



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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

## Lifted Up

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 14, 2021*

*The Fourth Sunday in Lent*

*Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21*

*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*

“Jesus said, ‘Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.’” (John 3:14)

A year is a long time: 365 days; 525 thousand, 600 minutes; 31 million, 536 thousand seconds. All of those moments of insight, despair, confusion, fear, grief, illumination, and, yes, hope. It has been one year since the COVID-19 outbreak was designated a world-wide pandemic. One year since we abruptly cancelled in-person worship here at St. Bart's and began the race to find masks and gloves and hand sanitizer. It's been a year of being pushed inward; a year of searching our interior and spiritual selves. In fact, it may be the longest Lenten season in modern history.

Five hundred forty-five thousand deaths, now more than half a million people. It is, finally, incomprehensible. Words fail and gestures ring hollow. Still, we see light. We are now beginning to see our way through to the end, even as we look back and marvel at what we've endured. We are beginning to see what has been lifted up in front of us.

The passage from the Hebrew Bible we heard read this morning comes from the fourth book of the Pentateuch. Its English title, *Numbers*, is a translation of its title in the ancient Greek editions, *Arithmoi*, a title which highlights the two military censuses which occur in chapters 1 and 26. However, its Hebrew title is a more precise description of the book's contents. In Hebrew, the book is called *Bemidbar*, that is, *In the Wilderness*, because it retells the story of the Israelites making their 40-year journey from Mt. Sinai to the borders of the Promised Land.<sup>i</sup>

This year has taught us something about being in the wilderness. Scholar Ted Blakely suggests an even more accurate title for Numbers might be *Grumbings in the Wilderness*. Listen to them grumble! “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” (Reminds me of a long family car trip I once took.) Out of their deep unhappiness, the people speak not only against Moses; they speak against the LORD.

“(One clergyman) says that every church he has ever been a part of has had a ‘Let’s Go Back to Egypt Committee,’ a group opposed to any kind of change, who are always wanting to get things back to the way they used to be.”<sup>ii</sup>

The LORD responds to the Israelites lack of faith in his wisdom by sending a plague of venomous snakes. Yeah, we’re not messing around here. In the Hebrew Bible, disrespecting the Almighty has consequences.

So, the people quickly acknowledge their sin and beg that these snakes be taken away. But the LORD chooses not to respond to that specific request and, instead, instructs Moses to create a bronze serpent, an icon of sorts, to remind the people of their sins (as well as God’s mercy). If they look upon this icon, the LORD promises, they will not die from their snakebites. They place it on a pole, and hope is raised up among them.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul also seeks to show that God’s judgement is balanced by God’s mercy. He writes, “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...by grace you have been saved...And raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

Note that in each of these lessons there is a “lifting up, a raising up.” And in today’s gospel lesson, it’s Jesus who recalls this episode when he says, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

In his first letter to Corinthians, the Apostle Paul lists *faith* as one of the “gifts of the Spirit,” along with “wisdom, knowledge, healing, miracles, prophecy, the discerning of spirits, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues.”<sup>iii</sup> The passage implies faith is not a gift to be earned, but one to be granted by the Holy Spirit. Our epistle lesson says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” Greater faith is bestowed upon some of us and others of us have been differently gifted.

I think back on the years I spent in biblical and theological education and I marvel at how my own faith stood resistant to the withering intellectual assaults one faces in four years of college, three years of seminary, a clinical pastoral residency, and, later, some 40 years of parish and diocesan ministry.

Anti-religious prejudice is accepted in elite intellectual circles in a way few other prejudices ever would be.

As an undergraduate, I watched my fellow students have their faith dismantled as they learned how difficult it is to hold onto a fundamentalist interpretation of the scriptures. The sand upon which their belief systems had been constructed fell away and some found it nearly impossible to regroup. A few managed to find their way to other religious traditions, and I always thought it was interesting that the rigorous critical tools they applied to Christianity were seldom applied in the same way to Buddhism, Hinduism, or other Eastern traditions.

There was a time when I did not believe in God. I was somewhere between being a boy and a man, but a developing person nonetheless, whose thoughts were firmly anchored in the notion that God did not exist. Why didn’t I believe? Well, if for no other reason, I could see there was enough pain and suffering in the world to raise real doubt about the existence of a benevolent God.

God had never spoken to me. God had never appeared to me. The senses offered no confirmation. God could not be seen, heard, or touched, and could neither be smelled nor tasted. The existence of God just couldn't be proven. (They got me on Santa and the tooth fairy, and I just wasn't falling for it again!) And, if there really was a God, why did God maintain such a distance? Why remain so concealed behind such impenetrable mystery? What did God have to hide?

And on and on my questions went. It also happened to be a convenient rebellion against my parents, at precisely the age I was seeking distance from whatever it was my parents might hold dear. But adolescent atheism turned out to be a very empty place to be. To place your hope in something which does not exist leaves you with an empty feeling in the pit of your stomach. For me, it felt as if it was always night and never day. The joys of life felt false, and the challenges of life all felt insurmountable. My mind went round and round. It felt better to believe there was a God. It just felt intellectually dishonest. Still, there was no more proof for God's lack of existence than there was proof that God did, in fact, exist.

A gifted mathematics teacher was appointed to teach the Sunday School I was attending. (Now don't be shocked. Sunday schools are filled with bright, young atheists.) Mr. Funderberg was a dazzling teacher, and he invited the class to think about incomprehensible things. He spoke about the mathematical concept of infinity. He spoke intelligently about the limits of logic. He didn't push, nor did he need to. He knew the wisdom of the old saying, "The harder the sell, the softer the product."

He simply beckoned our small group of young theologians, enticing us to go bigger, deeper, farther in our thinking. He was not worried about those of us who expressed our sincere doubts. He wasn't afraid of complexity or incongruity or even incomprehensibility. He knew a too-easily comprehended God would never hold our short attention spans and probably wasn't even worthy of the divine title. God was, after all, so much bigger than that.

And slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, I began to sense a small, fragile seed of belief growing. Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us. We imagine it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers."<sup>iv</sup>

- Steeped in its burning layers, I began to see evidence for God in sunrises and fireflies.
- I saw God's presence in loving friends and family members.
- I heard God's voice in the words of the liturgy.
- I began to offer my trust to what I could not and did not understand.
- I tasted God in the Eucharist and smelled God in the wine and in the incense.

I fell more and more in love with the questions and I simply couldn't resist a God who "...so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." So loved the world. So loved the world. This wasn't the wrath-filled deity I was raised to fear, the one I later came to distrust and despise. I think I've spent most of my life preaching against that imposter. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Something had been lifted up in front of me.

The world is such a fragile and tender space. Someone once observed that we would be far kinder to others if we knew what was going on in their interior lives. We would be more sensitive, more understanding, more patient if we knew the private battles they were waging.

- The person walking slowly on the sidewalk we just can't wait to get around.
- The person in the checkout line who's confused by the credit card reader.
- The person who always seems so angry for reasons which completely escape us.

With what are they struggling? How heroic, how epic are their efforts?

It's a particular privilege of clergy to hear the stories of those who have lost so much in this pandemic. To hear about the loss of life partners, to feel the pain of hearing something in the kitchen and realizing there is no longer anyone there to make a sound. The toothbrush that sits unused, useless, but which cannot be discarded. The smell of perfume on clothing that must eventually be given to charity—but not today. The haunting feeling that we did not show them enough how much we loved them, that we did not share our profound indebtedness for the joy they brought to our lives.

We have experienced a year of loss. Some of us, of course, have experienced much more loss than others, but virtually no one has gone through the past year unscathed. I once thought the young were receiving the better part of all this, and then I read the *Times* article<sup>v</sup> some of you may have read last week, which suggests the lives of older persons were, in general, less disrupted by the pandemic than the lives of younger people. Coping mechanisms built up over time by people over 50, left them better equipped to manage the strains of isolation and deferred gratification. (We may also note that a year out of a 60-year old's life is not nearly as long as a year taken from a 20-year old's life, but I digress...)

In the midst of the loss, something is being lifted up. Something is being raised up. In this season of Lent, we are preparing to see Christ lifted high upon a cross, and then we shall see him raised up from the death and the grave to sit at the right hand of the Father. For Christians, death does not have the last word. We are getting our hearts and our minds prepared for that even now.

Lionel Basney writes, "A religious event that does not change the meaning of light and dark, fire and water, food and drink, field and city, war and peace, birth and death..., slavery and freedom, has too superficial a connection with us. One that does can create culture... Not a new mind, but a new world. Conversion changes the actual; things look and sound different."<sup>vi</sup>

I like the story of "William Wilberforce, who was discouraged one night in the early 1790's after yet another defeat in his 10-year-battle against the slave trade in England. Tired and frustrated, he opened his Bible and began to leaf through it when a small piece of paper fell out and fluttered to the floor. It was a letter by John Wesley, the Anglican priest and founder of the Methodist movement, written shortly before his death. Wilberforce read the letter again:

"Unless the divine power has raised you up... I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that (abominable practice of slavery), which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? Oh, be not weary of well-doing. Go on in the name of God, and in the power of His might."<sup>vii</sup>

In this hour, in this very moment, we too, are being raised up. We are being raised up with Christ by the divine power. We are being raised up to serve others, to overcome the evils of this world. We are being raised up to believe what we know in our hearts to be true. We are being raised up with

all those who have gone before us: raised up to comfort the grieving and to prepare for that great celebration which is yet to come.

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> J. Ted Blakley, *A Lector's Guide & Commentary to The Revised Common Lectionary, Year B*, St. Mark's Press, Wichita, Kansas, c. 2011, p. 141

<sup>ii</sup> Craig Kocher, *Feasting on the Word; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, c. 2008, pp. 98-100

<sup>iii</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12: 8-10, *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version

<sup>iv</sup> Annie Dillard, *Notre Dame Magazine*, "Holy Sparks: A Prayer for the Silent God," Winter, 1998-99

<sup>v</sup> Benedict Carey, *The New York Times*, "Why Older People Managed to Stay Happier Through the Pandemic," March 12, 2021

<sup>vi</sup> Lionel Basney, *American Scholar*, "Immanuel's Ground," Volume 68, No. 3, Summer, 1999

<sup>vii</sup> Illustration from *Daily Bread*, June 16, 1989

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