



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Term Limits on Marriage and Signs of REAL Hope

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 2, 2012

The First Sunday of Advent

Based on Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36

This claim may seem a bit self-serving, but it is also the truth: I love Advent. I love everything about it and have for a very long time—particularly since getting over the silly notion that we shouldn't talk about Christmas until the 24th of December! What was I thinking? That's just nuts. Why, on any given day of the year, *we need a little Christmas right this very minute, candles in the window, carols at the spinet. Put up the brightest string of lights I've ever seen. Slice up the fruitcake; it's time we hung some tinsel on that evergreen bough!*

Sorry I got a little carried away; at least I didn't sing it for you. It happens this time of the year, and it should because it really is a big time of the year! And, yes, it is also the time of year that is too busy, a time when we spend too much money, eat and drink too many calories, and do all sorts of other excessive things; but it is also the time of year when for us hope gets institutionalized, when hope gets wired or more often re-wired into our spiritual DNA. Advent is about the coming again of the Christ child; Advent is about the promise of God—about a promise that has come, is coming now, and will come again and again!

And so this morning I want to talk about hope and promise, for it seems to me that as people of faith, who we are—all that is important about us—is shaped by the presence in our hearts of a promise, a promise from God. Our very short passage this morning from the prophet Jeremiah is one of many such declarations of hope and promise throughout Judaic/Christian writing: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made." Our journey through life is about our living in the presence of that very promise. God promised and promises to be with us, and our search for God *is* the spiritual journey.

Let me tell you a bit about the context of the promise from the book of Jeremiah. These brief details are important because they show us that promises are not just or even primarily important when things are going along swimmingly. They are particularly important when they seem the hardest to recall or believe. Jeremiah, who was not known for his optimism—he is called the Whining Prophet, a moniker that has endeared him always to me—was in prison when he wrote this. For one too many times no doubt, he had told the leaders, the powerbrokers of Israel, that they were headed down the wrong path. The fact that he was right, of course, just enraged them that much more. Sick of him and his whining, they tossed him jail. But shutting him away did not change the fact that the Babylonians were hovering all around tiny Israel; the exile was just about to begin, arguably one of the worst moments in the history of Judaism. The God of the people of Israel must have seemed far away and disengaged; and, yet, at this very moment we hear from Jeremiah, the prophet of doom, these consoling words, words of great hope. Apparently hope exists even when the trajectory of life moves in a way that seems far from ideal. Even though Jeremiah claimed that the coming exile was brought on by their own behavior, none—not even he—would suggest that this new path for God's people was part of God's plan. And, yet, in the midst of it, there still was hope that the promise, the covenant, would not ultimately be broken. Isn't that marvelous: hope exists even when all the supporting data say that life at the moment is going to hell in a hand basket!

But, friends, we are a people for whom promises have become shallow and short-lived. Political promises have become a joke, material for late night comedians. The power of the instant replay that is now preserved forever in each person's history has exposed what we knew all along: there is great temptation for a politician to say and promise what is most expedient for him/her, rather than what he/she most deeply holds to be true. So many means are being used to justify the end that we forget what the end was in the first place. The disappointment that hangs in the air after most political campaigns is deeply erosive and can start to be cured only by greater honesty.

We have become fast and easy with our promises, making and breaking them without too much regard. Even in our most intimate relationships, promises often are way too easily broken. Please don't hear that as another preacher preaching against divorce. In my case that would be unforgivable hypocrisy. I know that divorces must sometimes occur, but no divorce should ever be easy or flippant, because promises matter and they matter to our souls long after relationships are dissolved. Every divorced person owes the one from whom the irrevocable break has occurred *at the very least* the effort to desire the best for him/her and the commitment—*again at the least*—to pray always for his/her wellbeing.

Yesterday afternoon as I performed a marriage ceremony for a lovely young couple, glistening eyes were everywhere—and that included some other than mine (I am a total sap at such moments). The couple was so filled with hope and promise that I found myself doing some magical thinking, wishing that the magic of that moment could last forever, fantasizing that I—as though I had such power—could keep them safe and bubble-wrapped. But, of course, I can't because life does not flourish in bubble-wrap; and beyond that, it is not magic that keeps any of us in committed relationships anyway but promises and hope and a good measure of hard work. The truth often is that it is the intentional choice to remember the promises and hope when nothing at the moment feels particularly hopeful.

There is talk in the larger culture about a new way of envisioning marriage through the use of marriage contracts. The thinking goes like this: How can one promise to be committed to one person forever and how can one know at the age of x what he or she will want twenty or thirty years or a lifetime down the road? I don't have an easy answer to either of those questions; and, yet, call me old fashioned, but no thank you. If that works for a couple—that sort of “love me till you don't” philosophy—have the heck at it; but don't call it marriage, and don't ask me to bless it in the name of the church! Finally I am a conservative! I think if you asked the gay and lesbian persons who have recently won a hard-fought battle in New York State to have the right to make the legal promise of marriage if they favor such tweaking of the promise, they'd say—at least the ones I know—would say, “Are you kidding me?”

And, yet, despite what looks like we are always trending toward the un-hopeful, going somehow in the wrong direction, there are many, many examples at the macro and micro level that hope is alive and well in this messed up but marvelously made world of ours. Two quick stories please.

One of the worst things to happen in our area in many decades, Hurricane Sandy has had many moments of hopelessness when the “promise” seemed to be barely existent. But it has also given rise to some incredible stories of promise and hope, lived out in the lives of valiant people and tireless helpers. In Friday's paper, there was a great story about a Red Hook couple who lost their lobster business to the storm—including their beloved truck, Big Red, out of which they sold reportedly outstanding lobster rolls—and experienced huge damage to their home in the Rockaways. Coming back to life everyday with all their might, the Povich-Gorham family face each morning with these words because their young children are safe. “I can replace my truck,” said Mr. Gorham. “I can't replace my kids. The rest is just money and time.” Hope lives. God bless them and countless others like them.

In the world of viral communication we had another shot in the arm this week with regard to hope. NYPD Officer Larry DePrimo working the beat in Times Square came upon a homeless man in the cold with bare feet. Impulsively, the officer bought the man a pair of boots and helped him put them on. He didn't change the world; he just changed one man's world and for a second the soul of a country.

It's Advent again, my brothers and sisters. We wait as we do every year, but there is nothing penitential or somber about the waiting. We wait in great joy, for we know there is already a light in the world; and in that process of knowing and waiting for the coming of the Christ child again, if we open our hearts and eyes to the world around us, we are transformed yet again—for hope and promise are alive and well in the world.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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