



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Just One Thing

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 12, 2021

The Third Sunday of Advent

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

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

We've waited such a long time, but we're getting closer. Can you feel it? Christmas is only thirteen days away, and today we light the rose candle, a small foreshadowing of all the rejoicing that is to come.

Now John the baptizer is a pretty interesting character to introduce into this season. He's a very unlikely precursor to the warmth of the birth narrative. We're preparing for stars, wise men, shepherds, angelic messengers, and, finally, the faithful father and the blessed mother, along with the immaculate conception; the Christ child bathed in a light brighter than a thousand suns.

Instead, we get John the baptizer, who is unlike anyone else. Ever. Oscar Wilde observed, "Agitators are a set of interfering, meddling people who come down to some perfectly contented class of the community and sow the seeds of discontent among them. That is the reason why agitators are so absolutely necessary."¹

We begin to get a hint of John's strangeness from that warm and welcoming greeting he offers those who travel into the Judean desert to be baptized by him. "You brood of vipers!" Not exactly the traditional St. Bart's "radical hospitality" welcome now, is it? "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

John preaches a prophetic message of preparation. It's a little off-putting to modern ears, but what he's telling his listeners is that the act of baptism they're about to undergo, the sacramental action of being cleansed from sin, is not a magical act. It will be nothing more than an empty symbol if it's not matched with a transformed inner life.

"You must make your lives worthy of repentance," he tells them. You must make your lives count for something. It's an invitation most of his listeners—as well as most of us—want to accept.

- We *want* to make of our lives something rich and meaningful.
- We *want* to be a catalyst for positive change.
- We *want* to make this broken world a better place.

Further, John also warns his audience, "Don't depend upon your spiritual pedigrees. Don't count on the fact that you're 'descendants of Abraham' to save you. Why, God can create sons and daughters of Abraham from the very stones upon which you're standing! And your religious identity, your social status?"

Well, none of that is going to mean a tinker's damn!"

Oh, and just one more thing. John reminds them that time is tick, tick, ticking away. There's an urgency to this moment. We don't have forever to change our lives and to do good in the world. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And so, John's listeners, reflecting upon all of this, ask him the very same question we would ask if we were standing on that windswept desert, if we heard all those powerful warnings. What should we do? If God is coming, what should we do? If this is the season of preparing for the inbreaking of God into the world, how then should we prepare?

Now we could have reasonably expected John to answer that question by making radical demands upon his followers. He could have said, "Be like me. Leave everything and join me in the desert. Become an ascetic and live a life of fasting and prayer." Or he could have said, "Become an Essene and withdraw from the evil of this world." Or he could have said, "Become a Zealot and change the world through violent revolution."

But that isn't what he asks of them. Instead, he asks them to respond within the context of their own lives. He invites them to change what they have agency to change. He invites his listeners to act out of humility and repentance and to perform simple deeds of justice and loving-kindness. This, John preaches, this is how you will experience repentance. This is how transformation will come. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." If you're a tax collector, collect honestly. If you're a soldier, live by your wages and not through extortion. In other words, do small things. Simple things. Powerful things. And do them in the right ways.

Mother Teresa once said, "I never look at the masses as my responsibility. I look at the individual. I can only love one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time. Just one, one, one. You get closer to Christ by coming closer to each other. As Jesus said, 'Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me.' So, you begin. I begin. I picked up one person; maybe if I didn't pick up that one person, I wouldn't have picked up 2,000. But if I didn't put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less. Same thing for you, same thing in your family, same thing in the church where you go... just begin... one, one, one."ⁱⁱ

We all feel this need to be like some Joan of Arc figure when what we really need is to be a little more like Ted Lasso. "Just begin—simply, humbly—one, one, one. Emilie Griffin said, "To pray means to be willing to be naïve."ⁱⁱⁱ I think of naïveté as the virtue of the innocent. When we pray, we turn to God with open hands and open hearts. So, to pray is to hope for that which is not yet visible and not completely imaginable and to hold onto that hope against all odds.

This is my favorite time to be in New York City. It feels like there is a childlike wonder all around us. And I love all the Christmas traditions. I love the carols and the lights and decorating of the tree. I love the cookies and the Christmas cards and the holiday gatherings. I've been told by members of my family on several occasions that when it comes to Christmas decorations, I have zero ability to discriminate between the beautiful and the tacky. Apparently my problem is that I just love it all.

But clearly, clearly all of these preparations, which are important for their own reasons, are not the only preparations to which we're called in order for Christ to be born yet again in our hearts and in our lives. Joyce Hollyday says, "You get the picture. (This whole thing) was a scandal. This Word overlooked the ruling powers, both secular and religious, and went straight to the edges of acceptability, to the wilderness. The lesson was, if you want to understand the reign of God, look in unexpected places. Go to the margins. And watch out for this Word. It has the power to level hills and fill the valleys. It is like 'a

refiner's fire' and 'a fuller's soap' according to Malachi. It will purify by the torch and rub you clean until it hurts. And you were expecting maybe just an innocent baby?"^{iv}

Yes, watch out for this Word. It can change you in ways you never anticipated.

- You may find yourself changing the way you conduct your business because you no longer feel right about the old practices.
- You may find yourself making a commitment to give more of your resources to the church, not only because the church needs it, but because it's good for your own soul.
- You may find yourself making decisions to hire a broader diversity of people because you realize the good that could come of that practice.
- You may find yourself taking time to be inconvenienced by an older person... or a much younger person... and realize that it was the best investment of time you could have possibly made.
- You may find yourself making more room in your life for silence and meditation; worship and prayer.

Yes, this Word will sneak into you and transform you from the top of your head right down to the toes in your holiday socks! The apostle Paul just could not restrain himself when he wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."

Oh, the Lord is so near to us. So near. If you stand perfectly still, you can almost feel God's breath falling upon you. Let your gentleness lead you. God is so very, very close. Let go of all that is causing you worry or anxiety. Let it go. Let it all slip slowly away and feel how much lighter you are.

And then, get ready. Be prepared to finally rejoice! Because we've waited such a long, long, time.

Amen.

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ⁱ Oscar Wilde, as quoted in *Synthesis, Year C, Advent 3*, December 13th, 2009, p. 3,

ⁱⁱ Mother Teresa, *Words to Love*, as quoted in *Synthesis, Year C, Advent 3*, December 17, 2006, p. 3

ⁱⁱⁱ Emilie Griffin, as quoted in *Synthesis, Year C, Advent 3*, December 14, 1997, p. 4

^{iv} Joyce Hollyday, *Sojourners Magazine*, December, 1994-January, 1995, as quoted in *Synthesis, Yr C, Advent 3*, December 16, 2018, p. 2