

# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Reverend John F. Wirenius, *Deacon*

At the Threshold

*Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, January 15, 2017*  
*The Second Sunday after the Epiphany—Based on John 1:29-42*

So John the Baptist sees the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove, tells this to the crowd, and then tells them all that Jesus is the lamb of God.

The next day, as Jesus walks by him, John calls out “Behold, the lamb of God!” (I know, I know, the NRSV says, “Look here is the lamb of God!” but c’mon. If anyone in the whole Bible cries out for the King James treatment, it’s John the Baptist.)

Anyway, John tells everyone who will listen to him that Jesus is the one who was before him, even though he came after him, has had the Holy Spirit descend upon him, and so he—Jesus, that is—baptizes with the Holy Spirit—oh, and that he is the lamb of God.

I mean, have you ever seen a man with less brand awareness than John the Baptist?

*Of course* Andrew deserts John for Jesus. Lots of people do. John has rendered himself obsolete.

For those who believed John was a prophet, well, the greater your faith in John, the more imperative it is to ditch John for Jesus. Even if you don’t know what the lamb of God means exactly, it’s a pretty good bet that it beats hanging around in the desert eating locusts and wild honey.

So they all leave John behind.

Just like that.

In Luke’s Gospel, after John has been imprisoned, Jesus asks the crowd that has left John for him, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.” (Lk 7:24-26). He then tells them that “among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

Well, what does that mean?

It means that John is a liminal figure—a man who stands between what is, and what is to be. A liminal person is someone on the threshold, not fully part of the past or of the future. The Jesus Movement that John points to is not what he expects. Jesus is surprising; as Matthew Moretz reminded us just a few weeks ago, “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.” Jesus surpasses John, displaying more compassion than his stern predecessor, more love, and the world has never been the same.

Thing is, John saw it coming.

Oh, not the details. He didn’t know the shape of what was coming, just that it was coming, and that his part in it was to stand on the threshold and open the door.

But John is not of the Jesus Movement. He doesn’t follow Jesus, he points to him, and then he fades from history.

He is imprisoned, he is put to death. But even before those things happen, he travels about, pointing to his successor, “Behold the lamb of God!” Opening the door to the new thing is worth John’s life.

John’s entire ministry is about making himself obsolete. He points beyond himself to Jesus. He points to the man who takes his good idea—helping people to accept the forgiveness of God by acknowledging their guilt and symbolically washing away their sins—and transforms it into something far more real and life-changing.

John points away from himself. But today I think we could use another look at him. Because we are in a time of transition ourselves.

Transitions are hard. We see it all around us. Transitions bring to light divisions that have been papered over for a long time—don’t tell anyone, but I kinda still miss the pews.

But transitions also can reveal to us that our ideas, our ways of seeing the world, don’t describe it in a meaningful way anymore.

It doesn’t mean that they were wrong when we first found them. Dean William Inge once wrote that “It is the tendency of all symbols to petrify or evaporate, and either process is fatal to them.”<sup>i</sup>

A symbol—or a word—petrifies when we begin to confuse the image with the greater reality it stands for. So we begin by using a metaphor to capture an experience, or an insight, but then we begin to treat the metaphor as fact, not an image. As Inge says, “When we think of time as a piece cut off from the beginning of eternity, so that eternity is only in the future and not in the present; when we think of heaven as a place somewhere else, and therefore not here; when we think of an upper ideal world which has sucked all the life out of this, so that we now walk in a vain shadow—then we are paying the penalty for our symbolical representative methods of thought.”<sup>ii</sup>

A symbol evaporates when the common experience the symbol is based on no longer makes sense to us. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan needs to be explained, because we don’t live in a culture where we all can just know that a Samaritan must be despicable. If anything, the parable is so well known that we start off already liking the Samaritan.

Or think of Jesus describing the Last Judgment as God separating the sheep from the goats. What’s so bad about the poor old goats, anyway?

Ideas are like symbols. They can petrify or evaporate. They can become so familiar that they lose their resonance. People have heard them so often that they become meaningless. Or the messengers have been caught not living up to their ideals so often that the ideals are dismissed as hypocrisy. And trust dies. Anger builds.

We’re in a time where faith in just about all of our institutions is falling.<sup>iii</sup> We’ve just come through a bitter election and are about to enter a new political era. I think it’s fair to say that the tensions revealed by the election have not been eased.

Belief in religious institutions of all kinds is in decline.<sup>iv</sup> And we Episcopalians have heard all too often that the path of our church is a spiral of terminal decline.

Yet here we all are, worshipping God in community together.

And I’m going to suggest to you that right there, that is a hint to us in how to react to our times.

Right now, we are living through a liminal time.

We’re waiting at the end of a comfortable phase in the history of the Church, wondering what comes next.

We’re waiting for the next thing in our culture, in our society, wondering what comes next.

Will our institutions—spiritual, cultural, political—regain the trust they have lost?

What comes next?

I don’t know, and, frankly, I don’t think anyone does know.

There’s a lot of talk among traditionalist Christians of “the Benedict Option.” The idea is that modern society and culture are so contrary to the good life as envisioned in Christian tradition that Christians need to intentionally build communities in which the values we hold dear, the traditions that shape us, are shared and practiced.

I'm not ashamed to borrow a good idea from our more conservative brothers and sisters. But frankly, it sounds a bit like the St. Bart's Option to me. The Eucharist and Evening Prayer are available throughout the week, Morning Prayer on Saturday, Bible study, and adult education offerings. We have active children, youth and family ministries, too.

My point is not to give a St. Bart's infomercial, but to suggest that the Benedict Option is an intentional way of being the Church in the modern world. Like John the Baptist, we need to take the next right step. We gather together every week. We pray. We learn, we encourage each other.

And that it's a good part of an answer to times of transition and uncertainty.

But not the whole answer.

We act. We can give of our time and treasure to our best to serve those Jesus called us to serve: The poor, the hungry, the persecuted. The stranger.

In our daily lives, we often get in a rut. I can't help but think of Anne Herbert who urged people to "practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty" in the 1980s. I can think of worse things to do in a liminal time.

All of that sounds like I'm saying "keep on keeping on." And that's a big part of what I am saying. But there's one last piece.

Yes, the world is scary and unsettled.

No, we don't know what's coming next.

But listen for what's coming. New, fresh symbols will replace the dead ones. New, fresh ideas will replace the petrified ones. As a mentor of mine likes to say, every time of desolation is followed by one of consolation. We're just in the middle times, on the threshold.

But as one phase of the dance to the music of time ends, another begins. God is with us always, not just yesterday, but today, and, even more importantly, tomorrow. If we listen, if we keep our hearts calm and receptive, when the next phase of the dance begins, we'll hear the music change.

And then we'll be able to say, "Yes."

In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, *Amen*.

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<sup>1</sup> Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (1899), at p. 5

<sup>1</sup> *Id.*

<sup>1</sup> Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," June 2016, archived at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, Nov. 3, 2015, "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," archived at [http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2015/11/2015.11.03\\_RLS\\_II\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2015/11/2015.11.03_RLS_II_full_report.pdf)