



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Acts of God

Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, November 11, 2012

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17, and Mark 12:38-44

I have recently been watching the HBO TV series called “The Wire.” It is a difficult show, and the violence is graphic and language is coarse. The show follows the Baltimore Police Department and its haphazard and mostly ineffective response to crimes involving drugs and gang violence. The protagonist, homicide Detective Jimmy McNulty, is a dedicated law enforcement professional without any regard for institutional protocol, propriety, or the wishes of his commanding officers. He is also an imperfect father and spouse, and he drinks too much. At the end of the first season, as he is about to break a career-making case (a case that has taken 13 episodes to develop), a cooperating gang member receives a visit from his mother, who convinces him not to testify. Rather than entering a witness protection program and beginning a new life, D’Angelo listens to his mother and goes to jail for 20 years. Other more violent gang members receive lesser sentences, politicians who take bribes from the gang are not punished, and McNulty and others who pursued the case are about to be punished by reassignment. As season two begins, McNulty is assigned to harbor patrol, a punishment for disregarding the wishes of his captain. He stops in to visit his colleagues in Homicide. They laugh about passing the buck on an unpopular case and when McNulty asks why they had passed the buck, they respond, “It’s all about self-preservation, Jimmy; that’s something you never learned.”

The story of Ruth, from the Hebrew scripture, describes events “in the days when the Judges ruled” Israel. The story begins with a famine and tells how Naomi, her husband, and two sons leave Israel to live among the Moabites. While they are in the land of Moab, the sons marry Moabite women: Orpah and Ruth. After ten years, Naomi’s husband and both her sons die. Naomi decides to return to Israel and decides to send her daughters-in-law back to their own families. Orpah does return to her family, but Ruth insists on remaining. Naomi tries to convince Ruth to return to her family, but Ruth says, “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” Naomi sees that Ruth is stubborn, and Ruth returns with Naomi to Bethlehem in the land of Judah. Ruth then uses her status as a poor, foreign widow—a triple outsider, if you will—to gain the notice of Boaz, a rich relative who marries her. She has a son and becomes the great grandmother of King David.

The story of Ruth shows how God acts in the lives of people who, like Jimmy McNulty, have not learned about self-preservation. Like the imperfect but dedicated cop, Naomi’s family disregards institutional protocol and leaves Israel at a time of famine. Then her sons abandon propriety by marrying Moabite women, and Ruth follows in the family tradition and refuses to obey the wishes of her commanding officer (also known as her mother-in-law) and returns to Israel in a self-sacrificing act of loyalty and love. In many ways, Ruth did not know much about self-preservation or she would have returned to her own family. Yet in the end, her sacrifice saves her and blesses her, returns her mother-in-law to prosperity, and gives the people of God a King.

Jesus is teaching in the Temple and says, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” Scribes are people who know about self-preservation and self-promotion. These are company men, they know what to say, and to whom, to preserve and enhance their position in society. Jesus is not a company man. He routinely disregards institutional protocol, allows his disciples to harvest grain on the Sabbath, and eats without washing his hands. He disregards propriety as he talks to the Samaritan woman and prostitutes and regularly challenges the authorities, turning their own laws against them. Jesus does not seem to know about self-preservation.

James R. Dumpson, a social worker whom *The New York Times* labels "A Defender of the Poor," died on Monday at a hospice in Manhattan. Dumpson influenced the city's antipoverty policies for more than a half century and had served in various posts under five New York City mayors.. Dumpson might appear to have been a company man who drew on wide connections to accomplish great things, and yet he did not place his hope in the government systems that he had helped to create or in his own power and position. He said he found hope in the darkest of corners. “You’ve always got to hold on to the great potential for change that people have,” he once said. “And when you see that change—that’s what keeps social workers from being overwhelmed from the misery around us.” The fact that he found hope in the darkest corners would not have surprised Jesus, Ruth, Jimmy McNulty, my clergy colleagues, or my social work colleagues. All of us have found hope in the darkest corners of life.

These past two weeks I have marveled at the extraordinary response of ordinary New Yorkers to the suffering caused by the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. As I have contemplated the storm, I have begun thinking about the concept of an “act of God.” According to Wikipedia’s definition, an act of God is “a legal term for events outside of human control, such as sudden floods or other natural disasters, for which no one can be held responsible.” Most of us bristle at the thought that terrible natural disasters are legally referred to as acts of God, especially in insurance contracts. The idea that events outside of human control are events for which no one can be held responsible leaves us pretty much on our own at a time when we most need help. But then real help does not ever come from insurance companies, legal or institutional protocols, propriety, scribes or commanding officers or even a newly-elected Commander-in-Chief. In the real world, real help and hope come from widows who give two small copper coins worth a penny, from stubborn foreign daughters-in-law, and even from imperfect cops who bend rules and infuriate their commanding officers to really serve those whom they protect. Real help and real hope come from all those who recognize that when no one can be held responsible for events outside of human control, we must all be responsible and respond not thinking of self-preservation but rather with self-sacrificing acts of loyalty and love, real acts of God.

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