



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., *Rector*

Salt. Light.

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 5th, 2017

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Based on Psalm 112:1-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16); Matthew 5:13-20

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

At the end of the day, all of our lives are a collection of stories. We come to know one another when we know one another's stories. So, as we are coming to know one another, here is one of mine.

Not long after I was elected Bishop of Kansas, I was in a small coffee shop not far from Coffeyville, Kansas. There I sat, resplendent in my sincere suit, a brand new purple shirt, and the shiny new pectoral cross generously given to me by my former parishioners at Saint Michael and All Angels, in Dallas, Texas.

The cross, modest by Texas standards, was probably the largest golden object in southeastern Kansas at that time.

When the waitress came up to take my order and she looked me up and down and she said,

"Well, my... that is **SOME** kind of cross!"

And I replied, "Well, thank you, ma'am." And then, trying to offer some kind of explanation for my appearance, I said,

"You see, I'm the Episcopal Bishop of Kansas..."

And she stopped, and looked over her glasses at me, and she said,

"Well, LA dee DA!"

And to complete my lesson in humility, she took my order and then yelled over the counter to the cook, "Hey Frank, his holiness wants his hamburger medium rare!"

Well, I've had a number of "LA-dee-DA" moments as the Bishop of Kansas **and** as the Vice President of the House of Bishops, but perhaps no moment so extraordinary as this one. For the son of an Ohio factory worker to be preaching on Park Avenue is the kind of thing only a God with a great sense of humor can bring about!

For those of you who have been members of this parish for many years, you know this address is not so much a privilege as it is a sacred responsibility. And you all are my heroes because you have struggled and sacrificed to keep this beautiful and costly building intact... and you have struggled and sacrificed to keep this crucial ministry thriving in one of the most challenging environments anywhere... and you have struggled and sacrificed to maintain something of inestimable value here.

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.”

Now, I just have to say that this is a pretty interesting time to start a new ministry in what our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, calls “a national pulpit.”

This is no ordinary time in the life of our country or in the life of our Church.

I do not believe it is a partisan observation to say we’ve not experienced a period in our national political life like this since the 1960’s. Tectonic shifts are taking place in our cultural and political life, highlighting the extreme polarization we’re all talking about. (I had a cab driver at LaGuardia give me his theo-political take on things and, I’ve got to say, it was pretty compelling!)

- Never have relationships between people of different political parties or persuasions been more frayed. Lifelong friendships are strained across the political divide and people at family gatherings worry about what will come up at the dinner table.
- Never has there been less social capital banked against such a moment.
- And, in complete candor, never have so few people looked to the mainline Christian Church to provide answers or leadership.

But here’s the Good News. (You were hoping there was going to be some Good News, weren’t you!?)

Well, here it is. Historically, this is **Exactly** the kind of moment when the Christian faith shines brightest! When hope fails, and faith wobbles, and the situation is most dire, this is when our God, “overcomes the world” and this, historically, is when we become The Church. The real Church with a capital C.

Every ministry is contextual and every ministry takes place in a particular time and place.

When I’ve been asked why I’ve come to New York City and Saint Bart’s....and when people wonder what I’ve come here to do, I’m reminded of that great quote by the Revolutionary naval Captain, John Paul Jones, who wrote, “I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast, for I intend to go in harm’s way.”

And, I kid you not, we **will** be called to travel in harm’s way for the sake of the Gospel.

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can saltiness be restored? You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

To be “salty salt” and “bright light” in the world will **require** something of us.

And, in such a moment, we do not have the luxury of being silent when foundational Biblical principles are challenged.

In such a moment, we do not have the luxury of doing business as usual... we do not have the luxury of maintaining the silence and playing it safe.

Now this may seem like a time when the initiative belongs to others, but this is, actually, our time.

We are Christians and spiritual seekers in the middle of one of the greatest urban centers in the world. We are placed in New York City in the year 2017. God placed us here. And at Saint Bart's we like to say, **"Everyone needs a place. Everybody needs a place."**

But why? And for what purpose?

What **are** we doing here?

Well, allow me to tell you what I think we're doing.... what I hope and pray we will be doing in the coming years...

- The weakest among us; the poor, the addicted, the mentally ill, and the homeless....they need a place where they can find food and shelter and hope and folks who will be their loyal friends and their tireless advocates.

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We can be those advocates. We can be that place.

- The young, the hard working, the struggling, the aspiring, need a place where they can discover community, and a context for their life, and answers to their deepest questions.

We will be that place.

- Vulnerable populations; immigrants, women, indigenous peoples, disabled people, people of color, minorities, gay, lesbian and transgendered people; all those who have been victimized by a world which does not play fair, need a place... a home... where they feel safe and secure.

We can be that safe haven. We will be that place.

- In a world divided by national interests, there needs to be a place which recognizes that Jesus did not come into the world flying the flag of **any** nation.

Blocks from the United Nations.... Surrounded by people from every country in the world, this parish is called to be a cathedral to the city and to be salt and light to the entire world

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid." A Church built on Park Avenue in Midtown Manhattan cannot be hidden... nor can it hide.

- The wealthy, the established, the mature seekers of goodness and truth, need a place where they can be fed and where they can find hope and grace and outlets for their generosity and their genius.

We will be that place, too.

- Our world, our nation, and this city need a clarion voice which breaks the silence, sounds the alarm, and calls the people of God to prayer and to fasting (as well as to transformation and to renewal!).
- Our church can be that place. Saint Bart's can be that place.

We can be that voice.

We, you and I, are the people of Saint Bart's. Through poverty and illness, through epidemics and plagues, through wars great and small; through the Civil Rights movement, through the movement to recognize the equality of women, through the movement to recognize the equality of everyone regardless of their sexual preference;

Through economic upturns and downturns and depressions great and small, even through horrific terrorist attacks, the people of this parish have endured and, by the grace and will of our Lord Jesus Christ, we will continue to bear bold witness.

We will be Salt! We will be Light!

And, God, please forgive us if, in this moment, we are guilty of aspiring to a thing too high. (At least we can never be accused of having aimed for anything easy or common or cheap.)

I am honored beyond words to serve as your Rector in a time such as this and, as a bishop of the Church, I believe I am returning to the field at precisely the right moment.

- When other voices are loud and shrill, ours will seek to be steady and constant.
- When others advocate for easy division, we will speak on behalf of the more difficult reconciliation.
- When others offer, “alternative truths,” we will proclaim one truth: “one Lord, one faith, one Baptism; one God and Father of All.”
- When others attempt to divide and manipulate with fear, we will seek to unify and embrace with love.
- And when some say we don’t have the resources to do something so important.... when they tell us the modern Church no longer has the gumption to be salt and light... we will remind them that having a compelling vision is the beginning of all great achievements in the Christian faith and that we have a compelling vision at Saint Bart’s given to us by Our Lord which every single person sitting in this great church can acknowledge as worthy of sacrificial support.

Salt. Light.

The Apostle Paul said, **“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit, and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”**

We will gently explain to those who do not know who we are that we have been at this work for more than 2000 years.

We will lovingly explain to those who do not know who we are that **we will continue to do this work faithfully and prayerfully until there is no breath left in us...or until Christ returns again in glory.**

What good is salt if it loses its saltiness?

What good is it if it loses its essence; if it loses its very reason for being?

Light.

When the darkness closes in, we must be the light which refuses to be extinguished.

We must be the light which illumines the good works.

We must be the light which the darkness can never, ever, overcome.

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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