firefighters. Geoffrey Keaton, age 32, Andrew O'Dwyer, 36, Bill Slade, 60, all died leaving behind six children altogether. Another firefighter, Samuel McPaul, at 28 years young, left a widow, who is expecting their first child in May. It's not just the fire that infiltrated an entire continent. It's the smoke, both literally and figuratively, that will leave a devastating trauma for children and adults alike. To make matters worse, Keaton and O'Dwyer had twenty-month old children in their families. At the funerals, the young boy, Harvey Keaton, was awarded a pin attached to his shirt that resembled his father's dress uniform. A picture was taken when the posthumous award was given while Harvey was still sucking on his pacifier. On the casket was a mug with the gut-wrenching words: "Daddy, I love you to the moon and back!" At O'Dwyer's funeral, the young girl, Charlotte, refused to leave her daddy's

side while wearing his firefighter's helmet. Sometimes, the numbers do not reveal the true crippling devastation, or depict how unfathomably suffocating the smoke may be, both in the sky and in our very hearts.

Numbers do not always reveal the depths of the gut-wrenching story of our pain from illness, our depression over strained family relationships, our fear over our waning years of life, the regrets that plague our memory. It is an emotional darkness that can invade us without a moment's notice and overwhelmingly drown us for what seems like an eternity. And so, the not-just Good News, but Great News of Isaiah remains just as true on January 26, as it was on December 24, when we and Australians heard much the same words on Christmas Eve: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined." That seems to be coming more the case for our sisters and brothers ten thousand miles away, as rain and the efforts of brave fire-fighters instill their own hope-filled light for an entire nation.

And yes, we firmly believe the encapsulation of that Great News comes to life in the child, who rushed into what humanity believed was a never-ending suffocating haze of despair and hopelessness and fear, and unleashed a

light not just from a star in the sky, but from his own tears and laughter: letting us know once for all that he had arrived into our life, into our fears and worries, and would absolutely refuse to leave us behind to find the way out of the smoke for ourselves. This is the God who will not shout from the distant heaven, hoping we will, somehow, find the divine saving voice at some point in our life. This is the God who runs into the fire to save us, through the most debilitating smoke that leaves us gasping for any hope to move on, and show us the way out forever.

Yes, we are most certainly thankful for the ones who live among us, whose bravery and courage empowers them to run to any scene of our own brokenness, as if the love of God is still in full force in this world. And we still cling to the Greatest News, as if still, not even the densest darkness of death can quench the light from invading the forsaken terrain, pulling us out into a kingdom with no more darkness, no more debilitating smoke of any form, no more fear or trepidation, but only the soothing embrace of Jesus Christ, our still-Risen Savior and Lord, now and forevermore! And for that, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!