



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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

## Today...in Your Hearing

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 23, 2022*

*The Third Sunday of Epiphany*

*Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21*

*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*

The gospel lesson given to us today from the author of Luke and Acts is the straightforward account of what began as a pretty ordinary day in the life of a local synagogue. A man returns to his hometown after having been away for some time. He's a man of faith and so he goes to the synagogue on the sabbath. It's a small town, and the scripture lessons are usually read by a member of the congregation and then commented upon, line by line.

However, on this particular day, this visitor, who has traveled and studied with John the Baptist, is asked to read the scriptures. The people of Nazareth know him as one of their own: the son of Mary and Joseph, the carpenter. But this visitor has been places and seen things. There are rumors about him. He's taught in some of the surrounding synagogues. He's highly regarded. People keep talking about him. So perhaps he'll offer new insights into the scriptures. Perhaps he will make them understood in ways the congregation hasn't previously considered. Perhaps he can make something ordinary, extraordinary.

The man stands and unrolls the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and he begins to read, "Good News to the poor...release to the captives...recovery of sight to the blind...liberty to those who are oppressed. The proclamation of the acceptable year of the Lord." Once, these were radical words, but over time they've become pretty familiar to the congregation. They've heard these words over and over again; and, like rough stones worn smooth, they no longer excite or disturb them.

Then, as is customary in the synagogue, the man sits down to teach, and the people are thinking, "Now, he will expound upon this reading, and maybe we'll see what all the fuss is about. Now we'll get to hear how he understands the meaning of this scripture." And, of course the congregation in Nazareth, like congregations everywhere, believes they already know what the scriptures mean. After all, they have their own insights and opinions. They, too, talk and listen to God. Still, they're curious to hear what the hometown boy might have to contribute. All eyes are fixed upon him, and finally he begins to speak.

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he says. "*Today... in your hearing.*" What he says astounds his audience. To many, it's just blasphemous. "Why, he's claiming to be God!" And for everyone else, it's unprecedented. He is actually claiming to be the Messiah. He is actually telling them that he, Joseph and Mary's son, is there to change the course of human history.

A typical congregation in a very unexceptional town on an ordinary sabbath was present for one of the most extraordinary—and controversial—sermons in history. Because on this day, Jesus does not discuss

the prophesy of Isaiah or interpret it for the congregation; but, rather, he fulfills it. He actually becomes what he's proclaiming! As *The Gospel of John* says, "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us." And so it did. And so it actually did. It should be the kind of news that makes us want to change course, but we find ourselves strangely resistant.

There's an old story, familiar to most sailors, that was written by Frank Koch in *Proceedings*, the magazine of the Naval Institute. (It was also included as a story in Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.)

Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers, in heavy weather, for several days. Frank writes, "I was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities. Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing of the bridge reported, 'Light, bearing on the starboard bow.' 'Is it steady or moving astern?' the captain called out. The lookout replied, 'Steady, captain,' which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

"The captain then called to the signalman, 'Signal that ship: We are on a collision course, advise you change course 20 degrees.' Back came a signal, 'Advisable for you to change course 20 degrees.' The captain said, 'Send, I'm a captain, change course 20 degrees.' 'I'm a seaman second class,' came back the reply. 'You had better change course 20 degrees.' By that time, the captain was absolutely furious. He spat out, 'Send, I'm a battleship. Change course 20 degrees.' Back came the flashing light, 'Well, I'm a lighthouse.'"

Frank concludes his story by saying, "We changed course."

Sometimes it's difficult for us to change course. Sometimes it's really hard to go in a new direction. We set sail, we have our own goals, our comfortable presumptions. We cling to the security and familiarity of the roads *most* traveled, and we find it hard to give way when conditions or circumstances change.

I fear that we've heard some of these biblical stories so often that it's hard for us to actually hear them in any meaningful way. I mean, really, what difference does this story make to you or to me? What in these stories might help us change course?

"There's an old Hasidic story about an elderly rabbi, renowned for his purity, who was unexpectedly approached by a youthful disciple. The impetuous seeker fell at the feet of the rabbi and exclaimed, 'My Master, I love you!' The old teacher looked up from his books and asked the fervent disciple, 'Do you know what hurts me, my son?'

"The young man looked puzzled, but composed himself and replied, 'I don't understand your question, rabbi. I'm trying to tell you how much you mean to me, and you're confusing me with irrelevant questions.' The rabbi responded, 'My question is neither confusing nor irrelevant, for if you do not know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?'"<sup>ii</sup>

God knows what hurts us. God knows what breaks our fragile hearts in two. What do you think Jesus meant when he says he's, "preaching good news to the poor" and "liberty to those who are oppressed"? What if this story meant that God was telling you—along with all the rest of us—that every person who's ever been hungry or homeless, every person who's behind on their rent, every person who is poor or deep in debt, every person who's ever been exploited by the powerful or ignored by the indifferent will finally and ultimately find restoration in Christ?

- What if this story means that *every* last grieving person will be comforted, and the grief of *no one* will be forgotten?
- What if, in this new life being offered by God through Christ, *every* person's sorrow is valued and *every* person's depression is met with compassion and healing?
- What if "release to the captives" and "recovery of sight to the blind" mean that those of us who are held captive by our current circumstances have hope for liberation?
- What if those of us who have been blinded by our love for the shiny and the immediate can be released from our bondage to material possessions and granted greater spiritual sightedness?
- What if these words from Christ mean that all the cracks in the façades of our lives can fully and finally be repaired?

Could Jesus have meant that each one of us—and I know it's a frightening experience to look squarely into one's own heart—could Jesus have meant that each one of us has the opportunity to ask for the grace of God's forgiveness? Is such a blessed assurance possible even in the face of our startling imperfections? Can our spiritual blindness find sight in Christ?

The answer Jesus brings back home to Nazareth to each and every one of these questions, and the answer he offers us in this moment and in this place is, "Yes. Yes. YES!" As the words of that favorite gospel hymn explain, "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

In the Hebrew tradition, before the exile into Babylon, a Jubilee year was proclaimed every 50 years. The Book of Leviticus says, "And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty though out the land to all the inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you; you shall return, every one of you to your property and every one of you to your family."<sup>iii</sup>

"The jubilee was a safeguard against continued slavery and poverty," writes Lionel Koppman. "On the fiftieth year, Hebrew slaves and their families were to be freed. Property, with the exception of houses within the walled cities, was to revert to its original owner. Houses and lands were thus kept from accumulating in the hands of the few. In this manner, the Hebrews avoided the creation of an impoverished class and a measure of societal justice was guaranteed.

"The Jubilee year reminded the well-off that there would come a time when their Israelite slaves would once more be their equals and could bring them into court for any mistreatment during the years of bondage. Jesus, by proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord is claiming the now as the time of God's fulfillment."<sup>iv</sup>

"Today in your hearing" justice and equality are proclaimed. Not sometime in some misty future, but now. Ill-gotten possessions are returned and spiritual economic enslavements are broken. "Today in your hearing."

And this is the mark of the true church. Episcopal priest and theologian Matthew Fox writes, "The mark of the true church, the believing church, will always be as Jesus said it ought to be: wherever *compassion* is found." "In the future, Fox predicted, "it will be compassion making, celebrating, healing, justice making, the living out of shared interdependence, that will define the Church and its leadership."<sup>v</sup>

A typical congregation in a very unexceptional town on an ordinary sabbath, was present for one of the most extraordinary—and controversial—sermons in history. Do we, does St. Bart's, have the mark of the

true church, the believing church? Do we appear to have understood what this Jesus is all about? “The mark of the true church, the believing church, will always be as Jesus said it ought to be: wherever compassion is found.” If so, how can we share that mark with all the world?

And if we do not possess this mark, if compassion does *not* characterize us, then what will we be willing to do about it? How will we be able to change course?

Amen.

**©2022 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](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)  
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022

---

<sup>i</sup> Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2004, p. 33

<sup>ii</sup> *Synthesis, Year C, Epiphany 3*, January 21, 2001, p. 4

<sup>iii</sup> Leviticus 25:12, *New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>iv</sup> Lionel Koppman, Jewish scholar, source unknown.

<sup>v</sup> Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, Harper & Row/San Francisco, c. 1980 as quoted in *Synthesis, Year C, Epiphany 3*, January 27, 2019