



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Listen

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 22, 2017
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany—Based on Isaiah 9:1-4 and Matthew 4:12-23*

This week, more than most, has been significant. On Friday, the Inauguration: the newly elected president and vice president of the United States were sworn into office, according to our country's law, as has happened every four years since 1789. A "peaceful transfer of power" that affects not only the United States, but the entire world.

On Saturday, the Women's March on Washington: a grassroots movement to stand up for the values of freedom and justice and equality for all. Many hundreds more peaceful sister marches took place in the US and around the world, including the one here in New York. There was one in my small hometown of Greenville, South Carolina, and there were two in Antarctica. Though I was not able to march myself, I know some of you did. Each time I walked into my apartment elevator yesterday, I met more neighbors going out to join the march, all through the day. There were hundreds of thousands, even millions marching: women, men, children, families. In every state. In sixty countries. On all seven continents. Marching to uphold the values of Freedom, Justice, Equality, Women's rights, Human rights.

Also on Saturday morning: a prayer service at the Episcopal cathedral in Washington. [1] The Washington National Cathedral, as we call it, hosted the prayer service to offer the new president and the nation a chance to come together in prayer—something it's done regularly since 1933. That liturgy was an "interfaith service of prayer, music and Scripture readings, designed to reflect the diversity of our nation and to remind the president that he is called to lead all of us, not just a few." The Episcopal Bishop of Washington, the Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde, welcomed those gathered to the "house of prayer for all people" and an "hour of prayer for our nation, its leaders and all those who call this land their home."

That prayer service is considered the conclusion of the official inaugural events. It's a tradition dating back to the inauguration of George Washington. You may remember that our city of New York is no stranger to presidential inaugurations. Our first presidential inauguration, for George Washington's first term, was held here in New York City, in 1789. President Washington took the oath of office in front of Federal Hall on Wall Street. Afterwards, all members of the Senate and House were required to walk a short distance over to St. Paul's Chapel on Broadway to hear "divine service" led by the chaplain of Congress, who also happened to be the Episcopal Bishop of New York.

In the Episcopal social media and likely others, there was much discussion, and some controversy, about the appropriateness of the Washington National Cathedral's hosting the Inaugural Prayer Service this year, and about church choirs singing at inaugural events. Many of the faith leaders who took part in Saturday's prayer service were criticized for their participation, given that some of the values expressed during the election season seemed to contradict deeply-held Christian values of love, compassion, and human dignity.

There has also been, at least in the Episcopal media, controversy over whether we should pray for the president, particularly this president. The Episcopal Church's Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has written a thoughtful response to this question. I commend it to your reading and will include a link with this sermon text. [2]

Here is one part of Presiding Bishop Curry's response:

I grew up in a historically black congregation in the Episcopal Church. We prayed for leaders who were often lukewarm or even opposed to our very civil rights. We got on our knees in church and prayed for them, and then we got up off our knees and we Marched on Washington. Following the way of Jesus, we prayed and protested at the same time. We prayed for our leaders who were fighting for our civil rights, we prayed for those with whom we disagreed, and we even prayed for those who hated us. And we did so following Jesus, whose way is the way of unselfish, sacrificial love. And that way is the way that can set us all free.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we hear the start of Jesus' public ministry. It begins out of a moment of pain, out of what seems apparent failure. John the Baptist, Jesus' slightly older cousin and forerunner, the one sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus, has been arrested by King Herod. John's voice has been silenced. John's ministry has been halted. As Rome's puppet ruler, Herod ruled the region of Galilee, now Galilee of the Gentiles. Before it was called Galilee, it was known as Zebulun and Naphtali. It's an area on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Many centuries before, the prophet Isaiah spoke to the people of Zebulun and Naphtali. They had endured the darkness of being conquered and then deported by the foreign power of Assyria. The Assyrians were then conquered by the Babylonians, who were conquered by the Greeks, who were conquered by the Romans.

Isaiah's central image of hope to these people who have known such great darkness is a light shining in the darkness—a great light. If you've ever been in a place of deep darkness, whether physical or spiritual, you know the profound relief and deliverance brought by one bit of light. Even the light of one candle dispels a great darkness and brings relief and hope. Isaiah's powerful image of light helps the people to be able to imagine that a world of peace and justice and end to war and division just may be possible. The people need to be able hold that image in their imaginations. Without it, they will remain trapped in darkness. It's that way with us, isn't it? If we can imagine something, then that becomes a possibility. If we can't imagine anything different, then we tend to stay right where we are.

At the news of John's arrest, Jesus goes out into Galilee. When I first read that, I imagined that Jesus was retreating to Galilee to re-group, to figure out what to do next. But that's not the case. Jesus does not retreat to Galilee. No. Jesus goes right into the lion's den, because Herod rules Galilee. From the shadow—and foreshadowing—of John's arrest and imprisonment, Jesus begins his public ministry of teaching, proclaiming the Gospel, and healing in God's name. He has come to break the yoke of the oppressor, to bring liberation to those in bondage. But he won't do that in the way expected. Jesus doesn't come in as a conquering king, riding in on a great horse with an army. Jesus' way will be different.

When Jesus starts his public ministry in this out-of-the-way place, he calls his first disciples: these unlikely four fishermen. They are not the social elite. They are not the wealthy and powerful of their day. They follow Jesus, and their way of fishing is transformed.

Two thousand years later, we are trying to follow Jesus. Are we "fishing for people"? That kind of talk tends to make Episcopalians nervous. I suggest to you that we fish for people not by insisting that they believe like us, or join our particular church, or even join this particular congregation. I suggest, rather, that we fish for people by showing them the love, the compassion, the respect that Jesus showed.

Here are some practical ways we might do that:

Pray. Pray for this country, pray for our leaders, pray for those we love, pray for our enemies.

"Be on the lookout for moments of wonder, signs of grace, revelations of beauty, glimpses into the mystery of life, [glimpses] of God." [3] These are lights. The Light is always there, even in times of pain and sorrow.

Act love and compassion and respect into places where there is hate, distrust, and despair.

Stand FOR our Baptismal values of freedom, justice, equality, and the dignity of every human being.

Here's the most radical of all: Think of someone you know who holds opinions different from yours, who may have voted differently than you, who may feel differently about this election/these next four years. Invite that person to have coffee/tea/lunch with you. Then LISTEN. Listen with respect. Listen without argument. Listening does not imply agreement. Listening confers respect. And respect can open hearts.

This time in our country calls us to be more faithful, not less. This time in our country calls us to be our best selves.

We must be able to hold in our imaginations a time of freedom, joy, light, compassion, love and friendship, of peace and justice and equality for every human being. And we must act in ways to make that a reality. For that is nothing less than the dream of God.

[1] <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2017/01/21/trump-inaugural-events-end-in-prayer-at-national-cathedral/>

[2] <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/statement-episcopal-church-presiding-bishop-curry-regarding-prayers-president>

[3] <http://ssje.org/ssje/2013/01/23/a-wonderful-moment-missed-br-david-vryhof/>

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