



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

The Last Sermon

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 5, 2021

The Second Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

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

Over the course of some 40 years of preaching, in a variety of different contexts, I've sometimes wondered what I would preach if I knew I only had one sermon left to give. Charles Spurgeon, that great 18th century evangelical preacher, used to advise clergy to, "Preach as a dying man to dying men. Preach as if never to preach again."

Now, please don't worry. This isn't any kind of announcement. I don't have a terminal illness—other than the terminal condition we all live under as human beings. There are no plans to leave St. Bart's or the Big City. Still, I do wonder: If John was "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord,'" what should *my* voice be crying? What would I want to tell you if I had only this one sermon in which to do it?

To begin with, I would want to say that Christ, whose birth we are preparing for in this season of watching and waiting, is worth it. Having a relationship with God through Christ is worth it.

- It's worth struggling through your personal doubts.
- It's worth dealing with the imperfections of a Christian community or a lumbering church bureaucracy.
- It's worth straining to listen for that still small voice of God in the midst of the other (and usually much louder) voices.

Yes, you can, of course, have a relationship with God outside of the church; but Jesus said that the Christian community was the "Body of Christ," and in my experience, it's pretty difficult to be in a deep relationship if the relationship is not *embodied* in some fashion. Most Christians find they struggle without regular contact with other believers who are on the same path. They find they need others with whom they can share their faith as well as their doubts.

All of this is to say, and perhaps rather inelegantly, that my relationship to God through Christ in prayer and in worship has been the most mind-blowing, unexpected, and transformative experience of my entire life. I was baptized at the age of twelve, and now, after fifty-three years of baptized life, this relationship is as deep and as sustaining as it has ever been.

I had loving parents and grandparents. I have a loving family, loving friends. But I would say that the relationship with God, cultivated in Christian community, sustained, nurtured and grown in a *theologically*

broad church, is the most powerful relationship of my life. It's a relationship that has sustained me through some really hard moments. I've had, like all of us, a few public successes to be certain; but they often paper over a long litany of private failures—all those things “done and left undone.”

We all try to shout our successes from the rooftops while we attempt to bury our most difficult and painful experiences all together. But every time I've ever spoken about heartbreak or grief or loss or brokenness from this pulpit? You can rest assured that I was speaking about topics with which I have had intimate experience.

And, it's no joke when I tell you that I do not know what would have become of me if it were not for the presence and blessing of God in my life. I honestly don't know who I would be or what I would have become without God.

If this was my last sermon, I'd want you to know that.

The second thing I'd want to tell you revolves around guilt. I know feeling guilty *can* be a healthy thing—like an alarm that goes off when you're doing something you shouldn't be doing. But there is another kind of guilt that is soul-sucking and, frankly, worthless.

As a priest and as a bishop, I understand and acknowledge the sanctity of the confessional. I was once subpoenaed in the hopes I would reveal pastoral information given to me by a parishioner. Fortunately, the judge in the case decided he would not press the matter further, and I was excused from being asked to testify. But I was prepared to go to jail to preserve the sanctity of that confidence.

So, I fully understand that everything given to a priest in confession is sacred. That being said, may I reveal a general observation without revealing anything specific or confidential? Most of the confessions I've heard over the course of my ministry have been related to sexual sins. And I fully realize that marital promises are important, and faithful commitments are the bedrock of all our relationships. Our bodies and the bodies of others should be treated as temples and with respect.

That being said, I would observe that people are often tortured about these things. They often feel as though they cannot be forgiven for these sins. Every priest can tell you about the person who spoke to them at some party or stopped them on the street to ask about some adolescent sin. So I must tell you that Jesus had comparatively little to say about sexual sin.

The woman caught in adultery is shown striking compassion by Jesus. (Do we ever wonder why the man involved is never mentioned? Just sayin'.) Jesus says, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” As the crowd disperses, Jesus says, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

A bishop once told me that he thought the most crucial part of Christian theology we do *not* understand is related to the Doctrine of the Incarnation: that notion that Christ is both fully human and fully divine. Oh, we get the divine part; but it's the bodily human person of Christ—the sweaty, sticky, smelly enfleshed God—that we have such difficulty comprehending. If I had only one last opportunity to speak with you, I would urge you to lay these burdens down. Confess your sins, yes, confess them all; but then believe they are forgiven and do not let them haunt the rest of your life.

Perhaps related to this is the persistent anxiety so many of us carry around with us. Most of us are pretty knowledgeable about our shortcomings. We can be positively ruthless as we examine all the qualities we do not possess, and we become very vague (and largely unconvinced) when it comes to taking in God's

grace and forgiveness. Yes, I suppose you can preach about it too much, but I've preached about it so much primarily because I have a sense it hasn't yet found a comfortable home with my listeners.

I say it over and over again. You are loved. You are forgiven. You are redeemed. But I sense that every single time I say it, someone, in the back of their mind, is whispering to themselves, "Yes, but he doesn't know about me. He doesn't know about my sins. He's not mentioning the thing about which I'm most ashamed."

Have you ever had a coupon you wanted to use to save money on a particular item, and when you went to use it, there was something in the fine print which didn't allow you to redeem it?

- It had expired.
- It could only be used on certain products.
- It was only applicable on Wednesdays between 1:00 and 2:00 am.
- It could only be redeemed at the Poughkeepsie location.

That's how we think of God's grace. We do. Whenever we think about claiming it, we don't actually believe it will be available to us. We feel we don't deserve it. It's in the fine print. It's just a promise that seems too good to be true. And yet, and yet, when they ask Jesus what God is like, he tells them the story of The Prodigal Son—really the story of The Loving Father—who forgives his son of the most egregious failings and restores him completely as a beloved member of the family. You are not disqualified from God's love and grace!

I know there are a few people who are absolutely clueless about their faults, and I know there are a few rare individuals who don't believe they've ever done anything for which they should feel guilt. But the vast majority of people I have ministered to are haunted by a vague sense of guilt which I believe has *absolutely nothing* to do with a loving God.

"Madeleine L'Engle reminds us of the ever-present danger of turning grace into law, of turning the good news into being good. She writes, "For the opposite of sin is faith, and never virtue, and we live in a world which believes that self-control can make us virtuous. But that's not how it works. How many men and women have we encountered of great personal and moral rectitude convinced of their own righteousness, who have been totally insensitive to the needs of others, and sometimes downright cruel!"ⁱ

Okay, so some of you have trouble believing in God. Me, too. Sometimes the whole concept is just, well, beyond me. Richard Rohr writes, "God comes to us disguised as our life." Think about that for a moment: "God comes to us disguised as our life." He says that our willingness to find God in our own struggle with life and to let it change us is our deepest and truest obedience to God's eternal will. Rohr goes on to say, "We are always the 'stable' into which the Christ is born anew. All we really need to do is to keep our stable honest and humble, and the Christ will surely be born."ⁱⁱ

Honestly, God is the very air we breathe. If we were fish, God would be the very water in which we would be swimming. So, when someone tells me they don't believe in God, I almost always smile and say something like, "Wow. I just don't have that much faith." Because from my perspective, it requires a great deal more faith *not* to believe in God than is required *to* believe in God. We should remember that atheism is also a faith proposition. And I would observe that almost all the visible evidence is on the theist's side.

So then finally there are the great questions. "Why do bad things happen to good people?" "Why is there so much suffering in the world?" "Why do we lose the ones we love?" I believe the comfort we find in grief is in realizing that God, whom we worship and adore, has also suffered. Our God has lost God's only son to cruelty and hate. Our God watches his beloved creation tear itself apart, and he watches and suffers day after day after day. When we suffer, our God suffers with us; and it may be cold comfort, but a God who

suffers is a God who knows and who can empathize and express compassion—one of the deepest forms of love.

There is so much more I would want to say in my last sermon. I might hope the congregation would let me run a little long on such an occasion, but I think these are some of the things I would most want to share.

I'd also want to add that it's been the privilege of my life to be able to say things like this in places like this one. The Apostle Paul wrote from a prison cell to his beloved Philippians to say, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now."

This was the source of his joy! He knew that, like the prophet Isaiah, and later, like the prophet John the Baptizer, he was "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Amen.

© 2021 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

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

ⁱ *Synthesis, Advent 2, Year C, December 7, 1997, p. 4*

ⁱⁱ Prior Aelred, *St. Gregory's Abbey, Abbey Letter No.288, Christmas, 2021*