



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

## Part of our World

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 25, 2021  
Christmas Day*

*Based on Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14*

*Let us pray.*

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,  
Descend to us, we pray; Cast out  
our sin and enter in, Be born in us  
today.*

*We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell; O come  
to us, abide with us, Our Lord  
Emmanuel! Amen.*

It's an iconic scene, especially for those of us who were born in the late 80s or early 90s. A young mermaid princess named Ariel is recovering from a fierce argument with her father, King Triton, an imposingly muscular ruler of the sea. Triton has just scolded Ariel for once again seeking contact with the human beings who live on the land. Now, surveying a collection of human objects that her curiosity has led her to assemble, Ariel wonders if all of her father's fuss is warranted. "Maybe he's right," she says to herself and to her fish friend Flounder. "Maybe there is something the matter with me. [But] I just don't see how a world that makes such wonderful things could be bad."

Though Ariel's extensive collection of trinkets fascinates her endlessly, she realizes that it doesn't fully satisfy her hunger to connect with those strange creatures up above. "I've got gadgets and gizmos a plenty," she explains, fabricating words for items like forks, stopwatches, and tobacco pipes. "I've got whosits and whatsits galore. You want thingamabobs? I've got twenty. But who cares? No big deal. I want more." The music swells as Ariel prepares to reveal her true desire. "I wanna be where the people are," she finally sings, "up where they walk, up where they run, up where they stay all day in the sun, wandering free, wish I could be part of that world."

And that, of course, is exactly what Ariel does—she travels to where the people are; she manages to make herself a part of their world. After a brief encounter with a handsome prince named Eric, Ariel decides to pursue him at any cost, agreeing to a dangerous deal with a nefarious sea-witch in order to obtain merely a chance at catching Eric's eye again. Ariel and Eric do rekindle a connection with one another, but staying with the prince proves difficult for Ariel in the longer term. The sea-witch first has to be discarded, and King Triton's suspicion of humans must be tempered. Yet ultimately Ariel is successful in completing a permanent transition from the sea to the land. Emerging from the water with legs and a glittery dress,

Ariel leaves behind a glorious realm in which she held a place of privilege and prestige in order to try her chances on the dry soil of earth. She becomes a human being.

I'm not exactly unbiased when it comes to the intersection between Christianity and the Walt Disney Company. In less than two weeks, I'm planning on visiting Walt Disney World, running the Disney Marathon, and then fulfilling my lifelong goal of embarking on a Disney Cruise—or at least I was planning on doing all of these things before Omicron reared its ugly head. This interest of mine—in the overlap between things Christian and things Disney—isn't a recent development, either. When I was a teenager, I read a book called *The Gospel According to Disney*, and, when as a new priest I heard that another Episcopal clergyperson offers religious pilgrimages to Disney World, I was mad I didn't think of the idea first. I'll admit that I am predisposed to see Jesus in any movie that contains talking animals and a musical theatre soundtrack.

Still, I think I'm on fairly solid ground when I suggest that there are real and significant similarities between the story of *The Little Mermaid* and the story of Christmas. Both stories involve incarnation, the taking on of human flesh, the embracing by non-human beings of humanity in all of its complications and complexities. Like Ariel, God longs to connect with human beings. Like Ariel, God is willing to go to great lengths in order to reach those human beings. Like Ariel, God eventually decides to become a part of our world rather than remain somewhere else. The God of Christmas is no King Triton, no muscular monarch scoffing at the foolish humans from his distant throne. The God of Christmas is an earnest mermaid princess whose insatiable curiosity about human life has caused her to fall in the deepest kind of love. God, we learn in this sacred festival, is a passionate, relentless lover who will stop at nothing in order to be joined with the people she loves. No obstacle is too large for God to overcome. God will even go so far as to become a human herself in order to ensure that she and her beloved human beings can be together.

The implications of this incarnation are drastic and challenge the ideas of even the most informed Christian believers. The theologians tell us that God never lacks for anything, and yet at Christmas Jesus is a helpless infant, entirely reliant on his human parents for food, shelter, and care. The expert religious types declare that God cannot possibly suffer, and yet at Christmas we hear the baby cry. The priests and the scholars say that God does not change, and yet we watch as Jesus grows within Mary's womb. The patriarchs promise that God knows all, and yet the Child in the crib has much to learn. The Christ we worship today is vulnerable, fragile, incomplete, subject to a multitude of forces beyond his control. In becoming human, God has emptied Godself of God's own divine faculties, fully surrendering to the principalities and powers that preside over us and over our world.

Today we celebrate a God who wants to be where the people are, no matter the cost; a God who has become a part of our world, broken and beautiful as it is; a God who sees our world—whatever its flaws and ignorances—not as a cesspool of misery, but as fundamentally good. Our world, Christmas tells us, is holy enough to be the very dwelling place of God. Yet so many of us spend our time here lamenting how awful things are, wishing that we could be somewhere, anywhere else. And I can understand why! An historic pandemic has ravaged our globe over these past two years, causing staggering sickness and death. Appalling divisions exist within our own country and many others. Injustice is a reality we have come too easily to accept. Our climate is changing in ways that should shake us to our core. Inflation is rising; housing prices are up; it's hard to get on a plane without witnessing a brawl. In a suburb of a Detroit, two parents bought their fifteen-year-old a gun. Four days later, eleven other children were injured and four other children were dead.

Our world is no paradise, and still God chooses to be born here in the midst of our problems and pains. God is more than aware of the chaos, destruction, and selfishness of which human beings are capable, and God chooses to become one of us anyway. Christmas is an invitation to realism as a spiritual practice, an encouragement to step away from escapism and pollyannaish dreams in order to find hope and promise even in our incorrigible wills and grimy flesh. If God, the embodiment of all perfection, is able to cope with what is decidedly imperfect; if God, the epitome of power, is willing to yield up some control; if God who is goodness beyond all compare can find a way to love this world, perhaps we can, too.

Amen.

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