



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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God So Loved

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 8, 2020

The Second Sunday of Lent

Based on Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

This has been an unusual week even during a period in American history that has had more than its fair share of unusual weeks. The coronavirus, perhaps more than Ash Wednesday, is helping us to remember that “we are dust, and to dust we shall return.” A virus, which found its genesis on the other side of the planet, didn’t take very long to find its way to Midtown Manhattan. Now we are learning new practices like bumping elbows and a new vocabulary that includes phrases like “direct nexus” and “social distancing,” along with ancient words like “quarantine.”

As of yesterday, according to the Mayor of New York, approximately 2,773 people are currently being quarantined in our city. While we pray this number will decrease, we are not certain how soon that will happen. And so we are living, as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “by faith and not by sight.” We are people of faith and hope but, as completely human, we’re feeling a lot more vulnerable when someone sneezes next to us on the sidewalk. And, coming to church? Well, attending worship feels like a consequential act of faith. Nothing about this moment feels ordinary.

These past number of years have been a spare season for the mainline Christian church. People describing themselves as “spiritual but not religious” continue to increase in both their numbers and in their insistence in dismissing religious institutions as “irrelevant.” Of course, it’s been a difficult season for many other kinds of institutions as well, but religious institutions have borne a particular burden. Scandals involving money, sex, and especially those involving innocent children have pulled the curtain back on a generation of malfeasance to reveal an indefensible hypocrisy. Whether we committed them or not, we’re now paying for those sins in the loss of faith and reputation it took the Christian faith centuries to build.

And yet, in this moment of national crisis, it feels as if the church has an opportunity to occupy a slightly different place in the culture. Are there fresh possibilities for these “old wineskins”?

Now, like people in other professions, a clergyperson’s time is often filled with activities that aren’t expressly religious. There are phone calls regarding all kinds of matters, funds to be raised, details to manage, meetings to attend, people to be thanked, emails to be written, an occasional hospital or house call to make: the sort of quotidian tasks anyone who works in any kind of office would recognize. On

many days, I might just as easily be a principal, a store supervisor, or, more likely, middle-management for a fairly inefficient company.

My cousin, who's an attorney, says it's the same in his work. He tells me, "Dean, only about 5% of my day is spent doing the work of an attorney. The rest of my time is spent trying to get to that 5%." Plumbers, professors, and photographers all tell me the same thing. What they think they should be spending their time doing is not where they actually spend their time.

But every now and then something will happen, and in that moment, everything changes. An institution that has stood the test of time for more than 2000 years anticipates such moments. We never look forward to them, but we are never completely surprised when they arrive.

- Someone will fly a couple of airplanes into office buildings in middle of a big city.
- A virus, without a vaccine, will start meandering its way through the population.

Of course, almost always it's much, much less dramatic than that.

- Someone will call and there will be a certain urgency in their voice.
- Maybe I'll be at a reception or a party and someone will pull me aside to have a conversation.
- Sometimes after a worship service someone will come up and say, more with their eyes than with their voice, "I need to speak to you!"

Some sort of light goes on or something breaks, and they absolutely must talk about it with someone who comes from a spiritual perspective. There's a white-hot intensity about the experience which takes the conversation to an entirely new level.

The New Testament is filled with such transformational moments:

- A Roman centurion, having watched the death of Jesus on a cross, comes to a profound conclusion and summarizes an entire gospel in one sentence when he says, "Truly this man was God's Son."
- Thomas, one of the original twelve disciples, touches the resurrected Jesus and understands the Messiah as a present reality when he exclaims, "My Lord and My God!" His is an observation and a faith statement all rolled into one.
- An Ethiopian eunuch reaches a moment of absolute clarity and *demand*s Philip baptize him immediately before he continues on his journey from Jerusalem to Gaza.

And in the gospel appointed for today, Nicodemus comes at night to ask Jesus his most pressing question.

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* points out that there is a difference between being *in* something and being *into* something. He argues that believing in God can have no more effect on your life than believing in Freud's method of interpreting dreams or the theory that it was actually Sir Francis Bacon who wrote Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Believing God, on the other hand, is something else again. It is less a position than a journey, less a realization than a relationship. We *believe in God* when, for one reason or another, we choose to do so. We *believe God* when, somehow, we run into God in a way that, by and large, leaves us no choice: when we are reminded of our mortality; when we feel anxious, or scared.

The Kingdom of God is entered, not by intellectual comprehension, nor by moral achievement, but by holy transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit. If the Sunday gospel lesson two weeks ago was about the Transfigured Christ, then today's lesson concerns a transformation of a different kind. This morning's gospel story from John refers to a transformation of the heart.

Nicodemus has come to see Jesus by night, which, if you properly discern John's symbolism, means he comes in ignorance seeking some sort of enlightenment. Recognizing Jesus as a respected rabbi, he says, by way of introduction, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." It is obvious that important people have begun to notice Jesus. The signs Jesus performed have taught them that Jesus, in the grand tradition, must be a distinguished rabbi, one of the many rabbis to whom miracles are attributed in the ancient Jewish tradition.

But Jesus is so much more than that. And his response is unique. Jesus responds to Nicodemus as if he has asked a question. Jesus answers him as if he has asked about entrance into the kingdom of God. "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." In other words, Jesus has posed the very question Nicodemus most wants to ask. Raymond Brown writes, "Jesus' answer is meant to show Nicodemus that Jesus has not come from God in the sense that Nicodemus thought...as a man approved by God... but in the (completely) unique sense of having descended from God's presence to raise (humankind) to God."ⁱ

Now, like all wise men and women who encounter God face-to-face, Nicodemus is confused. Wouldn't you be? The author of John often uses the confusion of his listeners to allow Jesus an opportunity to explain himself more fully in the narrative. So, Jesus explains, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'"

Jesus is playing on the Greek word *pneuma*, which means both *spirit* and *wind* in Greek. "The wind/Spirit blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it. But you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit/wind."

The Christian Church has been staring down plagues, wars, pestilence, epidemics, famines, floods, economic declines, hurricanes, droughts, and political turbulence for a very long time. This is what we do. This is who we are. And isn't it amazing that on this week, of all weeks, we find these words in the lesson appointed for today? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life."

Don't be afraid. Be ye not anxious. The Lord is with us.

Let all of God's people say, "Amen."

ⁱ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII, The Anchor Bible Series, Volume 29*, Doubleday, New York, c. 1966, page 138