



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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

## Listen!

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 12, 2020*

*The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Isaiah 55:10-13; Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

*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 prophet Isaiah brings Good News in this morning's lesson. He announces to those who have been exiled in Babylon that their long exile is ending. (It was so long, 50-70 years according to most scholars, that parents and grandparents would have had to keep telling their children and their grandchildren what life used to be like back in the good old days in Jerusalem.) As biblical scholar Ted Blakely describes it, "Isaiah is calling out to his people like a street vendor: 'Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!'"<sup>i</sup> God is offering forgiveness and restoration and it is a joyful occasion.

The prophet also reminds us that, "whatever the Lord sets into motion comes to fruition." For example, Blakely notes, "at Creation, everything the Lord spoke into being came into being. When he said, 'Let there be light,' there was light."<sup>ii</sup> In other words, God is not messing around here.

Isaiah writes, and with some insistence,

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

It shall accomplish that which I purpose.  
It shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.  
Instead of the briar, representing suffering and death,  
the myrtle plant will grow, representing healing and life.

Roland Murphy, one of the editors of the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, points out, "The prophets don't simply mirror the world around them: rather they exercise enormous imagination both in their discernment and their articulation. They see what others do not see, and they dare to utter what others

would not dare to utter. The prophets are not simply social analysts who issue moral and religious urgings; they are also artists who re-describe reality and who construe social experience in new and venturesome categories.”<sup>iii</sup> I really appreciate this perspective on the prophets because it helps me understand them less as dour town criers and more like theological visionaries who are participating in the construction of a new reality.

Clergy proclaim, sometimes by the thinnest, what we hope to believe ourselves. Paradoxically, our proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ is often at its very best when we are at our very worst. In the midst of profound grief, loss, family turmoil, deep doubt, and depressions great and small, we cry out all the more boldly, “*Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.*” And there is a certain authenticity to our proclamations in these moments, which make even our most jaded listeners pay closer attention.

“...Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables saying, ‘Listen.’”

Listen. Listen. Can you hear them?

Sometimes they’re so soft they’re barely audible. Your life is filled with voices. Sometimes the voices are as faint as whispers and you strain to hear them. Other times, the voices are so loud, it feels as if there’s no escaping them. These voices call us into every direction and into all sorts of tasks and life experiences. There are the voices of our childhoods and the voices that call us to vocations (the word vocation from the Latin *vocare*, literally meaning “to call or to summon”). There are the voices which call us to passions and to risk-taking, there are voices that caution us to be safe and take good care, and there are the voices that call us to go out, completely beyond ourselves, in sacred search.

I’m so glad Peter Thompson, our Associate Rector for Adult Formation and Liturgy, is leading a class on the writings and theology of Frederick Buechner, who is one of my all-time favorite writers. Buechner speaks eloquently about this topic when he writes, “The danger is...that there are so many voices, and they all in their ways sound so promising. The danger is that you will not listen to the voice that speaks from outside, but specifically to you out of the specific events of your life, but that instead, you will listen to the great, boring, banal, voice of our mass culture, which threatens to deafen us all by blasting forth...”<sup>iv</sup> He continues, “Our lives are full of voices...and we are tempted to hear only the loudest ones; the voices which wail with impatience and lead us to live lives which are not anchored in the ‘Ground of Ultimate Being.’”

Our world is awash in sound and we are people who desperately need to develop discerning, sensitive ears to hear the voices that speak truth and salvation. And into this world comes the voice of Jesus.

We find him in Capernaum, a fishing village on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. It’s a fairly prosperous little border town between the domains of the Tetrarch Antipas and the Tetrarch Philip. There’s a small customs post in town, and the population is certainly more eclectic than what you might find in Nazareth, his boyhood home. The people of Capernaum seem more receptive to new ideas and new ways, and, when his teachings are not well-received in his own home town, Jesus comes to Capernaum for a time. There, in that little coastal town, he selects his disciples one by one and begins to focus on his earthly ministry with a renewed intensity.

Now on a given day, according to The Gospel of Matthew—in the lines of scripture which immediately precede the lesson appointed for today—Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers come to visit Jesus in Capernaum. It’s too long a trip to make casually. In fact, it’s a twenty-four-mile journey from Nazareth to

Capernaum, and even if the carpenter's family is able to afford a donkey, it's still a two-day trip. And when these members of Jesus' family arrive, someone tells Jesus, while he's preaching to a large crowd, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." Jesus replies, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples he says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Well, this is an outrageous redefinition of family for a devout Jew living in ancient Palestine! To not immediately receive his visiting family is shocking. And I think it may have come as quite a surprise to his mother and to his brothers who had just come quite a distance to see him. But the real audience for this exchange would have been his disciples, because Jesus wants to show them the nature of Christian community. We are bound together, not by blood, but by the Spirit.

So, this episode serves as an important backdrop for what happens next, which is the gospel lesson appointed for today. Matthew writes, "That same day...Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea." In the midst of emotional and spiritual struggle, one can imagine the tremendous need Jesus must have for solitude and contemplation. But so many people gather around him that he's forced to get into a boat to address a great crowd. And while this gathering stands on the beach, Jesus teaches them "in parables," and he begins by saying, "Listen! A sower went out to sow."

Teaching in parables was a common practice for teachers in ancient Palestine. The parable, or *Mashal*, gives vivid, memorable expression to teaching. It may lead those who hear the parable to reflect deeply on its teaching, and it may reduce the opportunity for hostile listeners to challenge whatever is being taught. Well, the message Jesus delivers to the people gathered on the banks of the Sea of Galilee could not have been clearer—or stronger.

- I. "A Sower throws seed on the Path and the birds eat it." What does this mean? What should we hear? Jesus explains that it means whenever anyone hears the word of the kingdom and doesn't understand it, the evil one can come and snatch away what is sown in the heart.

Evil is an authentic power on this earth; and, though we may find it amusing to characterize evil as a silly little figure with horns and a pitchfork, the power of wickedness is undisputable. C. S. Lewis, in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, wrote candidly, "...the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose...I found what appalled me; a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was Legion."<sup>v</sup> Evil is a force that can shatter our attempts to live the lives we seek.

- II. "Some seed is thrown on the Rocky soil. It sprang up quickly but had no depth. Because it had no root, the plants were scorched." What does this mean? What should we hear? It means that the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet has not root, endures for a while, but when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.

Theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas writes in his powerful commentary on Matthew, "The parable of the sower is not often considered by those concerned with the loss of the church's status and membership in Europe and America, but it is hard to imagine any text more relevant to the situation of churches in the West. Why we are dying seems very simple. It is hard to be a disciple and be rich." He continues, "Surely, we may think, it cannot be that simple, but Jesus certainly seems to think that it is that simple. The lure of wealth and the cares of the world produced by wealth quite simply darken and choke our imagination. As a result, the church falls prey to the deepest enemy of the gospel, sentimentality. The gospel becomes a formula for "giving our lives meaning" without judgement."<sup>vi</sup>

- III. “Some seeds were thrown among the thorns and the thorns grew up and choked them.” What does this mean? What should we hear? There are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word and it yields nothing.

What prevents us from enjoying a positive spiritual relationship with God? What serves as a road block to a life of prayer and service?

- IV. “And, finally, there is the one who hears and understands. That one bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold...in another sixty, in another thirty...”

Biblical scholar John Meier explains, “In Palestine, sowing often precedes ploughing. The sower liberally casts his seed everywhere in the field, for he is unable to tell what may be thin topsoil. A great amount of seed may seem to be wasted, yet the success and abundance of the harvest is assured. In other words, despite so much opposition from officials and so little response from the people, Jesus expresses his confidence that God will see to the triumph of his kingdom and its proclamation.”<sup>vii</sup>

This is the measure of God’s gracious love. Even the most blessed sower can only expect to receive seven times what he had sown. Handfuls of precious seed were thrown onto the soil in faith and only a few of the many take root and prosper. Yet Jesus promises this heavenly harvest will finally be beyond our imaginings! One hundred-fold! Sixty-fold! Thirty-fold!

In other words, God is not messing around here. Listen!

In the midst of all the ugliness in this world, in the midst of all the death and the corruption and the bad news on top of bad news on top of bad news, there is a single, sacred voice beckoning us to “Listen.” And to follow wherever Christ leads.

Amen

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<sup>i</sup> J. Ted Blakley, *A Lector’s Guide and Commentary to the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*, St. Mark’s Press, Wichita, c.2010, page 318

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, page 318

<sup>iii</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version*, edited by Bruce Metzger and Roland Murphy, Oxford University Press, New York, c. 1991, page 863 (OT)

<sup>iv</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark; A Life in Sermons*, c. 2006, HarperCollins, New York, page 38

<sup>v</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, Harcourt Brace, c. 1955

<sup>vi</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Gospel According to Matthew, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, c. 2006, page 29

<sup>vii</sup> Note: I am uncertain about the precise source for this quote. I believe it comes from John Meier’s book, *A Marginal Jew; Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, c. 1991, Yale University Press

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