



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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My Messenger

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 2, 2020

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Based on Malachi 3:1-4, Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:22-40

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen.

The movie *1917*, directed by Sam Mendes, is an intense World War I movie currently showing in theaters around the city. Nominated for ten Academy Awards, it's the story of two soldiers who have been called to deliver a crucial message. They've been chosen for this assignment because one of the soldiers has a brother serving in the British Army's 2nd Battalion, and Intelligence has discovered his battalion is headed into a trap.

The two friends are sent to deliver a message to call off an ill-fated attack that is scheduled for the very next morning. If they fail to deliver the message, their general tells them, "It will be a massacre. Sixteen hundred men will lose their lives." The movie, which is not for the faint of heart, is the adventure of these two young soldiers who risk everything to be messengers of life and death information.

The word *Malachi* means "my messenger." This short prophetic book (only a little over three pages long) is the last book in the Hebrew Bible. It was written in the period after the rededication of the Second Temple, somewhere between 500 and 450 B.C.E. ⁱ The prophet Malachi is God's messenger of life and death information. His prophecy emphasizes God's call to true worship and the need for the people of God to keep the covenant they've made.

He also predicts the coming of the Messiah. "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple."

To his temple. You can see why this passage would be read on this Sunday when we celebrate The Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple. The Presentation is the commemoration of the moment when Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem 40 days after his birth, for the traditional rites of *presentation* and *purification*. Luke conflates these two separate rituals into one, single event at the temple as a symbol of the fulfillment of God's promises in Jesus.

Jesus has previously been circumcised and given the name designated by the angel Gabriel. (The name *Jesus*, by the way, is derived from the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, meaning "to deliver" or "to rescue.") According to Mosaic Law (Exodus 13:1-2), first-born male children were to be consecrated as "holy to the Lord." (Luke 2:23). So, the infant Jesus is brought to the temple and his parents offer a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. ⁱⁱ This is The Presentation.

“After the birth of a son, the mother was considered ceremonially unclean for seven days until the child’s circumcision. Then she remained homebound for another thirty-three days until the fortieth day, when she offered a sacrifice to the priest to make atonement on her behalf. For those of lesser means like Mary (and Joseph), an offering of a pair of turtledoves or two pigeons sufficed.”ⁱⁱⁱ And this is The Purification of the Virgin, another feast which takes place around this time and which, as the title of the Feast suggests, involves one who is in no real need of purification.

So, Mary and Joseph are just going about their religious duties, fulfilling the laws of their faith, minding their own business, as it were, when they have two extraordinary interactions with people at the temple.

First, they encounter the righteous and devout messenger Simeon. It had been revealed to Simeon that he would not see death until the Lord’s Messiah was revealed to him. And, filled with the Holy Spirit, Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and offers the words of praise the Church has come to know as the *Nunc Dimittis*;

Lord, you now have set your servant free
to go in peace as you have promised;
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,
whom you have prepared for all the world to see;
A Light to enlighten the nations,
and the glory of your people Israel.

Can you *imagine* the joy filling that old man’s heart?

Then there was the holy messenger Anna, prophet from the tribe of Asher. The author of Luke says old Anna, “never left the temple, but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.” She, too, “began to praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Can you *imagine* the joy filling that old woman’s heart?

A light to enlighten the nations, a holy and eternal light, revealed to these two in the temple; a message sent to the messengers. In the midst of our darkness, we are all seeking a light. Coronaviruses, impeachment proceedings, helicopter crashes: there is certainly no shortage of things which block out the light.

This Sunday was known to a previous generation as Candlemas, the Sunday on which all the candles in the church were blessed and when other candles were blessed and distributed to those in need. It was a celebration of the light. A few other traditions sprang up around this holiday as well.

- Good weather at Candlemas was considered an indication that more severe weather could be expected for at least another forty days, whereas cloudy or rainy conditions were taken to mean that winter was over.
- In Europe, the faithful looked to the hedgehog to determine the weather. In North America, the absence of hedgehogs had us looking for groundhogs emerging from their dens and searching for their shadows so we could know what to expect weather-wise.

If Candlemas be fair and bright
Come, winter, have another flight.
If Candlemas brings clouds and rain,
Go, winter, and come not again.

Sometimes I think I have the strangest job ever. And I'm not referring to the hedgehogs and groundhogs. In the year 2020, in the middle of New York City, here I am, interpreting what I pray to be God's word: a word written in a series of books between 2000 and 4000 ago, which comes to us, handed down from generation to generation, to this very moment in which we now live. And the fundamental motivation behind all of it—every single piece of it— is love.

In the movie *1917*, the first soldier accepts the risky assignment because he loves his brother, and he's willing to risk his life to save him. Yes, there are many other unknown soldiers who may benefit from his devotion, but he goes first for his beloved brother. The messenger is motivated by love.

The second soldier accepts the assignment because his friend is going, and he follows his friend, almost unquestioningly, because, well, that's what friends do. He doesn't fully understand the risks he's about to encounter, but, when he has an opportunity to turn back, he does not. He cannot. This is his commitment. This is who he is. This is what love does.

And this connects with what soldiers have shared with me about their experiences in combat. "In the end," they will say, "you don't do it out of great courage or for glory or even for duty. You do it for the soldier to the right of you and the soldier to the left of you. You do it for your friends, your comrades in arms. It is to them you have made your sacred commitment." You do it out of *love*.

The British writer Mark Rutherford once observed, "When I look back now over my life and call to mind what I might have had simply for taking and did not take, my heart is like to break." We come to places like that in our lives. We reflect on what we could have done, but didn't. What we could have possessed, but did not grasp. We remember these things, and it is, truly, heartbreaking.

In the end, it is up to each one of us as to whether or not we will pay attention to the message or heed the messengers sent into our lives.

In Christ, we discover the messenger and the message are both one in the same.

Amen.

ⁱ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 1233.

ⁱⁱ *Synthesis*, Year A, *The Presentation*, February 2, 2020, p. 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 1.

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