



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Twenty Years

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 11, 2021

Based on Micah 4:1-5; John 15:9-17

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

Twenty years is a long, long time. In that amount of time, a child grows from an infant to become a young adult. In that amount of time, relationships can either slowly deepen or unravel altogether. In two decades, our bodies change shape, and new lines form on our faces and hands. We change locations. We change jobs. We change our minds about some things, and, with regards to others, we solidify our beliefs and double-down on them. Twenty years is a long, long time.

And yet, it is equally true that twenty years goes by like the blink of an eye. It's a moment ago. It's like it happened only yesterday. We remember so much of it with an amazing clarity: the color of the sky, where we were, the people around us, the conversations we had. We remember the feeling we had when we first realized the world had changed, significantly and irrevocably, right before our very eyes. We have amazing abilities to recall some of the smallest details of our lives from twenty years ago, and, in some ways, time doesn't just go by, but it sprints by. It races past us so that we wonder, "Where did the time go? How did twenty years go by so swiftly?"

Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." We gather here today in this holy place to mark a solemn moment and to honor this greatest of loves.

We are here because we have not forgotten the lives lost on this day twenty years ago. Our presence is a testimony to the fact that those lives matter. We are witnesses. We remember. We are here to say those lives are profoundly grieved, and we honor them in every way we can. We lift them (and their family members) up in our prayers, and we ask God's blessing upon them. For those of us who did not personally know any of the men that we remember in this service, we are here to say their sacrifice means something essential to us. Their example, their heroism, their witness speak to us across these 20 years.

Their example makes us want to matter in the ways they made their lives matter. Their heroism—although they would have said it was nothing more than duty—calls to us from beyond death and the grave and tells us, "Yes. We can be more than we are. Yes. We, too, can devote ourselves to something higher and better that is beyond our own individual wants and needs."

Lawrence Binyon wrote his poem *For the Fallen* as a commemoration of British soldiers lost in World War I. He wrote:

There is music in the midst of desolation
And a glory that shines upon our tears.

They went with songs to the battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted;
They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.ⁱ

We will remember them. And how shall we remember them? We, too, can express that greatest love in living a life given to the service of others. We, too, can devote ourselves to causes and people in need of our assistance.

As people of faith, we are called to love. We are compelled to love others so much that we are willing to give our very lives for others. To give ourselves to love and not hate can make us look like the suckers in the room. Who hasn't wished for vengeance in the Lord's mighty name? Love looks weak, insipid. There was a monstrous evil that cannot be ignored in the killing of so many innocents. Yet love, as it turns out, is the more powerful force. Love is the secret weapon of people of faith everywhere who do not look as though they stand a chance against such powerful forces.

Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." The love displayed by Jesus in a remote country more than two thousand years ago is a love we are called to express in our day. It's a love which is healing. It's a love which is self-sacrificing, it's a love which is strong enough to stand the tests of time. It's a love that is unique in all the world, as unique and as powerful as Christ himself.

Now we all know a little something about loss. Some of us have lost brothers and sisters over the years. Many of us have lost one or both of our parents. A few of us lost friends or have endured the nearly unbearable loss of a child. We have faced illnesses, financial hardship, conflict at work, betrayals, depressions, difficulties with our children: so many losses that we cannot list them all. To live in this world is to experience defeat.

We have cried ourselves to sleep and wondered if we could ever again make it out of our beds in the morning. How will we get dressed? Eat breakfast? Make our way into the world again? How can we do anything when we are so deeply mired in our griefs and in our losses?

The prophet Micah brought a word of hope into a conflicted world when he proclaimed, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more..." Can you imagine the beating of weapons of war into plows and gardening tools? Imagine no weapon being lifted up against any other nation. Imagine—just think of it—not learning war anymore. It is the heaven we long for; it is the hope we can never put away.

Micah continues, "They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all the peoples walk, each in the

name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever.” If only we could just sit under our own vines and under our own fig trees! If only no one could make us afraid! But we are deathly afraid, and we live in a moment which magnifies our fears: A pandemic and the financial disruption which accompanies it, increasingly severe weather patterns, civil unrest, a racial reckoning. You name it and it feels as though we’ve experienced it, in addition to a political polarization that keeps us from agreeing upon something as non-controversial and as fundamental as a fact. Oh yes, we know something about loss.

I saw a video this past week of a fireman responding to the flooding caused by Hurricane Ida. Without any scuba gear, no oxygen tanks, no mask, he didn’t have any of the gear you would think he might need. And yet, there he was, diving into a basement apartment through debris and filthy water to see if he could find someone who might have been trapped by the torrential rains. There was no wasted motion. He was calm, methodical even. He knew there was no time to wait for someone else better equipped to come and help.

I’m certain that firefighter didn’t personally know the people he was seeking to save. I’m absolutely certain he didn’t think of himself as any kind of hero. He simply did what needed to be done in that moment. and, as I watched, I found a tear welling up in the corner of my eye. And then I realized that he reminded me of all those firefighters in those long lines twenty years ago who climbed thousands of steps in the Twin Towers. While every other person in the building was going down to their families and to their friends and to the rest of their lives, those firefighters, sweating under the weight of their heavy load, kept climbing up.

Who does this type of thing? What are we to make of it? Police officers, Paramedics and First Responders of every kind face danger every single day. In the pandemic, we have seen the cost paid by nurses and doctors on the front lines. Members of the military, along with members of the diplomatic and intelligence communities, all take great risks so that we might survive the most unimaginable horrors.

It seems to me that without these types of sacrifices, without these icons of selfless service, we cannot have the society of which we dream. Without these who love others as Christ has loved us, we will never have the democracy we seek. We will never have the equality we want or the economic opportunities for which we hope. Because every single one of these gifts depends upon the few to pour out their lives on behalf of the many.

As the poet wrote, “There is music in the midst of desolation/And a glory that shines upon our tears.”ⁱⁱ There is an undeniable blessing in the midst of all of this pain and sacrifice and loss. There truly is “a glory that shines upon our tears.” People of faith believe the world we occupy is not the only reality, nor is it the last reality. People of faith believe there is something more than what we can see or know. It is not Pollyannish, this faith. It is born out of generations of human experience. We believe we will one day join those who have gone before. We believe we, too, shall rise in glory on the last day.

Now, twenty years later, there is some debate about how 9/11 should best be commemorated. Some argue that 9/11 has become an opportunity for even more political polarization, like so many other parts in American life. One scholar Andrew Levy suggests that we should, “Drop the vague #NeverForget hashtags that point toward no actual consensus about nation and memory. Cancel the lights and the ballgames. Instead, mourn in the traditional way with seriousness and calm those who perished on 9/11. And having mourned properly, we could then tend to the business of the next generation, for whom 9/11 itself is remote but the damage done in its aftermath all too present, and for whom mourning may also be the right response. What truth and reconciliation might we obtain, for instance, if we instead allowed 9/11 this one symbolic use (and this one only), if we spent the day thinking only about the people who truly lost something, regardless of whatever agenda they theoretically represent.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We are here today to support the people who truly lost something and to remember everyone and everything they have lost. Twenty years is a long time. It is time enough to begin to heal, to begin to forgive, and to discover in the examples of the past the very people we are called to be in the future.

“They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.”

Amen.

ⁱ Lawrence Binyon, *For the Fallen*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Levy, *The American Scholar*, May 31, 2021 (<https://theamericanscholar.org/author/andrew-levy/>).

(I was astounded to learn how many of the victims at the World Trade Center were from countries from around the world. They were of different races, different religions, different cultures. They came from Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Bermuda, Brazil, Canada, Chili, China, Cote d'Ivoire, Columbia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Ghana, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Mexico, Moldova, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Uzbekistan, Venezuela and, of course, the United States. Fifty-eight countries altogether. I guess it shouldn't be so surprising. After all, this is New York City—one of the largest, if not *the* largest financial capitals of the world—and people from all over the world were lost in this tragedy. This was a loss for the entire world.)

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