



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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

We Are Always Searching For The Light

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 10, 2021

The First Sunday of Epiphany; The Baptism of Our Lord

Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

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

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

We are always searching for the light. Albert Einstein thought the concept of light so important he declared at one point that he wanted to reflect on the nature of light for the rest of his life.ⁱ He thought all the mysteries of the universe might be unraveled in that singular pursuit.

We are in the liturgical season of Epiphany during which we focus upon the manifestation of Christ's light in the world. World Religions scholar Huston Smith writes, "Light is the universal metaphor for God and what science has discovered about physical light helps us to understand... why light is uniquely suited for that role."ⁱⁱ

"If we look beneath biochemistry at nature's foundations, we see that light's creativity 'comes to light' there through its early appearance in the sequence that produces matter in successive stages. (The phrase 'come to light' is not a pun.) Everywhere in recorded history light doubles for intelligibility, comprehension, understanding and—underlying all of these—conscious awareness."ⁱⁱⁱ

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2020 was a year filled with images and experiences few of us had ever seen or experienced before.

- Vacant streets *at rush hour* in Midtown Manhattan!
- Restaurants, bars, theaters, and concert halls: all closed, even on a beautiful Saturday night.
- Long lines of people waiting for bags of food in one of the richest cities and countries in the world.
- Refrigerated trucks parked outside of hospitals and used as temporary morgues for the horrific pandemic death toll.
- Empty churches during Holy Week and on Easter and at Christmas.

Pandemics are strange occurrences, but not everything we saw or experienced last year was related to the pandemic. We also witnessed a series of incidents, often captured on video, in which unarmed men and women of color lost their lives to police officers, turning what was previously unimaginable into an undeniable, graphic reality. And, in case we still weren't willing to believe our eyes the first time, we saw it happen over and over and over again.

There were also experiences of extraordinarily wonderful things as well.

- We saw first-responders being cheered nightly by a grateful city.
- We saw brave medical workers, struggling through their exhaustion, risking their lives to fight a virus some of their fellow citizens refused to believe exists.
- And, in total, we saw more than 50,000 people watch our Candlelight Carols, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day services on the internet this past Christmas.

We were also witnesses to, and sometimes the recipients of, innumerable small acts of kindness.

- Meals prepared by friends for those who couldn't get out.
- Shopping trips made for older neighbors.
- Calls to "just to check-in" on those living alone.

We also offered some random acts of kindness to ourselves when our social calendars became less busy, and we spent less time commuting to and from work. Then we were able to become reacquainted with the people we love and with whom we live.

We are always looking for the light.

All of these actions revealed our very best versions of ourselves in the most trying of times. History often reveals that the worst of times brings out the best in people. In that same spirit, we saw the streets of our cities, from one end of this nation to the other, fill with hundreds of thousands of citizens marching for racial justice and equality, for weeks on end. Peaceful protests with rare exception, which certainly must reveal something about the deepest yearnings of our nation's soul.

And now, in this New Year, we've witnessed something else we've never seen before. This past week we watched the Capitol of our nation be overrun by a violent mob, apparently incited by the rhetoric of the President of the United States, leaving multiple people injured and some dead. (I can't believe I just said that sentence because it seems so absolutely surreal.) Today, we hold feelings unfamiliar for most Americans: feelings of fear and concern for the very existence of our democracy in a time of great trial, along with no small amount of frustration and anger. As a citizen of the United States, I've never had a feeling quite like this.

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The videos that have surfaced of this sad incident reveal the people involved had been told a lie and they absolutely believed it.

- The lie was repeated in the echo chambers of social media.
- The lie was repeated by religious leaders who twisted Christian theology.
- The lie was repeated by media outlets lacking journalistic ethics and integrity.
- The lie was repeated by white nationalist and anti-Semitic hate groups for their own hate-filled reasons.
- The lie was repeated by ambitious elected officials who sought to exploit the lie for their own gain.

- The lie was repeated by innocent people who trusted the sources from which it came and who blindly followed leaders unworthy of their allegiance.

Lies do not thrive in the light. They thrive in the darkness amidst confusion, where it's difficult to separate fact from fiction. In courts of law, where there are severe consequences for lying, people are more inclined to tell the "whole truth" under oath. On cable talk shows and on social media, there are no such incentives for such rigorous truth telling.

No fewer than 70 judges, 38 appointed by Republicans, concluded there was no misconduct that would affect the outcome of the most recent U.S. Presidential election.^{iv} The Republican-appointed Attorney General, William P. Barr, said on December 1st that FBI agents and U.S. attorneys have been investigating complaints, but "to date, we have not seen fraud on a scale that could have effected a different outcome in the election."^v In other words, the election was not "stolen." No misconduct by election officials was identified. None. President Trump simply lost the popular vote and the Electoral College as well.

Christians live in a world where we believe the light was separated from the darkness by the very word of God. Truth, for Christians, is crucial and revelatory. Every single truth leads into greater truth and, finally, into *all* truth. The Devil and Satan, the most familiar symbols for evil in scripture, are described as "the deceiver of the whole world." In the Gospel According to John, Jesus says to his opponents, "When (the devil) lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies." (John 8:44) Every single lie leads to greater deception and, finally, to complete dishonesty.

And we—well, *Christians are always searching for the light.*

The New Testament lessons for today focus on the personal and spiritual transformation that occurs in Baptism, the principal Christian sacrament. Baptism is an essential part of Christian identity because it reveals who we are and to whom we belong. By his own example at the Jordan River, Jesus embraced this sacramental act for the remission of sins and as a sign of spiritual rebirth. Later, in his post-resurrection appearance to his disciples, the explicit instructions Jesus gave to them was to do what? To "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

What does our baptism mean? For some, it's only a strange memory of something mysterious that happened long ago. In faith traditions that practice infant baptism, it's a rite over which the child being baptized has absolutely no control and plays only the most passive part. There are many reasons why children might be baptized.

- Maybe your parents decided you would be baptized because they wanted you to share in the connection with Christ and the Church they had experienced and valued.
- Or they decided you would be baptized because they wanted you to be protected and to have a sense of belonging to a community of faith.
- Or they decided you would be baptized so that you might know some of the joys a relationship with God through Christ can engender.

We take the newly born and introduce them to our God through the initiation rites of the Christian family. We bring adults, who come later in their life to the Christian faith, through the very same ritual.

As the baptism liturgy from *The Book of Common Prayer* states, "We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his

fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

We rise from the waters of baptism, cleansed from the sin in which we are inescapably formed, and we are “born again,” language most Episcopalians find too foreign and, well, much too Baptist! (By the way, I think the passage from Acts is the clearest evidence that the Ephesians were Episcopalian because when Paul asks them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” they replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”) We rise from the chaotic waters of baptism as new creatures, reborn and transformed. And, as in the baptism of Jesus, we believe the power of the Holy Spirit falls upon us in our baptism as well.

Those baptized as adults have the advantage of choosing this rite, of making these promises and remembering them. The baptism of infants, on the other hand, places a tremendous responsibility upon parents, godparents, and grandparents to constantly remind the child who has been baptized *why* they were baptized. Children need to be repeatedly reminded about what difference their baptism makes in their lives so they can be prepared to make their own promises in Confirmation. It’s a fundamental question of establishing their identity as Christians.

And, just as children need to be reminded of the power of the rite they have undergone, all of us must be reminded of the difference our baptism makes in our lives: who are we and to whom do we belong? When we are made Christians, we are made to be very different in a world that is already quite suspicious of differences. We are not like everyone else. We can’t be. Our beliefs and our values disallow it.

The power Christians most value in the world is not a muscular, worldly power but a paradoxical and robust spiritual power which, when exercised, has the capacity to not only change one’s life, but can change the whole world. Indeed, it may be the only thing that ever has.

1. Material possessions can only be of passing interest to people of faith, because possessions belong to a world in which they only temporarily reside.
2. Care for those in need is also at the heart of the baptized Christian. As the author of the Letter of James argued, “So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”
3. Truth, that concept much debated in American public life in recent days, must matter more to people of faith than it matters to others because Christians believe evil resides in the lie.

Henry David Thoreau once asked, “With all your science, can you tell how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?” It’s a great question, and while I’m afraid I can’t answer Mr. Thoreau’s query precisely, I do believe that at baptism the Holy Spirit, that brilliant, eternal light, is irrefutably present.

What is baptism? Perhaps the 14th century Byzantine lay theologian Nicolas Cabasilas describes it best. (If you will please forgive the lack of inclusive language from the 14th century.) Cabasilas writes, “As the name of the Trinity is invoked, the candidate is immersed three time in the water and then three times rises up from the water once more; and immediately he enters into possession of all he seeks. He is born and created. He receives the good seal; he is granted all the happiness he desires; darkness before, he now becomes light. Non-existent before, he now receives existence. God claims him for his own and adopts him as a son. From prison and utter enslavement, he is led to a royal throne. The water of baptism destroys one life and reveals another; it drowns the old and raises up the new. To be baptized is to be born according to Christ; it is to receive existence, to come into being out of nothing.”^{vi}

We are always searching for the light. In baptism, we find it.

Amen.

ⁱ Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters; The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*, Harper/San Francisco, c. 2001, p. 137

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 137

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 138-139

^{iv} Meryl Kornfield, *The Washington Post*, (posted January 3, 2021, 9:41 pm) *From a Presidential Commission to Trump-Nominated Judges, Here's Who Has Rebuked Trump's Voter Fraud Claims*

^v *Ibid*, *Has the Federal Government Investigated or Found Any Evidence of Voting Fraud?*

^{vi} Nicolas Cabasilas, 14th century Lay Theologian, quoted, *Synthesis, Year B, Epiphany 1, January 9, 2000*, p. 3

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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