



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

A Balm in Gilead

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 7, 2014
The Second Sunday of Advent—Based on Mark 1:1-8*

There is no denying the fact that Christmas is coming in New York City, and to be perfectly honest there is no place in the world I'd rather be than right here, right now. I look for reasons to be near Rockefeller Center this time of year just to walk by the tree, to see the skaters, to hear the beloved—no matter how tinny—music, to feel the energy of people rushing to and fro. Of course, much of it is frivolous; we overspend (or more likely overcharge); we indulge in all sorts of excesses during the season; our expectations get out of whack and disappointments follow like clockwork. And, yet, not all of it is bad; there is a spirit about it that truly is catching. A week from tomorrow night we will gather with several hundred of our closest friends, most on their way home from work or to a holiday gathering for a drink, on our front steps to sing Christmas carols loudly, if not always perfectly pitched. It's fun in a natural, easy sort of way, and on that night, I guarantee that most of us will experience a feeling of good will and a sense that all is right with the world for a few fleeting moments. On top of all that, the stock market is soaring, more Americans are working, according to the jobs report on Friday, sales are strong in stores and in cyber-world, and gasoline is cheaper than it has been in years. Surely, this is all good news, right?

Well, as in most things, the answer is yes and no, a truth that reminds us once again that this must be the season of Advent, the season that tells us that indeed Good News is coming **and** that this Good News is at present only partial, its full coming still a ways off. Advent embodies the notion of both/and. We know that good economic news is not good for everyone and that many are underemployed; we know that some spending is obsessive and addictive; we know that some of our partying is more about dulling our lives than enriching them; we know that despite the joy on the surface, there is for many a level of despair, even among the highly affluent, that no amount of denial or conspicuous consumption can erase.

Into that reality the patron saint of Advent, John the Baptist, comes loudly and crassly. At first blush, he seems a bizarre and ridiculous figure; only upon further reflection do we begin to experience him quite extraordinarily as an ageless truth bearer who unsettles us to the core of our being. The insistence of John was and is that we stand in need of the baptism of repentance and forgiveness. We are not drawn to these words, not really. We love baptism—Lord knows I do: give me a bunch of kids to baptize and I am happy as a clam. But the part about calling others to repentance and forgiveness is a little less appealing. The only thing that is markedly less so is the calling of myself to repentance and forgiveness. Without a doubt Advent announces Good News, but it demands some serious work in the meantime, an earnest, ungilded look at our lives and the state of our world. When I try desperately and fail miserably to see any justice in the case of Eric Garner; when I face the truth that even in 2014 the color of my skin protects me in ways about which I am usually oblivious; when I try to comprehend a world in which a photojournalist, like Luke Somers, is kidnapped and then brutally killed during a rescue attempt gone bad; when I acknowledge that some of the privilege to which I feel entitled comes at the expense of the other half of the world, many of whom live much nearer to me than the other side of the world; when I admit the small and needling resentments that I treasure in my own heart, clinging to them as though they give life rather than take it; when I acknowledge my fears about security and my love of comfort and indulgence in materialism, then I know that John the Baptist has a message which my own culture needs to hear, a message which **I** need to hear.

While writing this sermon, I was reminded of an old gospel song, the tune of which I couldn't get out of my head,
There Is a Balm in Gilead:

*There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul.*

These old and definitively not hip words claim a power in Jesus to “cleanse a sin-sick soul.” Let me tell you, brothers and sisters, this is not a message that sells particularly well even in this pulpit and much less so in the rest of the world. We do not live in an era when it is fashionable to admit that we may be suffering from a sin-sick soul—for some good reasons, heavy-handed loveless religious experience being chief among them. But we will miss the message of Advent, which comes to announce Good News, if we fail to admit that part of our hearing this incredible Good News means that we need to set ourselves and our society right with God, that this is an annual invitation to get ourselves back on track.

Preaching on this brings up all sorts of issues for me, and as every one knows, a priest with issues is a danger for all. My paternal grandfather, a southern Methodist minister, God rest his soul, was quite a proponent of repentance and frequently, even at family dinners, called for it. In sixty years of this story my mother never found his zeal charming! And though I suppose his heart was in the right direction, his style and persistence almost permanently silenced me on the subject. And, yet, part of what makes the message of Advent so critical to the Christian story is that it tells us that all that is not okay, that all that glitters is not gold, that the cost of peace and peacefulness in all circumstances is sometimes too high, and that the message of authentic religion is not satisfaction with what is but the search for what can be. Advent stirs us, it unsettles us, and it reminds us that we have not arrived but are journeying toward something—the journey is sacred but also arduous.

Our pleasure that Advent lasts only four weeks may be less about our frantic schedule and more about how it niggles at us. The truth-telling it demands can be brutal, but the wonder of it is that it prepares our hearts for the coming of the Christ child. The admission of our brokenness, of our inabilities to get it all together, to love purely as we have been loved, to give our hearts only to things that truly matter, to forgive even the smallest slights and disappointments—the admission of those truths about ourselves somehow makes space in our lives for Christ, which in turn shows us the way to live joyfully and fully as God intends us. These are precious and few days, moments when an ancient scripture invites us to a modern critique of what is missing in our lives. Not to be feared but treasured, this season is a good stop on our spiritual journey, one that leads us to greater truthfulness and in the process makes us free and fills us with joy.

In the name of God: *Amen.*