

# ST BART'S



**A Sermon by:**

The Rev. F. M. “Buddy” Stallings, *Rector*

## Always More Than Enough

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 17, 2013  
The Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 21:5-19*

Today we have a tale of two realities. The passage from Isaiah is a joyous and poetic recital of what God is about to do, the creation of a new world, one without weeping, one in which all live to a ripe and good old age, one where workers will build houses in which to live themselves and not constructed for others, a new world in which no one labors in vain, one in which the lamb and wolf eat happily side by side. Where do I sign up now? It sounds wonderful. But wait, the gospel lesson tells a radically different story; the account of Jesus’ life is narrowing toward its climax of passion and death. Wars and rumors of war, nations against nations, earthquakes, famines and plagues, persecutions and arrests, betrayals and lies foretell the approaching end. Maybe I don’t want to sign up quite so quickly after all.

Each story has marvelous homiletic appeal, one so filled with promise, the other with doom and gloom, each in some way a preacher’s golden opportunity. And, yet, despite my desire to do as our Collect this morning has us pray, “to hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the words of our Holy Scripture,” I am left with the question: Is there anything these ancient stories really have to say to us today? It seems a fair question. Most of us no doubt believe and even cling to the hope that God is not finished with us, that there is, as Isaiah suggests, still the newness of creative work occurring around us. There are moments in our lives, certainly there are, places along our spiritual journey to which we can point as moments of ineffable transcendence. But always or even regularly? Probably not. Even as we enjoy the peaceful image Isaiah creates, many of us would resonate with Woody Allen in his quip about the lamb and the wolf: “They may sleep side by side,” Allen said, “but it is unlikely that the lamb will get a good night’s sleep.”

Angst being what it is, I fear that we may know the other end of the spectrum a little more regularly, Luke’s zeitgeist being more like the one we know. How many times in the last few years have we said to one another, “This weather really is strange?” “Who ever heard of such temperatures or of a storm like this one at this time of year?” Or upon reading a new article, how often have we remarked about the number of hot spots in the world, literal powder kegs poised at any moment to blow? We often feel that things in general are not going in a sustainable direction and find ourselves confounded and discouraged by how out of whack the world seems. And then there are our private anguishes—divorces, illnesses, and worries about our children or our jobs, all the things that break our hearts and worry us nearly to death. Though we know how to put forward our best selves—we certainly don’t want to appear to be negative or despondent—inside, the truth is that we sometimes are.

How do scriptures like these speak to us today in the ordinariness of our lives? Frankly, for me, the starting point is to admit that each passage was written in and for a specific time and place, limited in the way that all scripture is, intended for one audience and yet catapulted by life and liturgy and hope to be treasured by many generations, way beyond the imaginations of the writers. The first passage, written by the prophet known as Third Isaiah, was penned at the end of the Babylonian exile, near the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It was a time that was wonderful and not—a time, then, like most time. God’s people had been allowed to return to Jerusalem, those who had not been permanently assimilated into Babylon now allowed to come home; but as with so many homecomings, it was not a returning that was seamless and exclusively joyful. Many of the problems they had left a generation earlier had not magically been corrected. And, yet, it was indeed a time of hope and promise, forty long years away

from that most sacred of places, a time so beautifully conceived and described by Third Isaiah that we often read his words on Easter morning.

The gospel passage is another story altogether. Written as though to predict an event, the destruction of the Temple, it was in fact composed a long time after the event had occurred—perhaps as little as 15 years later or as many as 30 or more, depending upon the scholar you follow. It has come to be understood as a warning about a coming event that all the early followers of Jesus believed to be imminent: the Second Coming, Jesus’ coming again. It would be a triumphant return to set all things once and forever right. It was to be of epic, cinematic scope, some folks dramatically and instantly departing this world, others left behind for their disbelief, and a series of unspeakably awful occurrences here on earth. Given the current popularity of the genre in our culture, many might imagine it as the ultimate dystopian tale of end times.

Here is the problem: Neither picture of life truly fits our reality, does it? For sure many live what appear to others to be perfect lives in perfect situations, but even the most unexamined of us know that life is rarely precisely what it looks to be. And others, just as surely, live in circumstances that, if not dystopian, are so far from utopia as to seem its absolute opposite anyway.

But where are we—where do you and I find ourselves in these lessons and what might they say to us? For me, before I can even imagine that possibility, I have to dismiss any relation at all to literal descriptions. The world may indeed be headed for a cataclysmic conclusion, which could be zillions of years away or mere seconds. Who knows? Perhaps I should care more than I do, but the current truth is that I have no control over anything so grand as that but only this moment—and my control of that is often up for grabs. And, yet, in this hyped-up religious world of ours, with Christians of all sorts making all kinds of claims about ultimate truths—claims made from the halls of Congress to the corner of 42<sup>nd</sup> and Broadway—it doesn’t seem quite enough to avoid taking a position, no matter how clever the sidestep. So for the record, I do not believe that God’s ultimate solution for creation will be widespread destruction for many and the concurrent deliverance of those who are on the right track, those who believe with a saving quotient of orthodoxy or behave with adequate religiosity. Nothing about that is consistent with the view I hold of God.

The coming of Christ in the world again, though, is not beyond my albeit-limited imagination. *In my experience* Christ’s coming again is not an event in the future any more than it is one simply in the present or the past. Christ comes again and again and again, making him or herself—Christ most certainly existing beyond our boundaries of gender—known to us in the most extraordinary and unexpected ways. Christ comes to us a second time, a third time, and again and again—as often as we breathe. I have a marvelous friend, in fact whom I hardly know at all, whose email tag line—whatever you call those little pithy, uplifting or didactic words some use at the bottom of every email—reads, *God is as close as your very breath*. Normally that sort of thing would irritate the daylights out of me; but from her, it stops me in my tracks every time, and my breath seems suddenly and amazingly holy, filled with God.

In that moment and others like it, Christ has come again and is not unlike the image described by Isaiah. I emphatically do not live there every moment; but, by God, I know when I am there. And the memory of such moments is enough to remind me always that it is where I want to be. Suddenly churchy, strangely otherworldly language no longer seems as distant and inaccessible. The words of Third Isaiah, the words of Luke, and the words of every last one of us, when we and they speak of that for which we long and that of which we are afraid, asking God to be part of it all, join in a single chorus of “God be with us,” a single chorus of believing and hoping journeyers. And all else, though not disappearing magically before our eyes, becomes that through which we can walk with confidence, not always standing tall and straight, and in fact quite often moving timidly, but with conviction that whatever comes, we are never alone. And it is enough, always more than enough.

In the name of God: *Amen*.