



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Not What We Expected

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 21, 2020

The Third Sunday after Pentecost (Father's Day)

Based on Jeremiah 20:7-13; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

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

The gospel lesson for today is an extension of last week's exhortations to engage in an outward-bound faith: to engage in a way of life which is focused not on "achieving an inner heaven," but rather a way of living that leads to building a better world. In last week's gospel reading, Jesus reminded the disciples what they would need for such task, and what they could leave behind. In today's lesson, Jesus reminds the disciples just how difficult the task will actually be.

My friend Blake Hamilton and I met at Miami University of Ohio when we were fraternity brothers. (It was a slightly more innocent age, but there were stupid things to do, and, to the best of my recollection, I think we tried to do them.) But imagine, if you will, a guy who was athletic and kind and funny and loved by one and all. After graduation he married the smart and beautiful girl and went to work for a prominent accounting firm.

After a couple of years, he was recruited by the FBI to train as a Special Agent. Now Blake was exactly the kind of person you actually hope would work in law enforcement because he didn't do it out of a desire for power or out of some warped need for authority. He did it because he believed everyone should find a way to serve. He believed in things like duty and honor and integrity, and the pursuit of this vocation deeply reflected those values.

Traditional, decent, and fair: I always thought of Blake as just a little bit larger-than-life. When I saw him at a college reunion a few years back, he had managed to keep that radiant smile and a hopefulness about him, even after all these years. All the bad human behavior he had witnessed had not diminished his faith in God or country. What he finally could not overcome, what he could neither outwork or outrun, was cancer. He died in Colorado on Friday, with his wife and brother holding his hands at his bedside. If he had lived to be 101, he would have died too soon from my point of view. But he didn't live to be 65.

He believed in God and in the Resurrection, and that, too, did not keep him alive one more minute or preserve his wife and his brother from their devastating grief. It did not even save him from one additional moment of suffering. What I pray his faith *did* do was give his suffering meaning. Instead of asking, "Why is this happening to me?" Blake was the kind of person who would ask, "Okay, this is happening. What should I do now? What should we do now?"

It was not what any of us had expected. God, you may have noticed, does not do what we expect. To begin with, “a marginal Jew,” as one contemporary scholar described him, is not who we would have expected to be the Messiah in the first place. The compassionate carpenter’s son, the small-town rabbi with a big heart and all those strange teachings, would not have been thought “Most Likely to be God’s Son.” If Jesus had been born with a little more glory surrounding him, well, that might have been a different story. A powerful, incontrovertible, Holy Transcendence; an Unbearable Light illumining a darkened world: now that’s more like what we might expect! And we also expect a world where such a god can be showcased; a world where Goodness is clearly rewarded, and Evil and all matters vile and abhorrent are firmly punished.

When those two women stepped out of the rising heat of a long-ago desert morning and into the cool darkness of an empty tomb, it was absolutely not what they expected. Jesus, their teacher and their friend, had been raised from the dead. He really was the Christ, the Messiah—God-sent-for-them. And while they loved that man like a brother and followed him all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, they were still caught off-guard when he turned out to be just exactly who he said he was.

God continues to confound the deeply held expectations we hold.

The Apocalyptic writings of the Old Testament claimed strife and animosity between family members were sure and certain signs that the Messiah was drawing near. And when the Messiah eventually came, they believed peace and harmony would finally reign. Jesus himself claimed his disciples were peacemakers; and yet, paradoxically, his unflinching instructions made them an occasion for strife almost every single time they opened their mouths. Jesus said, “For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” (Don’t you just marvel over how the lectionary has us hearing this lesson on Father’s Day of all days? I mean, really!)

But this is an easy passage of scripture to misinterpret, so we need to be careful. Don’t misunderstand what’s being said here. Jesus is not, in this passage from Matthew, re-casting the commandment to “Honor your father and mother.” Jesus is simply saying that living a godly life, a spiritual life—living the life of an “outbound Christian”—is a matter of making difficult choices. It is a matter of setting priorities. In the process of instructing his disciples, Jesus wants them to understand exactly who they are and precisely what will be required of them.

“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” These are the “family values” of Jesus, and Jesus understands that “family” can be as much of an idol as money, or alcohol, or sex, or status or a hundred other different things we can come to treasure more than God. “Family first” is not, I’m afraid to say, a gospel imperative.

Jesus asks something of his disciples. Jesus asks something of us. But it doesn’t translate very well in a consumer-driven culture. Can you imagine if we ran an advertisement in The New York Times that reads something like:

- “Is your life going pretty well, but you sense you want to be more miserable? Why not try St. Bart’s?
- Having a rough time at home and find yourself alienated from everyone in your family? Good for you. You’re looking like a disciple.
- Sick and tired of all those beautiful possessions you’ve accumulated over the course of your life? Come on over to St. Bart’s and we will take them off your hands.
- Ever considered martyrdom? Try St. Bart’s, Park Avenue, right here in Midtown Manhattan.”ⁱ

In spite of our every attempt to domesticate and house-train God into a nice little deity who will sit and stay and come and fetch at our command, God remains the eternal Alpha and Omega: the Beginning and the End, The Great I Am, The Creator and the Redeemer and the Sustainer of all that has life. This God is completely beyond our control. And this God, who created us out of nothing, maintains a claim upon our lives.

It's one of the wonderful privileges of my vocation that I'm able to spend time with people who've recently had some kind of experience of God. You can see the fire in their eyes and the glow on their faces. You can hear the excitement in their voice. They've had an amazing, holy, and completely indescribable experience of God, and now they know their life's journey can no longer be followed using the same old map. These seekers expect their life from this point onward to be filled with a blessed peace and a harmony, a sense of being at-one with God in the world. Against all evidence to the contrary, we all expect the same thing. And for one brief shining moment in time, it's a stunning thing to behold, this fresh, mountain-top spirituality.

Unfortunately, these spiritual seekers soon find themselves beset by confusion and consternation and filled with no small amount of disappointment. Eventually, they have to come down from the mountain. And now, and now they see the world with new eyes, and now they're troubled by things they hadn't even noticed before. Now they're beginning to see themselves in ways in which they have never beheld anyone. Disturbed from their slumber by a new reality, and provoked by the Holy Spirit to do something about it, they find themselves in the very first stages of an authentic Christian transformation.

And please believe me when I tell you that it's not really a very pretty thing to behold. It's frightening and disorienting and exhilarating, and whatever else it is, it is definitely not what they expected. Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Christ-like living does not follow conventional expectation. The in-breaking of the Spirit of God is the grand reminder our lives will not go as we have predicted, planned, or expected. Christ-like living requires of us a capacity for the unexpected. We should be prepared for the surprises that do not come conveniently according to our calendars.

Jesus said, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Some of you may know this story from several years back. It took place at the Seattle Special Olympics where nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. They were so proud and excited to be participating in this event.

At the gun, the runners all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a genuine desire to finish and to win. All, that is, except one boy, who at the very start, stumbled onto the track, tumbled over a couple of times, and began to cry. When the other eight contestants heard the boy crying, they slowed down, and then they paused, and then they all came to a complete stop. And then they turned around, one by one, and went back. Every last one of them. And one girl bent down and kissed the fallen runner and told him, "This will make it better." Then all nine of these very special athletes joined hands and walked together to the finish line. And don't you know that every person in that stadium stood and cheered, and the cheering went on for a long, long, time. Because it was not what anyone expected.

It is, however, what Christ expects of those of us who seek to follow him—an unexpected compassion for the least and the lost and for those who have fallen along the way. When this pandemic is over, it will be the people who stopped and turned back to help others who will be remembered most dearly.

We all have a million excuses for not following God's call upon our lives. You remember when Moses told God, "My brother Aaron is really better at all of this than I am. You should probably call him instead."

Sarah laughed. She knew for absolute certain she was just too old to be an instrument of God's will. David sent a man to his death in order to conceal his relationship with Bathsheba. How could he ever be forgiven and made whole for God's purposes? Mary, that young girl from the village of Nazareth, could not possibly comprehend why she had been called to such an overwhelming task. And how could the Apostle Paul, present at the stoning of Stephen, be transformed by the very same power of the Risen Lord who gave Stephen the strength to make his witness?

I can tell you one thing for sure. It wasn't what any of them had expected. They all, each and every one of them, found their lives by losing them in God. Jesus said, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Now, think about your life for just a moment. What are you expecting? And what would completely surprise you? We are called to follow a surprising and unexpected God who loves us beyond all comprehension. The Christian journey requires a willingness to follow him, even down the most difficult roads.

With humility and faith, may we learn to expect the unexpected. For in the unexpected, we will find exactly what God has promised for us all along.

Amen.

¹ This advertisement suggested by Will Willimon, Pulpit Resources 32, no. 3, July to September, 2004, pp.42-43 and quoted by The Very Reverend Samuel T. Lloyd, *Soundings for the Journey*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. c. 2013, p. 22

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