



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

Shining Like the Sun

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 23, 2020

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Based on Exodus 24:12-18, Psalm 99, Matthew 17:1-9

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 book *Mistakes Were Made, But Not By Me; Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* was written by Carol Tavris, a social psychologist, and Elliot Aronson, a psychologist. The book discusses the mechanisms in our brains that keep us from admitting our mistakes. "If mistakes were made," say the authors, "memory helps us remember that they were made by someone else." (This may help us answer that age-old philosophical question among married persons, "If your husband is alone in the forest and says something, is he still wrong?")

Tavris and Aronson observe, "Trauma and relationship are the only things that change anyone's mind." I am deeply struck by that observation. *Trauma* and *relationship* are the only things that change anyone's mind. Our minds are so self-protected that the severity of trauma or the power of intimacy are the only things that can actually break through to change them. What implications does this have for the current political conversation or the theological conversations we have with people, people who feel deeply that their belief system is precisely the right one and ours couldn't be more wrong?

For me, the Transfiguration is one of the harder stories in the New Testament to preach about because I think *my* mind is already made up about it. It's an otherworldly experience and unlike what I know about how the universe works. There *is* something fascinating about "faces shining like the sun" and instructions from heaven-descended voices that say, "Listen to him!" I just can't completely trust them.

My friend the Reverend Maryetta Anschutz is helpful in this matter because *she* views this narrative in a fresh way. "Peter, James, and John accompany Jesus up the mountain after hearing the news of Jerusalem and Jesus' imminent death. It's only human that in their minds they play out the next few days and weeks. They begin to look for alternatives, desperate for a second opinion, a way to stop time. They want to build a safe sanctuary away from the world, to be content in the moment, saving Jesus and themselves from the heartache to come. They cannot, nor can we.

"We glimpse that moment in a hospital room as we sit with two people who have just heard the worst news of their lives and watch the patient reach out to assure the companion, the healthy one, that all will be well. These are the moments when we realize God is present in suffering and sacrifice, just as God is present in the promise and potential of our lives."ⁱ

God is present in the very traumas that allow us to realize we are wrong. *How* God is present in suffering and sacrifice is always one of the questions clergy struggle with because it's one of the questions we're most frequently asked. And, when no one's asking it of us, it's one of the questions we're asking ourselves.

The Reverend Adam Hamilton is the founding Methodist pastor of The Church of the Resurrection, a 20,000-member congregation in the Western suburbs of Kansas City. I've just attended a conference where Hamilton was the keynote speaker, and he's a fascinating and inspiring presenter. He believes *every* member of *every* church should be asking more questions. Questions like:

1. Who are we?
2. What do we believe?
3. Why do people come here?
4. Who is Jesus?
5. Why does he matter?
6. What is a Christian?
7. What do I have to do to be one?

He observes that most mainline Christian churches in America are suffering from low self-esteem due to shrinking membership, shrinking attendance, shrinking programming, and shrinking giving. The NONES (people in the U.S. declaring no religious affiliation when surveyed) went from 16% in 2007 to 26% in 2020, an astonishing increase in only 13 years. We've begun to doubt how any congregation in today's environment can possibly "transform lives, transform the Church, and transform the world."

Are we losing our gumption?

Hamilton suggests that many congregations are afraid to ask such questions because they're afraid of what they might discover. I don't think that's true of St. Bart's. Interesting thought, on a day when we're holding our 184th Annual Meeting as the community of faith known more formally as St. Bartholomew's Church.

- 185 years as a faith community, trying to love others as Christ has loved us.
- 185 years of transforming hearts and minds in the service of humanity.
- 185 years of teaching and baptizing the children, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, visiting the sick, advocating for the immigrant, happily marrying the beloved, burying the dead with honor and dignity, and joyfully worshipping God in all things.
- 185 years of preaching and teaching the Good News of Christ in a world moving so swiftly and so arrogantly that it seldom slows down to consider the Church might have anything useful to say—or power to do it.

Now, I said this last year and I believe it bears repeating: "We are the richest-looking poor church in New York." I know. I know. We're on Park Avenue. We have an endowment. Look at this place! How can we be poor? We've **got** to be rich. Our endowment is a fraction of what's needed for a church of this size and age and responsibility. I know, we've sold some air rights and we may sell more, but the millions and millions of dollars of deferred maintenance in this building will make dreams anyone has of riches disappear like bubbles in a bathtub. We struggle to keep our shelter operational. We struggle to keep the food pantry and the feeding programs vital. We struggle to pay the bills. No, we aren't in danger of going under or disappearing, but we run on very thin margins!

And, the amazing thing is that God's transfiguring, transformative love frees us to take these risks, to take every one of these chances, in order to be faithful to this highest of callings. Love asks us to take enormous chances for Christ's sake.

Any logical, rational person would have questions about what we are doing. We must be crazy! We test city codes with food kitchens and swimming pools and pre-schools and restaurants and bars and things that are not like other churches. We innovate and we adapt and we overcome in order to keep our particular brand of Christianity in the

mix because we KNOW that, if not for us, there would be very few other voices representing this broad, wide-open expression of Christ's love.

Dr. Chanon Ross wrote a fascinating book titled *Gifts, Glittering and Poisoned: Spectacle, Empire, and Metaphysics*. In it he makes the point that like the ancient Romans before us, we are living in an age of spectacle. In ancient Rome, people faced the wild animals in the coliseum in the morning. At noon, the political prisoners were crucified. Then, in the afternoon, the gladiators fought. Aren't we experiencing a similar sort of news-cycle spectacle that immerses us in a kind of bread and circuses atmosphere? Isn't our consumer-culture driven by spectacle?

I love the passage in this morning's lesson from Exodus where it says that Moses put into place an "interim reconciliation team," should anyone have any problems while he's away talking to God on the mountaintop. He takes his assistant Joshua with him and he tells his leadership team, the elders, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; (and) whoever has a dispute may go to them." You've got to believe that Aaron and Hur were ecstatic about that assignment!

Now, Moses waited a long time to receive God's ten commandments: 40 days and 40 nights is biblical shorthand for a long time. The cloud covers Mount Sinai for six days and on the seventh, God calls to Moses from within the cloud, seven being a symbolic number representing completeness/fullness. What all this tells me is that it takes time for God to speak to God's people, and it takes even more time for us to listen. It doesn't always happen instantaneously.

There is a great deal of anxiety and fear in the mainline Church right now. It may have been predictable. Episcopalians spent thirty years fighting about women's ordination and human sexuality; and, now that those fights are over, what do we have to talk about?

God's been speaking to us for more than 185 years here at St. Bart's and yet, in an age of spectacle, God's "still small voice" can be easily overshadowed. We may need to be reminded of that booming voice of God from the story of the Transfiguration. These are the (transfigured) moments when we realize God is present in suffering and sacrifice, just like the sacrifices made by this parish church over the years, just like the sacrifices made by so many of you sitting in these pews.

Amen.

ⁱ The Reverend Maryetta Anschutz, *Daily Feast; Meditations from Feasting on the Word, Year A*, edited by Kathleen Long Bostrom, Elizabeth F. Caldwell, Jane Riess, p. 156