



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## Spiritual Minefield

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 24, 2013  
The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday  
Based on Luke 23:1-49*

I can't speak for other preachers, but for me I have to admit that hearing the Passion gospel on Palm Sunday leaves me with very few words and a swirl of emotions and questions. Each year the story lays out for us in excruciating detail Jesus' movement from a moment of shallow adoration to the ignominy of the cross. Along the way, friends betray and misunderstand, adversaries fabricate lies about him, strangers hurl humiliating remarks, and finally soldiers drive nails into his hands and feet. This is the week we remember all of it, each horrific moment.

But why? Why do we insist upon hearing with such painstaking clarity all of the horror of Jesus' death? Is it the mysterious but unmistakable appeal of violence and narrative? Is it to whip ourselves into some sort of internal frenzy for one week of severe devotion? Or is it an obligation through which we somehow must soldier in order to rejoice on Easter?

I, of course, don't know the precise answer to those questions any more than anyone does, but I am convinced that hearing the passion story again and again is indeed necessary for us. Does that mean that Jesus came just to die or even primarily to die as part of some prearranged divine interaction of substitution and satisfaction? No, not to me; it does not mean that. It seems more likely that Jesus came to die only inasmuch as his death, like his life, taught us how to live and love.

And, yet, there is no denying the fact that the story of his death is huge for us, that it is a moment somehow connected to our being brought to a new kind of life. Jesus died because he was unwilling to abandon what he had come to teach us. At any moment he could have changed the course of history. He could have stopped fraternizing with outcasts; he could have conformed to the expectations and demands of the religious hierarchy; he could have ceased to so obviously identify with the poor; or, easiest of all, he could have slipped away with his inner circle of followers into the obscurity of the hills, where he could have lived a full life among cherished disciples.

But he did not. Refusing to be other than who and what he was, he trudged to Calvary, where he gave his life not as substitution for us but as evidence that we too must die in order to live the life to which God calls each of us. This should not have come as a surprise, as he predicted it over and over. Repeatedly he said, "If you want to gain your life, you must first lose it; you must be willing to die to that which is old to be born to the new." He said it to those with ears to hear, and he says it to us even now.

Suddenly a fascinating story about a distant event takes on the urgency of this moment. If we are ready and brave enough to take it, this walk of ours through Holy Week 2013 contains the powerful likelihood that we too may lose our lives—at least as we have known them. We know that part of us to which we need to die so that we can truly live. The brutal honesty that is so much a part of Holy Week places us in real danger. We may be challenged to give up cherished views of others and ourselves, to question in rigorous detail the priorities and compulsions of our lives, to let go long-

held resentments and hurts, the hanging on to which has been almost definitional for us. We may find ourselves insistently tugged in directions never before imagined, and we may be driven to acts of mercy, justice and generosity that in our old mind would have scared us to death had we even considered them.

Why would any of us want to do it, to walk through this spiritual minefield we call Holy Week? The obvious answer, of course, is that we know what lies at the other end of the darkness: light and life, the sunrise of Easter. That is the promise we have; we have glimpsed it before; it is an arduous and narrow walk, but one we can trust with our lives.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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