



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Opening the Borders of our Lives and Finding God

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 23, 2014  
The Last Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 25:31-46*

Yesterday morning I baptized a precious little baby. All of them are precious, of course, from the beatific one who gazes adoringly into the baptizer's eyes as though receiving the mark of Christ forever was the very thing for which she was born to the irate one who screams bloody murder as though running for his life. Several decades of doing this have shown me that regardless of baptismal comportment, the amazing thing is that baptism works, and it lasts forever. It is not a baby's first encounter with grace, but it is an auspicious one!

And, yet, even yesterday as I presided at this beautiful and ancient ritual, I wondered what in the world we were actually doing. What was this little boy being set apart for? What will this action mean in his life? Our claims are that in baptism he is initiated into a particular way of being religious, that he is in fact made a Christian by this sacramental act and is thereby headed to a life in Christ. It is an audacious notion that for him, as for all the baptized, Christ will be the king, the lord of his life. To this day in the rite of baptism we use old language largely not found elsewhere in our Prayer Book, language that if we thought much about would make us squirm. We ask the one being baptized or, as in this case, the parents and godparents on his behalf: "Do you turn to Jesus and accept him as your Savior? Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?" It is extraordinary language, needing at least a lifetime of parsing.

My wondering about all of that spills over to this day, a day known by some in the church as Christ the King Day, the last Sunday of the church year, a year-end that only geeky church folks really even notice! For those of you who are such geeks, we want you to know your priests love you! At St. Bart's, we deliberately avoid this moniker, Christ the King. We do so because of its inevitable sound of triumphalism (our way is singularly right) and its hint of militarism. Actually it is much more than a hint of militarism, certainly so historically. Images of the Chi Rho, the monogram of Christ, affixed high upon a cross, leading warriors for Christ into battle, make us appropriately uncomfortable—even more so now in an era during which religious wars are not simply vestiges but current realities. We feel relieved, maybe a little smug, that we are so distant from such deadly religious demarcation.

And, yet, here this very morning we are presented with a gospel lesson from Matthew, which without ambiguity separates the world into sheep and goats, the cursed and the saved, the righteous and the unrighteous. And we not only read it, we lift it high and proclaim it as the "Gospel of the Lord." Really? "Eternal punishment, eternal fire?" Wow, that is hard stuff. It is not difficult to understand how the religious world came to operate on the basis of who is in and who is out. While it is indeed true that with all my being, and perhaps more fervor than is becoming, I find the religious right utterly wrong and honestly worse than wrong—arrogant, dogmatic, mean—I have no difficulty in understanding the origin of such black and white certainty. Such doctrinaire thinking obviously derives from a reading of scripture that is not diligently, insistently historical, critical, and contextual. Read in the absence of such assiduous scholarship, our beloved scripture gives all the ammunition needed to provide clarity for religious warring. The problem is that I—and others like me—become as pigheaded in *my/our* understanding of scripture as *they* are. The result is that we sulk off into our deeply divided and self-righteous camps from which we either blatantly ignore the other or take potshots at them. And the wars go on—not physical ones in this culture, but ones with their own kind of emotional violence. With the coming of visits with extended family at Thanksgiving, some of you get this.

What are we to do? What do we say about this scripture to the little boy I baptized yesterday as he grows up? Do we tell him that indeed we have made him a little warrior for Christ and that he is to go about evangelizing every soul to our way, the only real way, or can we give him a radically different message? Happily I believe that there is a different message; but for it to have any authenticity, any claim of connection to the One to whom he has been pledged, the message must be accompanied first and foremost with humility, with a capacious spirit, and the acknowledgement that much is and forever covered in mystery. For now we see in part, the Apostle Paul said, and indeed we do.

What we do know and can teach him in age-appropriate language is that the gospel narratives, every one of them, come from a particular kind of writing and understanding known as apocalyptic. The historical Jesus lived in a time when the apocalypse, the destructive end of time, was expected at any moment. Some understanding of that mindset is required if there is any hope for us to read the gospels in a life-giving way. The narrator of this gospel, Matthew, was addressing an event that he undeniably believed was rapidly approaching—the Last Judgment. Writing a decade or so after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, his world seemed to be hurtling inevitably toward a dramatic and violent conclusion. Their predicament was dire. Their land was occupied by stern oppressors; their poverty was extreme and inescapable; their religious community was torn apart, some Jews deciding to follow Jesus, others remaining faithful to traditional Judaism; their Messiah had died an ignominious death; and though they believed—wanted to believe—he had survived death, their deep conviction was that he was about to return to make all things finally right in one great act.

In that context, in that kind of thinking, there are sheep and there are goats, there are those who believe and those who do not, there are the righteous and the unrighteous. But the scholars of my tradition recognize that this clarity about Last Judgment is infinitely more about Matthew than about the Christ who is above all, the Christ who lives in but also very much *beyond* scripture. Though we have our own, we do not understand the world through this set of cultural limitations, and setting out to believe these words in a literal way is not good for us or anyone else.

Though miraculous is a word I use rarely and with great care, it is indeed the word I mean in this sentence. For me, it is unspeakably miraculous that even within this extremely severe passage, there are words attributed to Jesus that give us a hint of that which is beyond all of the borders and boundaries we in our fearfulness construct. Jesus said that in caring for the least of those around us, we care for him—“when you have done it for the least of these, you have done it for me.” Though scholars differ as to whether Jesus literally said these words, there is wide agreement that from them flows the unmistakable ethic Jesus holds before us as those who would follow him.

And so when the little boy I baptized yesterday grows a bit older, if I have the chance I shall tell him that he was baptized into a life that is characterized by such acts as these: feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty some water and the unclothed some clothing, welcoming the stranger from across all kinds of borders, caring for the sick and visiting those in prison. I will tell him that it won't be easy and that succeeding at it from time to time will not mean that he is better than anyone else or any more loved by God for doing so. I will tell him that it will cost him something to live in this manner and that some people will reject him for doing these very things. But above all, I will tell him that his living like this will mean that he is a person of God, who will find God in his life by seeking to know and serve the Christ, who resides in every one of us regardless of what he believes, or how she acts or what country she comes from.

In the name of God: *Amen*.