



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Future is Here

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 30, 2022

The Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

Based on Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Good morning! My name is Zack, and it is joy to be at St. Bart's. A heartfelt thanks to all who have extended such a warmly radical welcome to me and my husband Michael. Indeed, everyone needs a place, and we're so glad to make this ours.

Whether you are beginning a ministry or a marriage, Paul provides a timely reminder in his letter to the Corinthians that shared life will not be all honeymoon. While this so called "love chapter" is often read at weddings, it was originally addressed to a church in turmoil. The Communion table had become a caste system; division and inequity obscured the living body of Christ. Confronting their selfishness, greed, and envy, Paul is passionate in his exhortation to Love—not in word alone, but in action and in truth.

Nothing will disillusion you of romantic, utopian visions of Christian community quite like living in one. During college I lived for two years in an Episcopal campus ministry house with six other students charged with leading programs and caring for the building. I had envisioned a quasi-monastic community of prayer and study and Christian fellowship. It ended up being something more like church meets frat house (probably not all that dissimilar to a monastery behind the scenes). As personalities clashed and dirty dishes—and laundry—accumulated, there were times when patience and kindness were in short supply.

One day during an especially tense moment in the semester, the entire tenor of the place changed. I woke up early—around noon in those days—and stumbled into my bathroom to find written on the margins of my mirror in dry erase marker the words, "You're lookin' like God today!" I wasn't sure if I should be confused or flattered or just totally creeped out. When I found the culprit, a fellow housemate named Katie, she admitted that she actually crept into each of the residents' bathrooms, because she wanted us all to remember that above all, every day, that we created in the image of God.

It actually became a mantra, and the message swept across campus. Others outside the house began writing it on their roommates' mirrors in dorm rooms and leaving post-it notes on friends' cars. We heard about a dance instructor who worked with teenage girls and their self-esteem writing it on her ballet class mirror. It's hard to know if it had any lasting effect outside our community, but I know that it transformed us from within. A spirit of renewed affection, encouragement, and goodwill took root. One simple phrase on the margins of a mirror, "You're lookin' like God today," literally reframed and reset our life together. A turning point.

Oddly, it reminds me of the Jewish practice of Midrash, something like a cross between biblical commentary and fan fiction. Midrash, you may know, consisted of writings in the margins of the scriptures by Rabbis who sought to expound upon the biblical texts—filling in details, inviting questions, sparking imagination between the lines. Fascinatingly, we see within the religious tradition permission and *encouragement* to play, embellish, ask questions, stay curious. Midrash would sometimes be used to

reconcile contradictions or to provide explanations for problematic stories. For example, there is a plethora of commentary surrounding the binding of Isaac, in which a plain reading might suggest a God who demands child sacrifice—clearly inconsistent with the God of life and peace. Midrash expands interpretive possibilities, while at the same time grounding the community in its most core convictions about God and creation.

Amidst the polarization and tribalism that plague our society, Midrash offers not only an approach to biblical commentary but really a way of being, a posture worth reclaiming and embracing by faith communities today. Staying open and curious to the mystery that is the other, grounding all our relationships and assumptions in the fundamental dignity of every human being. Paul was right: Now we see in a mirror—or 2022, a Zoom screen—dimly; one day will see face to face. (And how we long for it!) Of course it's not a commentary on the picture quality or the mode of gathering. He is commenting on our capacity to truly see others, to comprehend the mystery of God and neighbor this side of the veil. Whether virtual or in the flesh, our vision is limited. Each person we encounter is more than a stereotype, more than a cable news caricature, more than their worst offense or greatest achievement. None of us can see the whole picture, the whole person, the whole story.

Now we see in a mirror; then we will see face to face. Paul speaks of that great day when we will gather with the saints at the feast that knows no end. Yet, in the meantime, robust Christian hope extends beyond wishful thinking and pie-in-the-sky someday. It offers more than rose colored glasses and silver linings. Even now we get glimpses of God's kingdom breaking through.

Enter scene: our friend and Rabbi Jesus. *Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Not someday, later, but *today*. In case you missed it, this Sunday's gospel dovetails with last week's, when Nazareth's own son opens a scroll to the prophet Isaiah declaring, "good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, the year of the Lord's favor."

The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. It must have been like looking in a mirror. Can you feel their pride? One of their own, raised up a prophet to not only speak but to en flesh good news with words of hope and restoration, reversal and abundance. The people were amazed at his gracious words. All spoke well of him, because these were words for them. When they saw Jesus, they saw themselves.

But the hometown honeymoon doesn't last long. Foreshadowing Palm Sunday, as quickly as they praise him, all the sooner do they attempt to hurl him off a cliff. Why the sudden flip? What triggered them? According to the text, Jesus anticipates their skepticism, and he preemptively refuses to perform signs and wonders on demand. He won't be controlled. Moreover, he starts talking about foreigners and outsiders, which suggests this good news extends even beyond the Jewish people, as he recalls the miraculous healings of a Widow at Zarephath and Naaman a Syrian, outsiders and outcasts far, far away from Nazareth.

It's easy to understand why a rural, struggling community of Nazarene Jews might feel like they missed the boat. In so many ways they're on the margins themselves. In their own poverty and suffering, they seem receptive of a generic proclamation of good news: all lives matter. But a widow at Zarephath? Syrian Leper lives matter? Where's the relevance? Why give up a chance to be on the inside for once?

In their failure to recognize and celebrate in Jesus anything more than a reflection of themselves, they miss the real miracle entirely, which is not chiefly that Jesus is the son of Joseph. Is this not Joseph's son? Well, yes. But the real miracle is that this Jesus, this prophet, born of Mary, is the Son of God, the savior. A light to enlighten all nations and also the glory of God's people Israel. How much higher an honor could Nazareth possibly boast?

My friends, the truth is that God does not belong to any of us as individuals. The challenging miracle for you and me is that we all belong to God; and because we all belong to God, we all belong together as God's children. What was true for Jeremiah and the Psalmist and for our brother Jesus is true for us. We are fully, intimately known, and deeply loved by the God who knew us before we were in our mother's womb. We are born of the very heart of God, where there is room and abundance and love enough to go around. Good news for the poor, sight for the blind, freedom for you and me and for us all.

All the eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him, face to face, and yet they couldn't quite see the miracle of God's expansive kingdom breaking in. Will we?

At the beginning of COVID I was enamored with the story of Pastor David Gibbons. He started Newsong Church in Irvine, California. It began as an experiment to ask: What would it look like to have a church without walls, committed to racial reconciliation and community through engaging with the neighborhood and connecting in small groups. The church had a strong digital component, and members would receive an email each week with details of their regular gatherings. This all happened around the year 2000, seven years before the first iPhone. People called him crazy, fringe, destined to fail. Now Newsong Church is a thriving multi-ethnic, socially engaged congregation of hundreds. Practices they established 20 years ago were early prototypes for what has now become the norm.

Pastor Gibbons, a self-styled futurist says this: "The future is already here; it is just on the margins."

In the words of Jesus, "Today, in your hearing, the scripture has been fulfilled." Could it be that the future is already here?

Speaking of Midrash, Nazareth isn't built on a cliff. So many of the cliffs we face are products of our own fears and imaginations. Jesus invites us to pass through the crowd with him. To take the high road. To walk in love. To rise above the anger, insecurity, anxiety, and fear that seek to best us. Sometimes emotions and patterns of being, baggage and burdens we've carried all the way from our childhood or our hometown, might feel comfortable and familiar but keep us from stepping into God's future, now.

Mirrors, margins, Midrash: could it be that we need a little reframing, recalibration, to see where God is already moving and alive in our midst, inviting us into a hopeful future. Perhaps the same imaginations that created our cliffs can lead the way out. There is a way forward. Could it be that the future is now? At the margins, on the edges of our world, our communities, our hearts.

May we set our fears aside this day. As we come to this table, may this Eucharist be a mirror. May you embrace and celebrate your wrinkles and warts, blemishes and scars. With all the baggage and burdens you bear in your body, disillusioned with all the lies that would say otherwise, may you know that you are "lookin' like God today." Write it on your hearts. Know it deep in your bones. Behold who you already are. Become what you receive: the very Body of Christ. And may we be good news today.

Amen.

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