



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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

## All In Our Power

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 9, 2022*

*The First Sunday of Epiphany*

*Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

*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 are people of faith largely because of the influence of others. We believe because somebody else told us the story. If you think back on your spiritual journey, you've had parents, godparents, teachers, friends and colleagues who've made an impression on you over the years and who've helped you find your way to the chairs you now occupy, either worshipping with us here at St. Bart's or worshipping with us online from home.

Every seeker must be introduced to that which he or she seeks. I was introduced to the Christian faith largely through the example of my grandfather. He was an impressive man, a tough steel mill foreman in a small Ohio-River town. Once he was baptized, he seldom missed church, and he took me with him. I believed that if *he* thought there was something to this God business, well, then maybe I should give it closer consideration.

Later, I was introduced to the Episcopal Church by a chorus of voices, beginning with my mother's, who once attended a relative's Episcopal funeral at the Sisters of the Transfiguration Convent in Glendale, Ohio. I don't think my mom ever really got over it. I imagine the event was a rather high church funeral with candles and incense and a choir, the likes of which no young Nazarene girl from New Boston, Ohio, had ever seen before or since. Liturgy and mystery are powerful things.

At Miami University of Ohio, I was given a *Book of Common Prayer* by an Episcopal chaplain, the Reverend Rona Harding, and that gift ended up changing my life. Rona was one of the first women ordained to the priesthood in the Diocese of Southern Ohio and was a vital spiritual and intellectual presence at the University. With a *Book of Common Prayer* in my hands, I could pray daily and draw sustenance from a spiritual tradition both ancient and modern.

Katherine Phillips Singer, a life-long Episcopalian from Mobile, Alabama, lived just across the street from our house with her family. Katherine made it appear that being an Episcopalian was the most genteel expression of Christianity for any gentle woman or man of refinement and good taste. When the former Bishop of New York, William T. Manning, was asked whether salvation could be found outside the Episcopal Church, he replied—and, we hope, with his tongue firmly in cheek—“There may be avenues other than the Anglican tradition whereby one can reach God, but no gentleman would avail himself of them.”

Father Jim Paget showed me the very human and very compassionate side of parish priesthood, and Father David Miller showed me that, every once in a while, the church ordains a genuinely holy person. Father Mark Anschutz taught me about loyalty and hard work, and Bishop Bill Swing showed me that bishops could be great people and do important work with tremendous joy, an example I still attempt to imitate. And there are countless other persons over the years who have served to reaffirm my faith when it was wavering and offer hope in the midst of everything that seems so hopeless in life.

Baptism is one of the most hope-filled Sacraments the Christian faith has to offer. “(It) is the sacrament by which new converts are received into the Christian community. It is a sign of their incorporation into Christ. Some—like Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and members of the Eastern Orthodox traditions—baptize infants on the basis of the covenantal promise made to Abraham: ‘to you and to your offspring.’”<sup>i</sup> We believe newborn should be brought into the community of faith and baptized as soon as possible. “Others—like members of the Baptist churches, the Church of Christ, or Pentecostal Church—reserve baptism for those who make a personal and public profession of faith in Christ.”<sup>ii</sup>

Following the very example of Christ himself, new and transformed life is available to those who are immersed in these waters. We pray that God will take those who are being baptized and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, make them essentially different. Changed. Blessed. Transformed. Filled, as it were, with the Spirit. We believe the presence of the Holy Spirit will guard and guide those being baptized, along with each and every one of us who have been baptized. We believe this “Holy Comforter” will accompany us throughout our entire lives. The officiant at baptism says, as he or she makes the sign of the cross on the infant’s forehead, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever!”

In the Early Church, baptism was a declaration that the believer was identifying him or herself with that group of people who were called Christians. And Christians were a despised and hated community in large parts of ancient society. To identify yourself with people who are despised and hated means you must be willing to be despised and hated yourself. You understand, right from the very beginning, that this, this, is going to be hard. Really hard. Which is why the entire community was required to make promises and to stand with them.

Now, we don’t think much like that in this generation. We generally imagine being connected to the Christian Church as a positive thing. But today we’re going to ask Eva to be different from the world and different from some of her friends and classmates. We are going to hold her to a higher standard when it comes to loving God and loving her neighbor as herself, just as we hold ourselves to that same higher standard.

Theologian Scott Cormode observed, “At the Connecticut church where my daughter was baptized, the pastor had a routine that she followed whenever she baptized a child. After the ceremony, she took the child in her arms and walked her through the congregation. As she did this, she said, “This is (child’s name). She belongs to God. And she belongs to us.”<sup>iii</sup>

So this morning, meet Eva Rae. She belongs to God, and she belongs to us. She is a blessed, holy creature whom God has made. She is a blessing and a sacred responsibility to her parents, her family, to her godparents, and to each and every one of us.

Kate Douglas Wiggin once said, “Every child born into the world is a new thought of God, an ever fresh and radiant possibility.” I believe it. I believe it. Before us is a new thought of God. And when we are asked, “Will you, who witness these vows, do *all* in your power to support this child in her life in Christ?” please note that we are not just messing around here. We are asking a serious question on behalf of Almighty God. A serious question which demands a serious response.

And what do you imagine “all in your power” actually means? How can we do all in our power to support this child and every other child in their life in Christ? Bishop A. Theodore Eastman, writing in his book, *The Baptizing Community*, argued, “More is accomplished in baptism than is accomplished at the moment. The requisite qualities of the baptized, therefore, are openness, expectation, the desire to grow, and the ability to trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>iv</sup>

I invite you to reflect on these essential qualities: to remain open, expectant, hopeful, to desire to grow and to trust the guidance of the Spirit. These qualities are what each of us can hope to make apparent throughout our entire baptized lives through the power of the Spirit. And if you are not baptized, but would like to talk about the possibility of being baptized, please let me know. You, too, are “a new thought of God, an ever fresh and radiant possibility.”

Remember the promise of God from the prophet Isaiah?

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.”

This is the promise of baptism. This is the story we hand down from generation to generation. This is the answer every seeker seeks.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year C*, edited by Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, and James D. Newsome, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, c. 1994, p. 93

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 93

<sup>iii</sup> Cormode, Scott, Fuller Theological Seminary, *Baptism Stories*, accessed January 5, 2022

<sup>iv</sup> Eastman, A. Theodore, *The Baptizing Community*, Harrisburg, PA, Morehouse Publishing Co., 1990.