



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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A Dream of St. Bart's

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 18, 2022

The Feast of St. Bartholomew

Based on Deuteronomy 18:15-18; 1st Corinthians 4:9-15; Luke 22:24-30

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

I have a dream of St. Bart's...

One of the challenges we experience on the Feast of St. Bartholomew is that we know very little about any of the apostles, and we know even less about Bartholomew. We're even confused about as simple a matter as his name. Should we call him "Bartholomew" or "Nathanael"? We don't know for sure.

Our confusion begins in the New Testament where the name "Bartholomew" is mentioned only in the listing of the apostles in Matthew, Mark, and Luke-Acts. But biblical scholars believe "Bartholomew" is "probably the same person as 'Nathanael.'" Nathanael is described as coming from Cana in Galilee, and Philip invites him to meet Jesus. We find his story in the Gospel According to John.

And Nathanael-Bartholomew? May we call him that for clarity's sake? Well, whatever we call him, he begins as a sarcastic skeptic. When Philip says, "We have found him about who Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth," Nathanael-Bartholomew quips, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

But Philip responds with the great evangelical invitation that all modern Christians would do well to remember. Note that Philip doesn't argue with Nathanael-Bartholomew. He doesn't say, "You've got to believe this." He just says, "Come, and see." Come and see for yourself. It's the best invitation we can offer to anyone searching for God.

I've just returned from some time away, and, as I've told anyone who's asked me about my sabbatical, I say, "Everyone should have one!" Everyone should have some time to reflect upon the meaning of life, to pray and renew their relationship with God and others. Everyone should have time to allow their bodies to rest and recover.

Now, I'm aware that it's a great privilege to have such time, and most people can only wish for such a thing. I was truly appreciative of the gift. It gave me an opportunity to do something I don't usually take much time to do: I had time to dream. I had time to *think* about what we're working to build here. I had time to *imagine* what a "great" St. Bart's would look like. I had time to *dream* about the kinds of things I believe God wants us to accomplish in this place.

Now those early apostles (like Nathanael-Bartholomew) might have had a difficult time dreaming about a Christian community that would be able to call, as its home, a building as grand as this one. Those simple fisher-folk knew more about suffering and want and persecution than they did about magnificence.

As Paul noted in today's Epistle reading, "To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands." That may not sound like our contemporary experience, but I think it's important to be reminded that we come from strong people who've suffered and bled and died for the faith we are given the privilege to proclaim.

So, what did I dream about while I was away? What is my dream for St. Bart's?

- I have a dream of a more diverse St. Bart's.

Now I realize diversity has become like a mantra for modern institutions, and everyone from J.P. Morgan to Coca-Cola talks about their desire for greater diversity. But I believe the church's call to diversity is a holy one. Christian communities are called to look like the Kingdom of God, and so we need people here who are young and old, rich and poor, thin and not so thin, people who represent all the colors of the rainbow.

We need straight, gay, bi, and transgendered people of every description. What might be harder to recognize is that we also need Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. We need theological progressives and theological traditionalists—not only because we believe God loves all these people, but because we believe we are actually enriched by their presence among us.

- I have a dream of a St. Bart's that models authentic servant ministry—from the Rector, to the Clergy, to the Wardens, to the Vestry, to the staff, and, finally, to every member of the congregation. When a dispute arose among the disciples as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest, Jesus told them, "The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves."

We often say we want to be more like Jesus, but, if that is even *remotely* true, our congregation needs to become an icon of servant leadership. I don't want to be part of a parish where the clergy serve as either "princes of the church" or as "spiritual concierges."

Being a member of St. Bart's cannot be just another consumer experience. I dream of a congregation that sees all of its members as servants of the world, a church that refuses to believe its primary reason to exist is to meet its own needs.

- I dream of a St. Bart's where transcendent worship regularly brings us face to face with the living God. I dream of a place where people who worship in this holy place will be, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, "charged with the grandeur of God."ⁱⁱ
- I dream of a St. Bart's where the music performed here transports listeners into the heavenly realms. Where one can actually hear the very voice of God speaking through the notes played and the lyrics sung here.
- I dream of the angelic voices of our choirs, the purity of their voices, whispering reasons to believe to everyone who worships with us.

- I dream of a St. Bart's filled with passion; a church where there is an urgency about the faith and a busyness in the building. I dream of experiencing a buzz whenever you enter this church—a constant hum of excitement and the unmistakable sound of truly good works being pursued and accomplished.
- I dream of a St. Bart's which refuses to overlook the hungry and those without housing. I dream of a church driven to serving the needs of the poor and the most vulnerable of this city. In my mind's eye, I imagine a St. Bart's where lines of people circle the building daily because they know we will always strive to meet their most basic needs, and that everyone in need will be met with kind eyes, an earnest smile, and an open heart.
- I dream of a St. Bart's where the roughly 4,000 meals a week we are now serving is thought of as just a good beginning.
- I dream of a St. Bart's that is a center for spiritual, ethical, and theological education for people of all ages. I dream of a place where great minds come together and world-class educators empower creative thinking about the life of faith. I dream of a church where classes take place in person and online, and people from all over the United States (and, indeed, the world) continue to participate in our dynamic educational programs.
- I dream of a St. Bart's where the laughter of children fills our sanctuary and classrooms and where children feel right at home learning the basics of the Christian faith accompanied by their parents and grandparents.
- I dream of a St. Bart's where every person in our faith community comes to see that financial generosity to the parish is not primarily for the benefit of the church, but benefits the giver. I dream of lives being transformed through generous giving because giving with glad and open hearts changes people for good.
- I dream of a St. Bart's where we don't always need to be renting every part of our facility for our survival, but where we can utilize our space to extend our ministries in every area of parish life.
- I dream of a St. Bart's where this pulpit is a courageous compass which always points True North, a pulpit where prophetic voices speak truth to power. I dream of a St. Bart's which maintains a national voice on the concerns of the day, and where silences in the face of violence, injustice, and oppression are broken with great regularity; where broken people, in the midst of their suffering, will find hope and meaning in the Good News of Jesus Christ preached with conviction.
- I dream of a St. Bart's where the ancient truths find resonance with the new realities and we find ourselves addressing the issues which not only face this great city, but face the nation and the world beyond it. I dream of a St. Bart's which is respected and looked to by civic leaders and others. A St. Bart's that shines such a bright light into the darkness of the world that no evil or injustice will eclipse it.
- These are some of the things I dream about. These are some of the things which we are already seeing come to fruition.

So please tell me, dear people of God, that these are not just *my* dreams for St. Bart's Church. Please tell me—please promise me—that *you* have dreams like these—maybe even grander dreams still. And that those dreams for this parish haunt you and push you towards deeper commitments and more immediate actions as they do the clergy, the staff, the wardens and the vestry of this parish. I believe we can be who we are called to be, but it will require a sacrificial effort and a persevering will to attain such dreams.

Sophie Scholl was a German student before the beginning of World War II. After being imprisoned, she was asked why she became an anti-Nazi political activist. She said, "Somebody, after all, had to make a start." Somebody had to do something. Somebody had to resist. Somebody had to be the first person to show others that they could defy a monstrous evil. Sophie was beheaded by the Nazi's for her opposition to the war. She paid a fearsome price for her convictions but, "Somebody, after all, had to make a start."

Dreams are powerful things.

"It started like so many evenings. A mother and father at home with a young boy playing after dinner. Mom and Dad were so absorbed with their various tasks they didn't notice the time. There was a full moon and some of the light seeped through the windows. The mother glanced at the clock and said, 'Jimmy, it's time to go to bed. Go on up now and I'll come and tuck you in later.'

"Unlike usual, Jimmy went straight upstairs to his room. An hour or so later, his mother came up to see if everything was alright. To her astonishment, she discovered her son quietly staring out the window at the moon-lit scenery. 'What are you doing, Jimmy?' 'I'm looking at the moon, Mom.' As the reluctant boy finally settled into bed, he said, 'Mommy, you know one day I'm going to walk on the moon.'

"Now who could have known that small boy, in whom the dream was planted on that night, would survive an airplane crash in which he suffered compound fractures, amnesia, and nearly lost a leg, would bring his dream to fruition when Astronaut James Irwin stepped out onto the moon's surface, the eighth representative of the human race ever to do so."ⁱⁱⁱ

Dreams are powerful things.

T.E. Lawrence wrote, "All men dream but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds awake to the day to find it was all vanity. But the dreamers of the day are dangerous, for the many act out their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible..."^{iv}

We have an opportunity to give our lives to a great dream here, something important and holy. Why not give a portion of *your life* to *your dream*, to *your vision*, to *your hope* for St. Bart's Church?

Dreams are powerful things, very powerful things indeed.

Amen.

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ⁱ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland Murphy, Oxford University Press, New York, c.1991, page 126 (John 1:46, in the footnotes)

ⁱⁱ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Grandeur of God," 1877, <https://poets.org>

ⁱⁱⁱ Copied, source unlisted, confirmation "James Irwin, *Wikipedia*"

^{iv} Copied, source unlisted