



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, *Associate Rector*

Make Way for the New Way

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 11, 2016

The Third Sunday of Advent—Based on Matthew 11: 2-11

Some people say it's the Golden Age of Television. As one raised on television, I can't argue with that. More and more of this "prestige television" is being produced, written, and directed. We can binge-watch entire seasons at a time if we like. This makes Wagner's Ring Cycle look quite modest in comparison, at least if you are counting the hours spent.

Some of us may be to the point where we watch more theatrical content on our screens than we spend time on real, physical interactions with people in our "actual" lives. These dramas shape us. They form us. Now, not just from the cinema or the TV in the den, but from the screens in our pockets. We, like some chicken breast in the fridge, marinate in whatever artistic worlds we settle into, don't we? Yet some marinades, some sources, feed our spirits, and other sources leave us dry, no matter how much we soak in them.

Now, don't think that I'm some kind of cultural scold. In fact, I've been grateful that the culture of the Episcopal Church has not been in the business of scanning the airwaves for scandalous or heretical media. Some Christians do this, and it is just so sad. I don't care what books, TV, or podcasts you consume or how much of it. But I do care that you bring to all the reading and listening and viewing the scrutiny that comes with having Jesus as your friend, and having the God that looks and acts like Jesus as the source of your vitality.

There's a running pattern through a lot of the prestige television I've watched lately that I feel I must address. Take two of the most popular shows around these days: "Game of Thrones" and "Westworld." I promise I'm not going to spoil anything. But each of those shows has a key attractive element, the villain that everyone loves to hate! In these shows, it is the delicious, agonizing thrill that comes with watching the worst person imaginable, tormenting our heroes in all kinds of creative and audacious ways. From the cruel King Joffrey, or the even more cruel Ramsay Bolton in "Game of Thrones", or the mysterious Man in Black in "Westworld." They all commit horrible atrocities to beloved characters, with dark panache, and part of the pleasure comes in longing episode after episode for their deaths. All this comes from the writers' plan to distill evil in one person and then to expel that person, with flair. That's part of the suspense. Which way will they go? How will they die? Who among our heroes will strike back? And when we witness the often-violent end that they have coming to them, a certain kind of peace and rest comes among us. For many it is a type of joy and delight. Some call it catharsis, a shared emotion in which we all feel purified and cleansed, and everything is set right again. We have this new common strength and confidence, thanks to seeing the enemy destroyed. This isn't just in prestige television. Our dramatists, from Shakespeare to Disney, have known this powerful process all too well.

But they didn't originate it. They are just making into a spectacle a process that is as old as human history. A technique used by society itself to unite and lead others by showing that we can be protected from all that ails us, as long as we regularly gather together and cast out evil. It can happen in all sorts of varieties and flavors. Some group or person becomes a representative of that evil, and then—whether it has been a religious temple or a hall of justice—all kinds of ornate ceremonies are created to cast out the heretic, the evildoer, or the criminal element. Some involve exile or imprisonment, some involve shunning or stigmatizing a person, like that Scarlet Letter on poor Hester Prynne or being on the front page of the Post. Some ceremonies go as far as killing the evil person, either in a spontaneous lynching or in an official ceremony. The ceremony on Golgotha was one of countless horrors that our Lord Jesus was ultimately ensnared in, wherein it seemed like a good idea for the priests and the rulers to cast him out, for the sake of protecting the state and the faith.

Knowing this Old Way of Building Society, this Old-style Religion, waking up to how it works, both in our society and in our movies and TV, waking up to this is essential in our Christian life. It's also important to bear in mind when we look at John the Baptist, this troubling figure in our history. As odd as he was, he prepared a way for a New Way, a New Way of Building Society under God, one where there is no more casting out, no more scarlet letters, crosses, stonings, or electric chairs.

You see, he was the child of a High Priest in the grand temple of Jerusalem. He would have been deeply aware of the benefits that came from declaring a space as the holy of holies, and then using all kinds of walls and rules and cleaning rituals to make sure that no evil thing or person could get close. Heck, even his dad, the High Priest Zechariah, could only enter the holy place once a year. Part of his duties was to place all the sins of the people of Israel onto a poor goat and then scare it out into the wilderness to get that evil as far away from the temple as possible. This was the original scapegoat.

But his son, John—who, as a son of one, could have been a High Priest of the Temple himself—instead, chose a different path. He donned the clothes of a prophet from one of the scrolls he would have known by heart, and he went out into the profane wilderness, to the River Jordan. He preached about how sinful people were, how far they had gone astray. He really dug in on this. People were as bad as a brood of vipers. And some divine axe was waiting to chop them down. But instead of demanding that they be cast out or destroyed, he had a path for them, a path to freedom that anyone could take. He didn't need a grand temple or a yearly goat ritual. He just needed a river, a God-given river, to display the forgiveness of God. He asked people to repent, and, by golly, they did. It worked. And kept working, beyond all precedent, in the middle of nowhere, nowhere near a temple or a priest, thousands of all sorts, the sheep and the goats, were declared clean and righteous. It was a sensation, a common experience, a catharsis, that didn't rely on righteous vengeance, or casting anyone out, but was grounded in inviting people in, especially the kind of people who were used to being cast out! The waters of John's baptism, like the Red Sea was for the Hebrew slaves, was a path of liberation from the horrible bondage of the old way, of judgment and vengeance, into the shocking, uncomfortable, but life-giving way of judgment and mercy.

You know, John the Baptist was on the right path, but he wasn't quite there yet. John knew it too. He knew that his baptism was good. But he knew that there was even more in store. He even preached about this, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John had had a breakthrough, but he knew that this was only the beginning. Jesus even recognized this, as you can see in our Gospel reading for today. He called John "more than a prophet." This is high praise. And he said: "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." What could be greater than the amazing work that John was doing?

Well, let's look at a poignant encounter in our Gospel today. John, like his cousin Jesus would be, was imprisoned by a ruler who had no patience with his practice of directly calling out people for their sins. And it was from prison that John had a dialogue, of sorts, with Jesus, through messages carried through his disciples. "Are you the One?" he asked from his dark dungeon. "Are you the One I've been telling people about?" And Jesus responds to him by quoting an evocative passage from the prophet Isaiah:

"Look at what is happening! The blind can see, the lame can walk, even lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

It's a lyrical reference from a classic prophet. In this, Jesus is alluding to all of the blessings and transformations that were happening as he took it to the next level in his healing ministry. He was in and among all sorts of people who were assumed to be sinful, broken, and unclean. And he wasn't scolding them to go a temple or to a river to be cleansed. He was walking among them, going anywhere, even to the heathen lands beyond God's chosen people! He touched those thought evil, suspect, and stained, declaring them clean, declaring people worthy. In a world that depended on people being broken and dead, he declared people whole and alive. And many times he said it was their faith, their goodness that made them well! And this wasn't like John. John began with God's judgment and then proclaimed God's mercy.

This is a great start, but Jesus goes directly to the love of God, with no middleman. He didn't lead with God's judgment. He didn't start with casting out sin from people or cleaning them up. He started by loving people, no matter how great their sins, no matter how dirty. He led with God's love, like a loving parent. He lived it and taught others how to live it too, and like wildfire, the Holy Spirit was repeatedly showing this reality to be true, the kingdom of heaven on earth. It

was unheard of. Spectacular. His ministry, too, was a sensation that would cover the globe like the fire John the Baptist prophesied.

This is what we long for in this season of Advent, in this timeless space where the past has yet to happen, at least, has yet to happen completely in our lives. We wait for what has already come, the New Way of Christ, so that it might come in its fullness in us. And we have an entire new church year to be re-introduced to what this New Way looks like in sacred story and in us. How it behaves. How it serves. How it loves, no matter what. Our friend John has told us that what has always been is now coming. And so we wait. We wait for the New Way to emerge on the horizon, outshining the Old Way with its brilliant light, a light that still shines from a manger, a loving life, a cross, an empty tomb, and a light now shining from our still beating hearts.

© 2016 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York

For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022