



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Divine Imperative

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 11, 2020

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

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

I can't think of any more challenging time for a preacher of the gospel than the period of time in which we are currently living. I've had at least five conversations this past week alone with parishioners and friends who've shared with me their depression and their anxiety over the current state of affairs. I get it. I get it. I feel it too.

From this pulpit, I toll the bell regularly for the now more than 214,000 American victims of the Coronavirus pandemic.ⁱ *The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation* at the University of Washington School of Medicine, now suggests that 395,000 people may die in the U.S. by February of 2021ⁱⁱ due to Covid-19. I toll this bell, in part, because there is so little public recognition of this enormous abyss of loss and grief by our nation's leaders. You must *acknowledge* a crisis in order to be able to *respond* to a crisis. This is a vast loss of human life, and the numbers numb us to the reality. If this were to happen to any one of your friends, or to a member of your family, or to a teacher, or a co-worker, it would be absolutely devastating.

In this same moment in our nation's history, and perhaps not coincidentally, there's a renewed cry for justice for black lives: a recognition that while all lives matter, we've treated black lives as if they didn't matter nearly as much. Far too many deaths of African-Americans at the hands of law enforcement have led us to a national moment of reckoning, a broad consensus built across racial lines that this sort of injustice must finally come to an end.

In this same moment, too, (and not at all coincidentally), we've seen the re-emergence of white supremacist groups and radicalized armed militia across the United States. Experts note these groups gathered strength after the election of our first African-American Presidentⁱⁱⁱ and now they find solace in the political rhetoric that seeks to divide us, instill fear in us, and then pit us against one another. No wonder we're feeling so depressed and anxious.

The most recent news that the Governor of Michigan was a target for kidnapping by groups like this is so completely shocking that it feels as though this news must be originating from another country—certainly *not* from the United States of America. There are fears about our upcoming election—news that *also* feels as though it came from some other country. I cannot remember, in my lifetime, a serious concern *ever*

being expressed about “the peaceful transfer of power” after a presidential election. This is new. This is new.

- Some fear the election will be stolen.
- Others fear it will be unduly influenced by foreign interests.
- Still others fear their vote may not be properly counted.

I do not recite this long litany to stoke our depression, but to give voice to what must be expressed. Churches aren't as full as they would be because the unvarnished truth is not spoken as it could be. Maybe the most crucial role for any preacher of the gospel is to break the silence, to talk about the things that nobody wants you to talk about. Therapists say depression is often related to an anger that has been repressed, and I believe we're seeing this anger being played out across a national stage, with the greatest health crisis our nation has seen in over a hundred years, serving as the backdrop.

It's natural for us to want to avoid talking about it. In fact, we'd like to talk about almost anything else! It's hard to talk about a crisis that has no visible end. We appear to be many months from having access to an effective vaccine for the Coronavirus, and instead of seeing a clear path to a time when restrictions will be lifted, we're afraid we may need to take a step backward if the infection rates begin to rise.

And right in the very middle of all of this, are the words of the Apostle Paul, sounding like an off-pitch clarion trumpet, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice.” What? You have got to be kidding me! Oh, and he goes on, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

Don't worry about anything? What a clueless, useless Pollyanna if there ever was one! What could Paul know about political turmoil or sickness and disease? What could Paul possibly know about brutality and injustice and inequality? What could Paul know about politics that do not serve the people and power that is found only in the hands of the rich? Oh, yes, I almost forgot. He just might know a thing or two about these things out of a lifetime of distress and sacrifice on behalf of Christ and the Church. His admonition to his fellow Christians to preserve their hope is meaningful because it comes from a place of having truly known suffering.

The City of New York had a program at one time to help children keep up with their school work during stays in the city's hospitals. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular classroom teacher. “We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now,” the classroom teacher said, “and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind.”

The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, “I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs.” And, when she left, she felt like she hadn't accomplished very much. But when she returned the next day, a nurse asked her, “What did you do to that boy?” The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. “No, no,” said the nurse. “You don't know what I mean. We've been so worried about that little boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to the treatment. It's as though he's decided to live.”

Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until that visiting teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to one simple realization. He expressed it this way: “They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?”^{iv}

Hope changes things! I know you are tired of this pandemic. I know you are weary of wearing masks. I know you are frustrated by other people who don't. I know the news is horrific. I know the economy is scary. But we hold a holy hope, and what we hope for always is God.

Weeks from a close national election with great consequence, no ethical preacher should be, or should even *appear* to be, partisan. But as Jesus understood so well, it is impossible to avoid being political. Politics is the process which determines who gets what. And God seems to have been, from the very beginning, very, very interested in how things get divided up. God reminds us how in the upside-down economy of the divine, the rich are poor, the weak are strong, and the powerless are given unimaginable power.

Our Presiding Bishop, The Most Reverend Michael Curry, in a recent sermon to the House of Bishops said,

“As you know, The Episcopal Church does not endorse, support, or oppose political candidates for elective office. And there is good reason for that. First, in the United States, tax-exempt, religious, and charitable organizations are, by law, prohibited from such endorsement, support, or opposition to candidates. This does not prohibit churches from engaging in voter education, voter registration, helping people get to the polls to vote, or even advocating for issues of public policy reflective of the tenants of our faith.

“And every citizen, including those of us who are members of the church have our rights and responsibilities as well.

“Secondly, there are good and faithful followers of Jesus Christ who are Episcopalian. Some are Republicans, some are Democrats, some are independents, some liberal, some centrist, some conservative. And just as we must respect the right of every citizen to cast his or her own vote according to the dictates of their conscience, so we must do so in the church, the body of Jesus Christ. And that is how it should be. The Bible says we have one Lord, one faith, one baptism, not one political party.

“But it's important to remember that partisan neutrality does not mean moral neutrality. Partisan neutrality, bidden to us by human civil law does not mean moral neutrality, because we are bidden to obey the royal law of almighty God.”^v

Yes, we—we all—hold invitations to royal wedding banquet to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Bishop Curry asks, *“What does voting have to do with the Gospel? What does voting have to do with being a Christian? An election for public office is not a popularity contest between two or more people. It's a contest of ideas about how to shape the future of a community, nation and maybe even a world. It's a contest, a debate, a discernment of moral values and their relationship to public policy. Voting is an act of moral agency. It is an act of moral discernment and decision. It is how a community or a nation decides how the moral values that it holds and shares, shape public policy and the lives of people, the children of God. It is salutary to remember that partisan neutrality does not mean moral neutrality.”^{vi}*

Jesus is mixing it up this morning with the scribes and the Pharisees when he tells them the parable about a King and a wedding feast. In the end, the people you think will be there don't come. And the people you don't expect to be there? They are everywhere. And that is the Good News that God's mercy overcomes God's justice, and even *I* might find a place at the heavenly banquet. Even *you* might find a place to sit and to rest and to feast. But, you can't just do nothing. You've got to put on a robe and look like you respect the invitation as well as the host. You've got to make some effort because if nothing has changed in you, then what really is going on?

It's just a little later in Matthew where Jesus cries, "Woe to you blind guides. Woe to you scribes and Pharisees. Hypocrites. For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith."

Paul wrote to his beloved community in Philippi a kind of love letter, really. Like a concerned parent worrying about his children, he tries to give them words of counsel and consolation in the midst of their difficulties. "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Comforting words for a fraught time. Comforting words.

And finally, some of the most beautiful language in all the epistles is offered to us when Paul concludes, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Don't spend all of your hard-earned energy worrying about the things you cannot change. Don't give yourself to fighting over mint and dill and cumin. Focus on justice, mercy, and faith. Don't be so afraid.

Hope changes things. Hope changes us!

Amen.

ⁱ *Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Research Center, Covid-19 Tracking Map*, October 10, 2020

ⁱⁱ *COVID-19 World News*, citing CNN's report of a model by *The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington School of Medicine*, October 10, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Washington Post*, "In the United States, right-wing violence is on the rise" by Wesley Lowery, Kimberly Kindy and Andrew Ba Tran, November 25, 2018

^{iv} Copied, *Bits & Pieces*, July 1991

^v The Most Reverend Michael B. Curry, Presiding Bishop and Primate, The Episcopal Church, Address to the House of Bishops, (meeting virtually), September 16, 2020.

^{vi} *Ibid.*

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