



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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

As the World Begins Again

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 13, 2020

The Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-2; John 1:6-8, 19-28

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'd like to begin this morning by sharing a poem that we are using in our liturgy, Light in the Darkness. A Service of Hope. It's a poem written by a United Methodist minister by the name of Jan Richardson, and it's titled "Blessing when the World is Ending."

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.

Somewhere
it has gone
completely dark.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the gun,
the knife,
the fist.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the slammed door,
the shattered hope.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet

that follows the news
from the phone,
the television,
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break
your heart.

But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything
but morose.
It has **not** come
to cause despair.

It is simply here
because there is nothing
a blessing
is better suited for
than an ending,
nothing that cries out more
for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.

This blessing
will not fix you,
will not mend you,
will not give you
false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.

We are, in this very moment, gently turning our faces towards the direction from which the light will come, gathering itself about us as the world begins again. This, this is what Advent is. And the world *will*

begin again, as it has done a thousand times before. After COVID-19. After the loss. After the death. After the financial ruin. After the war. After the hurricane. After the divorce. After the fire. You see, it always does. That pink candle in today's Advent wreath marks this coming hope as our biblical lessons turn more joyful in anticipation of the coming of this Light.

In the Prologue of The Gospel According to John, it says that "there was a man sent from God whose name was John." Of course, there was a long line of others before John, and there have been many others since. People are always being sent by God, you know. It's been a veritable procession of prophets and saints and other strange people sent by God since the world began. And, we must admit, some of these people sent by God have been most unusual people. Folks who lived in the wilderness, who dressed in camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey. People who sleep in parks and on sidewalks eating tofu and dandelions, who hear voices few others can hear.

After observing these prophets over the centuries, we might conclude that God does not really appreciate our carefully manicured sensitivities when it comes to the sending of holy messengers.

- Poor carpenters and wide-eyed village girls from out-of-the-way places.
- Rough fishermen, lonely shepherds, sleazy tax collectors, and folks no one on earth would think of as being wise.
- And then there is that long procession of preaching wackos, which stretches on and on from ancient times right up to include your preacher appointed for this morning.

In today's gospel, the authorities in town, in Jerusalem, sent a group of priests and Levites to check out this strange man and his followers. They were trying to determine just who this character was who wandered through the wilderness preaching repentance and "making straight the way of the Lord." How unsettling it is for all of us establishment, metropolitan clergy to have someone rocking the boat from outside of town. It doesn't require much imagination to imagine what the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem was saying about John the Baptist.

And so an appointed representative of Jerusalem's religious power-elite posed this simple question to John, "Who are you?" The great question which presents itself to every living, breathing person is the question of identity. It's the question that can only be authentically asked and answered within oneself. It's a question truly asked of the soul: "Who am I?"

Many years ago, a friend of mine was named the Rector of a prominent church on the Upper East Side. New to New York City, and feeling no small amount of pride in having achieved such a highly coveted position within the Church, he was walking, head-held-high, to an appointment in the parish. Dressed in a new pinstripe suit and a crisp clerical collar, he was crossing Madison Avenue when a disheveled looking woman pushing a shopping cart approached him from the opposite direction. She stopped in the middle of the crosswalk, looked him slowly up and down and then said in a loud voice, "Honey, I don't know who you are or where you're from, but you're ripping off *somebody*." And, having offered her moment of judgement, she continued on her way.

My friend tells this story with a great sense of humor, but there is also that shred of doubt that lies in each of us. Who am I, really? Is it possible that others see me more clearly than I can see myself?

Who am I? Am I primarily a father or a mother or a grandparent? A wife, a husband, someone single? Am I, at the heart of it, an attorney or a student or an accountant? Is that who I am? Am I a retiree, an up-and-comer, or a failure? Am I fundamentally a bad person, a liar, a cheat? Am I a person of substance, a person of dignity and compassion? Am I honest? Kind? Am I the person I wanted to become when I first set out on my journey into this world?

Who are *you*, and what do *you* have to say about yourself? Because John's call to repentance (in preparation for the coming Messiah) invites this sort of deep exploration. Most of us have more than one identity, don't we? We're often described by our relationships to the other people in our lives. Some of us are parents, and all of us are someone's children. Some of us are married, and some of us are in loving relationships. And all of us want and need to be loved.

We may be defined by the responsibilities we carry or by the organizations to which we belong. Are you a saleswoman or a manager or a doctor or a partner or the owner? We're employees and members and officers of clubs and organizations, chairs of panels and committees, and when these responsibilities come to an end, that too is reflected in our self-identity. "I'm retired now" is too seldom said with a sense of having completed the well-run race. And, when people say, "I've been laid off" or "I'm unemployed" or "I've been fired," you can hear the sense of diminishment in their voices. We are *so much more* than what we do, but it doesn't always feel that way.

Some of us define ourselves more by our personalities or character traits. You'll hear someone say, "Well, I'm just a candid so-and-so." Or, someone else may say, "I'm a very private person." Or, "I'm just a nice guy." Or, "I'm a person who really doesn't give a damn about that." We can also be described by what we believe; "I'm an atheist." "I'm an agnostic." "I'm a Christian." "I'm Muslim." Or, even more specifically, "I'm an Episcopalian" or "I'm Roman Catholic." Of course, all of these descriptors speak to who we are, but ultimately, we exist totally beyond *any* of these partial descriptions of ourselves.

John the Baptist described who he was in classical "*via negativa*" form. John said, in essence, "If you want to know who I am, let me begin by telling you who I am not."

Reminds me of an old story about a Texas Ranger who rode up on a solitary cowboy as the lone rider was making his way across the sparse Texas Panhandle. And, as he pulls his horse to a halt, the Ranger's eyes narrow and he says, "Cowboy, I've got to bring you in." And the cowboy returns the Ranger's cool stare and says, "Well, why's that?" And the Ranger says, "I've got to bring you in because you're a liar and a swindler, and a card-cheatin', gun-slingin', no count, horse-thievin', son of a scoundrel." And the cowboy pauses for a moment and replies, "Now hold on there, Ranger. I ain't never cheated at cards."ⁱ

Sometimes we know who we are by who or what we are not. John tells the Priests and the Levites sent by the temple officials who and what he is not.

- He's not the Messiah, the anointed One of God who is to come—so he can put their minds at ease on that score.
- He's not Elijah, the anticipated immediate forerunner of the true Messiah.
- He's not a pre-eminent prophet, walking in the footsteps of Moses.

In fact, John the baptizer makes no claim for himself within the bounds of Judaism. He claims no status or entitlement. John is, as Professor Massey Shepherd once said, "in all humility, a voice of God, sent from God not merely as a forerunner to the true Messiah, but as the first witness to and believer in him. He is indeed a burning, shining lamp; a light that testifies to the true Light now appearing after him in time, but existing before him in all eternity."ⁱⁱ John is the one who can identify the true Light who comes among us and whom we do not know, and we desperately need someone to introduce us to this One who is coming.

What can you say about yourself? What do you know about yourself for certain? And what do you know about the true Light? What might it be like to allow a small, smoldering ember of this faith to be fanned into a burning flame, even an ember so small as to be more a sense or a feeling than a thing?

Is it so impossible? Could not the God, who parted the Red Sea and delivered the children of Israel out of Egypt, draw even such a one as you into God's holy presence? You don't think it to be beyond God's power, do you? What would it be like to lay down your resistance, your skepticism, maybe even your anger, and crack open the door of your heart to love? Perhaps that's what is meant when we speak in Advent about making room for Christ to be born yet again in our hearts.

Is it so improbable that the God who sent his only Son as an atoning sacrifice, as an *at-one-ment* with all humanity, could cultivate belief from the smallest fragment of faith within you? Do you consider yourself so beyond the pale of God, so lost in this darkness that surrounds us that you can't begin to even approach the warmth of this true Light?

In First Thessalonians we find the caution, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good..." I believe there is power in those words. Test it. Examine it. Give it a try.

This blessing
will not fix you,
will not mend you,
will not give you
false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.

AMEN.

ⁱ Copied, Source unknown.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Massey Shepherd, Notes from a lecture at Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, California, 1981

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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