



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Waiting for the Light

Sermon preached at the 11 o'clock service, December 10th, 2017

The second Sunday in Advent

Based on Mark 1: 1-8

Episcopalians are a strange and wonderful people. Sometimes more strange than wonderful, but pretty wonderful nonetheless. Now I realize not everyone here this morning is an Episcopalian, but I just wanted to offer a little shout-out to those of us who live in one of the more tolerant neighborhoods in the Christian faith. I'm sure you've had the experience of talking with someone and religion (or the Christian faith) comes up and you end up saying something like, "Well, yes, I AM a Christian, but I'm not that kind of Christian."

We're pretty different from other parts of the Christian tradition, in ways I've come to appreciate more and more over the years. Women in ordained leadership. Married clergy. Acceptance of all people. Grace magnified. Guilt minimized. Emotion moderated. Intellect unleashed. Different, in a good way.

But we're seldom as counter-cultural as we are during this season of the year. In a month when secular culture kicks into high gear with the arrival of the pre-Christmas shopping season and all the frenetic holiday busyness, Episcopalians call one another into a period of quiet, prayer-filled waiting. We don't do it perfectly: We may slip a carol or two in there before it's time, and we enjoy a good Christmas party as much as the next person. But we always have the sense that these are just glimpses, foreshadowings of what's to come.

In terms of worship—in terms of our worship, in terms of our inner life—we try to slow things down. We try to watch and listen for the Advent of the One who is coming; the One who's almost (but not quite yet) here. When the Christ Child comes, we will not only celebrate his birth on the day, but we will take 12 whole days of Christmas to fully express our joy.

But for now, we try to savor the silences. Our music is somber, even solemn, and there won't be any carols on Sunday morning until Christmas Eve. I remember my father visiting us—he grew up in the Baptist tradition—and after one Advent service he said, "Do you all have any Christmas Carols at all in this church?" The decorations around the church are

kept to a minimum, and we try to use this period of liturgical stillness to get our heads and our hearts right.

As it turns out, we need all the help we can get. Left to our own devices, we would **never** have enough patience to prepare to be witnesses to the holy activity of God.

My aunt, who was a week away from turning 98 years old, died in her sleep last week. It was, by all accounts, a good death. As hard as it was to say goodbye, it was a joy to celebrate a life so wonderfully lived: 38 years of teaching. I was asked to officiate at her services and it was such a privilege. So, on Friday Ellen and I were sitting at LaGuardia waiting for a flight to Columbus, Ohio. And, as I sat in the waiting area of that bustling terminal, I looked around and realized that absolutely no one was just waiting. Yes, of course we were all waiting for flights to take us to our various destinations, but no one was *JUST* waiting. People were reading or writing e-mails, making phone calls, negotiating deals, reading books and newspapers, watching movies and television shows on their laptops or iPads. People were eating and conversing with loved ones, but no one was *JUST* waiting. "Waiting" is nearly a lost art in a world where immediate gratification is the operating standard.

But in Advent we're the ones who are still waiting. Christmas has not yet come for us, in spite of all the heartwarming music we hear and all the bright decorations we see. Internally, privately, we're still making ready. We're still getting prepared. We're waiting for the revelation, preparing for the movement of the Holy Spirit, waiting for further instructions. Like Mary, after hearing the Angel's frightening pronouncement that she would bring the Son of God into the world, we are still "pondering all of these mysteries in our hearts."

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal writer and preacher, observes there is a value to be found in the waiting. She writes, "Our waiting is NOT nothing. It is something...a very big something...because people tend to be shaped by whatever they wait for."

What are you waiting for? For what do you hope? What is shaping you? What dream is slowly forming and changing and re-arranging you? Are you waiting for children to reach a certain age? Are you waiting for a relationship to come to a particular point? Are you waiting for your career to peak, or for your retirement, or for your investments to pay off? Are you waiting for some fantastic, long-held dream to finally come true? Are you waiting to feel better? Are you waiting for the time to be just exactly right?

Our waiting is not nothing!

Our waiting in this season is a valuable as it is rare because it's the holy anticipation of a New Heaven and a New Earth. It's a waiting for the light that shines through the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it. For Christians, it's the waiting for a child, yes, an

infant, but an infant whose adult life we already know and whose ultimate sacrifice makes us all unworthy to untie the thong of his sandals.

Wendell Berry, one of my favorite writers, is a native Kentuckian and writes about his understanding of this sacred mystery in a poem from his *Sabbaths* collection, where he pictures the manger scene taking place right in his own Appalachian barn. I'll try to read the poem slowly and I invite you to close your eyes and focus on these wondrous words...

**Remembering that it happened once,
We cannot turn away the thought,
As we go out, cold, to our barns
Toward the long night's end, that we
Ourselves are living in the world
It happened in when it first happened.
That we ourselves, opening a stall
(A latch thrown open countless times
Before), might find them breathing there,
Foreknown; the child bedded in straw,
The mother kneeling over Him,
The Husband standing in belief
He scarcely can believe, in light
That lights them from no source we see,
An April morning's light, the air
Around them as joyful as a choir.**

**We stand with one hand on the door,
Looking into another world
That is this world, the pale daylight
Coming just as before, our chores
To do, the cattle all awake,
Our own white frozen breath, hanging
In front of us; and we are here
As we have never been before,
Sighted as not before, our place
Holy, although we knew it not.**

And, "sighted as not before," we see the world so differently.

We know our abundance is not a sin, but our selfishness regarding our possessions may be. Our shifting of the societal burden onto those who have less is impossible to defend from a biblical perspective. We know material blessings are not a sin, but the fear that makes us hold onto them with a grip which suggest we will never ever be so blessed again—well, that may be.

We know education is not a sin, but if we're unwilling to open the doors of learning to those who have fewer opportunities for learning—well, that's plain wrong. The color of your skin is not a sin. You are who you've been created to be. But if the color of your skin causes you to be much more likely to be injured or even killed by a law enforcement official, well, that is a societal sin and a fatal brokenness, making it incumbent upon **all** of us to do more to ensure justice is granted to everyone equally.

Being a male in a position of authority is not a sin, but leveraging that authority to force women who work with you into compromising positions in order to intimidate them, dominate them, sexually harass them—well, that is sin. And you can better believe there've been a lot of conversations around the water cooler and at the club and in the board room over these past several weeks about what it means to be white or male or privileged...and the obligations that status demands in a new day.

What should we do while we watch and wait?

Some of us are in professions that are ethically challenging; some of us are in professions that make it hard to feel good about what we do. Tax collectors in the time of John were in a predicament. They came to John to be baptized and freed from their sins, and then they asked, **“Teacher, what should we do?”** And John told them simply, **“Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”** In other words, do the right thing, whatever your circumstances, whatever your predicament. Do the right thing and the Kingdom will be just that much closer to your grasp. Do the right thing, and the light will begin to break through the darkness. Do the right thing, the thing you know in your bones to be the right thing, and be willing to face the reality that not everyone wants you to do the right thing.

They thought John was amazing. They all thought he was so pure, so holy. They thought he just had to be The One. But John was quick to remind them, **“I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord.”**

And what does the voice of one “crying out in the wilderness” sound like?

Does it sound like the monitor alert of an elderly patient signaling the nurse's station that the end has finally come and a new beginning has begun? Does it sound like the shouts of protestors filling the streets demanding that justice be done? Does it sound like the cry of “Last Call” in a bar filled with quiet, lonely people? Or, does it sound like an African mother's gasp when she realizes the child she's been rocking died of starvation in her arms?

Does the voice of one crying out in the wilderness sound like anything we have ever known? Yes, it probably does, because we, too, know what it is to have cried out into the wilderness. It's why Fleming Rutledge once said, “Of all the seasons of the year, Advent

preaching is the easiest.” Why is that? “It’s because Advent is about a world in darkness, and it is not at all difficult to show that this is a world of darkness, certainly not at this point in our history.”

Advent is, therefore, a season in which we help one another face up to the truth about the human race in general and also the truth about ourselves.”

Make straight the way of the Lord...

Make a clear path for our God...

Get out of the way all who would obscure this path...

Clear out everyone who does not understand...

THIS IS THE TIME OF THE LORD!

What are we waiting for?

And who will we be when we’re bathed in the light of the One who is most assuredly coming into our world, into my life and into yours?

Amen.