



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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The Magnificence of Thirst

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 17, 2013

The First Sunday in Lent

Based on Luke 4:1-13

They came as they always do on Ash Wednesday. Hundreds and hundreds of them—of us—seeking, searching, hoping, repenting. Because I love the early morning, I took the first shift; and at 7:00 a.m. sharp they started. A few even at that hour were very Thom Browne-looking as though they were ready for a magazine shoot; more though with hard hats, ready I imagined to engage in all sorts of dangerous tasks; one lady leading a black standard poodle upon whose majestic and coifed head—the poodle's—I wouldn't have dared put anything as mortal as ashes—happily he only watched without much interest as I reminded his owner of her mortality; a few with ear phones still in, presumably silenced but who can say for sure; more than a few bent and laden with bags of various sorts; some smiling as though I was pronouncing "have a nice day," rather than their eventual return to dust; others visibly burdened and sad.

All in search, I believe, of God, all coming to admit and to be reminded that in the end there is nothing between us and God: we return to that from which we have come, both places—creation and eternity—profoundly inhabited by God. And if they/we only know it one day during the year, then so be it; better one than none. Life is the process—simple and magnificent—between our beginning and our ending when we search for God. Lent reminds us of that journey. Is it sad and ponderous? Well, yes, sometimes it is; and in fact it almost always contains some aspect of such emotions, for it is a serious time when we examine our lives. But at a deeper level Lent calls us primarily to remember our thirst for God: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God," cried the psalmist; and there is nothing more true or profound about us than that fact: we thirst for God.

Today we are confronted by the topic of temptation. Each of the Synoptic Gospels contains some variation of the story. In our lesson from Luke, we read that for 40 days Jesus has been tempted by the devil, and he is famished. The devil tempts Jesus to turn the stones into bread; Jesus reminds him that we live by more than our appetites. The devil then offers Jesus dominion over the world, a kingdom on earth, which would put to end years of Roman occupation for God's people. Jesus reminds the devil that such resolution is not Satan's to give. And finally the devil tempts with an act of magic to show that God will indeed protect Jesus. Jesus refuses such an effrontery to God.

My suggestion to you this morning is that each of the temptations was an invitation for Jesus to thirst for something other than God, an invitation he repeatedly refused but one from which we can learn a great deal about our own search for God.

What thirsts get in the way of our thirst for God? The first and most obvious, of course, is the thirst to satiate our appetites. Truthfully, of course, we rarely know real or certainly extreme hunger and thirst. Over the course of my life, I must have said thousands of times, "I'm starving"—I've probably said it this weekend—but, of course, I wasn't, not once. When we are dieting or simply trying to eat and drink relatively healthily, we talk about how difficult it is to withstand temptations to indulge in various foods or drinks. Generally these moments are not those that get in the way of our desire for God. It is a much more ruthless kind of insistence upon having what we want, when we want it, and taking it because we can that separates us from God.

An ancient story from Hebrew scripture provides an example of this kind of thirst. David, a powerful and charismatic king, happens to look upon the beautiful Bathsheba across the way one day. He is filled with thirst for her and immediately uses his power as king to be with her even though he knows she is married to another, Uriah. This thirst becomes the blinding

thirst in his life to which all other considerations must kneel. He takes her because he can; and at that moment his thirst for God is no longer first.

Our tabloids are filled with some version of this story every day. But sadly it exists in our own lives more often than we realize. The finest, the most beautiful, the best, the latest—our desires for these separate us from God when they become more important to us than God. And how do we know when they have become more important to us than God? When we realize that our desire for this object, person, or accomplishment suddenly means more to us than anything else. It happens to us on small and big levels, from everyday power plays to the most insidious. When we in the First World demand the resources of the world with no regard to others, when our desire blinds us to others, we cannot claim that we love God as we have been created to do. This truth, I believe, resides at the heart of Jesus' remark that we "do not live by bread alone." This story begs of us the question: by what do we truly live?

Jesus' second temptation to us is subtler than the first but just as important. Jesus refuses to do what the people of Israel most wanted—to become an earthly king—because that is not the way by which God called or calls people to God. From the moment that the extraordinary truth of Jesus began to be known, those around him looked to him as the one who would deliver them from the political realities of their lives, hoping that he would become the great deliverer for whom they had so deeply longed. Jesus' refusal to fill that desire rests not in his wish that they remain oppressed but in his knowledge that true deliverance comes only from God and is never *singularly* about deliverance from temporary powers on earth.

This temptation resonates in our lives when we desire and insist upon premature solutions, when we demand answers for complex issues that simply may not be knowable in this life. This failure to truly thirst for God gives rise to religious thinking that divides all of life into black or white, right or wrong, in or out. Our desire for such clarity is utterly human but is in the end simply not faithful. We are not promised absolute clarity but instead vision that is now as "through a mirror darkly." Only God ultimately resolves; we live with partial understanding, and until we accept that, we are prone to the sin of religious arrogance.

The third temptation of Jesus, to resort to an act of magic, relates to us in our own love of magical thinking. This desire for the great acts of God may more than anything stand in the way of our genuine thirst for God. It comes to us in our daily lives when we find ourselves saying or thinking, "If I can just get this job or this promotion, if I can just be healed of this ailment, if my child can just not be sick any more, then I will know that God is God."

I think this may be Jesus' greatest teaching to us: the thirst in our lives that most defines who we are is our thirst for God, not for what God does for us—but **for** God, for who God is. This is hard to accept, for we are consumers, even consumers in religion, even would-be consumers of God. But what God offers us is God's self, not great acts but God's eternal abiding presence in our lives.

This third point is so critical for what it teaches us about God: God loves us, even thirsts for us, not because of what we do but for who we are. We do not inch closer and closer to God by doing better and better but by being who we most genuinely are created to be.

Temptations come and go; we succumb to some; we withstand others. But God's love for us—for who we are, not what we do—remains unchanged, a fact which is perhaps the only truly unchangeable reality in the world and one that sustains us not just during the Lents of our lives but every single day.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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