



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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

“I hold my breath and let the wonder in.”

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 7, 2021

The Fifth Sunday of Epiphany; The Baptism of Our Lord

Isaiah 40:21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

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

“Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” Jesus expresses a precise clarity in The Gospel According to Mark. In the first chapter of the oldest gospel, he clearly articulates his purpose, which is to “proclaim the message,” “for that,” he says, “is what I came out to do.” He doesn’t remain at home. He’s not just some local miracle-worker. Jesus has a far different calling—a specific and unique *raison d’être*.

He’s called to proclaim a message, and what, exactly, is that message? The message is that a veritable piece of God has come to inhabit flesh and blood. A part of God—God’s only Son, to use different words or the Messiah, to use yet other words—is present in the world. And, therefore, the great transformation is beginning.

And, in this strange instance, the person is the message. Jesus is the Word, the very manifestation of God in the world. Indeed, when he announces, “The kingdom of God is at hand” that is quite literally true. The Kingdom of God *is* at hand. Right there. Right there in front of us. The person of Jesus communicates as much of who God is (and what God is like) as any language ever could. This man, who is the message, brings light and life and, crucially, healing into a world where darkness, death, and disease are always threatening.

“They brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.” When they knew he had this gift, they didn’t hesitate to give him plenty of opportunities to use it. You can imagine “the whole city gathered at the door.” So many that, in the early morning, he has to step away from the city to pray, to regenerate, and to recharge. So many. Just so many.

In the midst of a pandemic that has disrupted so much of daily life, we’ve become more focused on healing and health. We ask our friends, “Have you received your vaccination?” Or, “When do you

think you can get one?" "How are you feeling?" is now a question asked by people genuinely wanting to know the answer.

It's interesting how people of faith have approached illness over the centuries. Almost every seriously ill patient I've ever visited in the hospital thought their illness was, at least at first, some sort of punishment. Parents with children in the hospital almost always blamed themselves for their child's illness, even when there was no sensible basis for their guilt.

It's also interesting how people understand the role faith plays in illness. In Christian orthodoxy, the faith to be made well does not have to come from the one who is sick, contrary to what some "faith healers" would have you believe. These seeming quacks exercise an often-pernicious misconception that when someone they've prayed for is not healed, it's because the person didn't have enough faith. How much faith did the four-day-dead Lazarus have in order to come back to life? Not much. And I confess that it makes me furious when I see gravely ill people beating themselves up for their perceived lack of faith. "If you would only pray harder, Joanie, I just know you can beat this." This is where we can see how bad theology has real consequences.

But none of this is from God. None of it. Jesus never viewed illness as some sort of retribution from the Almighty. For him, much like for us, illness was understood more as an "incompleteness," a literal "un-wholeness." Healing, therefore, was seen as the return to wholeness. Here we find the origins of our word *holy* from the word *whole*. To be "holy" is to be "whole," as whole and complete as God created us to be.

P.C. Ennis observes, "When Jesus said to the woman who pushed her way through the crowd just to touch the hem of his garment, "Daughter, your faith has made you well." It was to reclaim the health in her that had been "broken" or somehow "lost." It was restoring her to completeness. It was reassembling the broken parts, if you will, back into a complete and healthy whole.

Ennis continues, "One cannot dismiss as insignificant the number of times the Scriptures refer to touch (in regards to healing). In the text, Jesus came and took Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up and the fever left her. Throughout both testaments the angel who touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh, Jairus' daughter, the blind man whom Jesus 'touched' and so forth: there is one incident after another pointing to the power of touch. It might even be said that in Scripture touch is a metaphor for intimacy, for presence, for relationship. Some theologians even suggest that to be 'created in the image of God' means that we are created for relationship."ⁱⁱ No wonder COVID-19 is so hard.

Many years ago, at the end of my first year of seminary, I became very ill. I became sicker and sicker, and finally my wife took me to the hospital where it was determined I had a perforated appendix that needed to be removed. When I asked the doctor if I had a "burst appendix," something I'd heard about before, he said, "Well, that may be a little dramatic." But I was really sick and I was frightened and facing surgery, and we didn't really know anyone outside the seminary community. So Ellen called the priest where I had just been chosen to do my field work, The Reverend Dr. Mark Anschutz. (Some of you will remember Mark because he's been a guest preacher and teacher here at St. Bart's.)

Mark came to the hospital right away. He didn't stay long, but he spoke to me and he prayed with me, and, at the end of his prayer, he reached up and made the sign of the cross on my forehead. It was just the smallest, slightest gesture; but, in that moment, it meant the entire world to me. When Mark made the sign of the cross on my forehead, I can't explain it, but it gave me such a feeling of

peace and relief. I felt that everything was going to be fine no matter what happened, and I felt that God was with me. I don't remember what he said. I'm sure it was helpful. I don't remember the words of his prayer. I'm sure it was faithfully rendered. What I remember was his touch.

Touch is important! And the lack of touch, the lack of handshakes and hugs and kisses on the cheek is no small thing we've been missing throughout this past year.

Now, I have been hearing a variety of stories about how many of you have been reaching out to your friends and neighbors and to other members of the congregation during this time. And you are completely confounding every single stereotype about cold and unfeeling New Yorkers there has ever been. It really is difficult, and sometimes even ill-advised, for clergy to visit apartments and hospitals because of the pandemic. Yet I hear stories of meals being made for folks who are shut-in, stories of people being accompanied to their doctor's appointments, of groceries being delivered and medicines being picked up.

I have to tell you that, in so many ways, my dream for how this congregation might pull together and be a deeper community of faith are, in these difficult times, becoming realized in ways I could not have possibly imagined. Now I know we haven't built the Kingdom here just yet, but these are important signs of life that the folks who predict the end of mainline churches haven't yet seen.

Gerald May, a physician practicing psychotherapy in the Washington, D.C. area, writes, "God's grace through community involves something far greater than other people's support and perspective. The power of grace is nowhere as brilliant nor as a mystical as in communities of faith. Its power includes not just love that comes from people and through people but love that pours forth among people, as if through the very spaces between one person and then next. Just to be in such an atmosphere is to be bathed in the healing power."ⁱⁱⁱ

Here we are, bathed in the healing power of God, and we don't always realize it. We are encircled and lifted up by these holy connections, and all we have to do is to recognize them. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? What a soaring, poetic proclamation of truth with a capital T. The opening chapters of 2nd Isaiah invite us to reflect upon the enormity of God's power. Truth be told, we actually *have* known and we really *have* heard and it *has* been told to us, and we, well, we simply haven't begun to comprehend it. Even now, after all these centuries, we are still trying to make sense of it.

In his book *Moral Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, Dr. Richard Selzer writes, "I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted, palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed to remove the tumor in her cheek. I had cut the little nerve.

"The young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. 'Will my mouth always be like this?' she asks. 'Yes,' I say, 'it will. It is because the nerve was cut.' She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles, 'I like it' he says, 'It is kind of cute.' He bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close that I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate her, to show her that their kiss still works. I hold my breath and let the wonder in."^{iv}

Ahh, the wonder.

We are all made whole by the love of an unimaginably loving God and by the love that originates in that God: the love we share with one another.

Woe be unto me if I do not preach this gospel, this “good news,” this wonder, this deep truth with profound gratitude.

Amen.

ⁱ *Feasting on the Word; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, (Westminster/Knox Press, Louisville, Ky) c. 2008, p. 334

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 334

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, pp. 334-335 from *Addiction and Grace*, Gerald G. May, (Harper and Row, San Francisco) c.1991, p.173

^{iv} *Moral Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, Richard Selzer, Simon & Schuster, New York, c. 1974, pp 45-46

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