



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, Associate Rector

A Journey to Another World

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 2, 2013

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Luke 7:1-10

I'd like you to join me, for a little while, on a journey to another world. To get there with me, it is quite simple. All you have to do is lean a bit closer, cock your head just so, and then we'll find ourselves drifting into it. There we are! We're here. In a world that is just next to the one we left. Similar in nearly every respect. This world has a city like ours. It has a St. Bart's like ours, right down to the chair you're sitting in now. But it differs in two striking ways. One way is good, and, I have to warn you, one way is not-so-good.

The first way in which this world differs from the one we left is that Jesus has returned. You see, in this world, history has a funny way of repeating itself. This time around, Jesus was born in the early eighties in Yonkers to a young teenager named Maria. He worked for his stepfather's construction company, but as a second career he has recently taken up a preaching and healing ministry, traveling through the villages of Westchester and Connecticut. He's been drawing enormous crowds everywhere he goes.

And the rumor is that his tour is coming our way. And we here at St. Bart's really hope that this will happen, and soon. Frankly, we could use a visit from Jesus, because many of us are so very discouraged. Times are bleak in the New York City of this other world, and this is because of the second way in which this world differs from the one we are used to. You see, in this other world, our nation's wars have gone worse than we could have possibly imagined. Our enemies in these wars had some alarming technological advances that actually gave them an overwhelming edge in our conflicts. And now, after a season of blood and tears, we find ourselves, just as Jerusalem was two thousand years ago, an occupied city. Instead of Roman soldiers, it is a garrison of soldiers from a distant land, running the city, patrolling our streets, and "keeping the peace." Things have settled down, lately, but it remains a dark time.

To our surprise, our occupiers have allowed all the houses of worship to gather as they usually do, as long as they don't resist. And this has been a great comfort, especially for us at St. Bart's. We recently instituted our first Rector of the occupation, the Buddy Stallings of the other world. And it was such a special night for us. And now, on top of that, the rumor is that Jesus is coming to make a special visit to St. Bart's. A new hope is in the air.

Before Jesus arrives, though, there is a person in this other world that I have to introduce. It's a certain officer, an officer of the Enemy Army, actually the one responsible for our district, Midtown. He commands about a hundred soldiers or so to do this. And I think it was a few years ago that he encountered St. Bart's and decided on impulse to come in for a Sunday service. To everyone's surprise, something inspired a courageous usher to offer him a seat with, I might add, a genuine smile. He sat in the back. He got a lot of looks though, some dirtier than others. But he participated in the service without incident. And every month or so after that, you would see him in the back, dressed in an olive outfit with a black vest, with a crisp black turban, seated with a security detail. Few people talked to him. He didn't expect them to.

And about a year after his arrival, with no warning, that officer offered our church a substantial gift, enough to restore the dome, enough to make this church of ours look like it was built yesterday. Some of us, those deeply wounded by the occupation, thought that the money should be rejected, but after a time of prayer, and with great sensitivity, the Buddy of this other world encouraged us to quietly accept the gift. And, in due course, the renovations were made, but without fanfare. The officer, he understood. And he stayed in the background.

It was the week before the arrival of Jesus to St. Bart's that the officer became greatly disturbed. His home, just down the road, had a significant staff. And one of his most beloved staff members, one who had raised him up when he was a child, this servant became very ill. In his distress and love, the officer had the sick servant placed in the officer's very own bed to be cared for there. The officer summoned the

best doctors. He spared no expense. They visited the sick man, but none of them felt that anything could be done.

The officer didn't lose hope, though. He had heard the power of Jesus' healing ministry and so he contacted Buddy and the Vestry in the night, requesting that they help him, hoping that they might make a special request to Jesus, not for him, but for the sake of his beloved servant. After consulting together, they hesitantly agreed to the request of their benefactor, but they made no promises, for who could tell what Jesus would do?

When the next day came, Jesus arrived with his disciples and many others for a special visit to St. Bart's. Many of us were gathered inside the church, waiting to meet him, to hear his words. Before, though, he could enter the church, Buddy and the Wardens and the Vestry met him out front, greeted him warmly, and then felt compelled to tell him about the man on the officer's staff and his grave illness. They said that the officer deserves to have his servant healed, because he loves our people and has cared for our church.

Jesus asked Buddy and the Vestry to take him to the officer's home so that he could visit the sick man. As you can imagine, all of us heard what was going on, and we decided to follow Jesus and Buddy and the Wardens and the Vestry as they made their way north up Park Avenue to the officer's home that he had claimed years ago (what used to be known as the Racquet and Tennis Club). We followed Jesus there to see what would happen next. Just as Jesus was about to enter the officer's home, a group of the officer's friends came out of the front archway with a message to Jesus from the officer. They were told to say to Jesus, "Lord, don't be bothered. I don't deserve to have you come under my roof. In fact, I didn't even consider myself worthy to come to you. But I know how things work. I also am a man appointed under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes. I think your power works something like this. Just say the word, Lord, and my servant will be healed."

When Jesus heard these words from the messengers, he was very impressed with the officer. He turned to the crowd following him and said "I tell you, even among the Christians, I haven't found faith like this." Let's just say that this was not what we expected to hear. And when the officer's friends ascended to the officer's bedroom, they found that his servant had been restored to health. The officer's hope had turned to cheers of joy. The crowd below heard the cheers, and then they found themselves following Jesus back to St. Bart's, not knowing what to think.

Now, brothers and sisters, of course, the story goes on from there, but time grows short, and so I invite you to lean back in your chairs, untilt your heads so that we might return from this other world, and make our way back to our own world, the one that raised us, so we can rest a bit, and reflect.

The things that Jesus did in that other world are very similar to the things he did in our world with another military occupier, the Roman centurion overseeing Capernaum in Galilee two thousand years ago. And, hopefully, the parallel account of that other world has given us a sense of how bold Jesus' actions were then, how against the grain he was in his healing and preaching ministries, and how expansive (and at the same time threatening) his compassion was. His was a care and love that overflowed beyond his own people to find its way into the lives of people like an occupier, the centurion. Yes, even him! One of the people responsible for the worst that the world could do. Yes, even he was God's child.

This is the great spiritual calling that is set before all of us who consider ourselves "good people." The call is to overcome the outrage that can come in discovering how unfair God is with God's generosity: that Jesus would opt to feast with notorious sinners so often, that he would choose to help out what most would call a mortal enemy. That God loves the "bad people" just as much as us, and that the "bad people" are just as able as us to be involved in God's healing. I know it is exasperating, I know it's a mess, but here's the thing: If we don't swallow this bitter pill, and digest this messy reality, our "goodness" will isolate us from the truth of things. Our "goodness" will have us painting ourselves into a corner, cutting us off from so much of what the Holy Spirit is doing in the rest of the room: God's large open realm.

It was on his way to Capernaum to heal the centurion's servant that Jesus said this, and may he say it to us again in our day and in our world: "God makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous . . . Therefore, just as God is complete in showing love to everyone, so also must you be complete."

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