



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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All Who Have This Hope

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 1, 2020

All Saints' Sunday

Revelations 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

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

In the 15th century, Joan of Arc became the heroine of France and was later canonized by the Roman Catholic Church as a saint for her role in the Hundred Years' War against England. She was only 17 when the French King, Charles VII, turned his army over to her and only 19 years old when she was martyred by pro-English clergy following a politically motivated trial.

Military historian Stephen Richey wrote, "When Charles VII granted Joan's urgent request to be equipped for war and placed at the head of his army, his decision must have been based in large part on the knowledge that every orthodox, every rational option had been tried and had failed. Only a regime in the final straits of desperation would pay any heed to an illiterate farm girl who claimed that the voice of God was instructing her to take charge of her country's army and lead it to victory."ⁱ Truth be told, it's often "the final straits of desperation" that brings anyone to turn to God in any form. At the end of custom and convention, at the end of rationality and logic, is the glimmering light of the Holy.

The author of the 1st Letter of John writes, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." Indeed, that is *what* we are and that is *who* we are. Joan of Arc was once asked whether she was afraid. She famously replied, "I am not afraid because God is with me. I was born for this!" What we are or are not "born for" is one of life's essential questions. Knowing that we are born for something, *to* something, and that God is a present reality in all of it, is a powerful way of putting fear and anxiety in their proper place. God is with us. We are born for this. Of what is there to be afraid?

Being born *for* something does not suggest human agency. We do not determine what we were born to do. We may choose our profession, but we do not choose our calling. Bishop Will Willimon writes, "The notion of an unchosen calling seems odd, schooled as we are in the fiction that our lives are our exclusive possessions to use as we choose."ⁱⁱ

1. We think we're in charge.
2. We think we're making *all* the decisions.
3. We think the life we live is ours alone.

And not one of these three statements is actually true from a Christian perspective.

The author of 1st John writes, “Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.” Willimon continues, “Christians assert the un-American conviction that our lives are less interesting than the God who assigns us. To paraphrase Aquinas, we're contingent creatures. We're the moon, not the sun; our light is derivative, reflective of the Light of the World. The God who had the brilliant idea to breathe life into mud loans breath, but only for as long as God wills.”ⁱⁱⁱ What we will be has definitely not yet been revealed.

Originally, All Saints' Day, which we celebrate today, was a commemoration of those early Christian martyrs whose names were unrecorded and who, therefore, could not be remembered “by name” in the Christian community on the day of their martyrdom. They were the unknown heroes and heroines who gave their lives for the faith, but whose names were known only to God.

Yet, throughout the New Testament, all baptized Christians are referred to as “saints.” Even when the apostle Paul is writing to those belligerent Christians in Corinth, whom he repeatedly admonishes, he never fails to refer to them as “saints.” Their sanctity was not, finally, some kind of moral achievement, nor even the complete triumph of grace in their lives. Their sanctity rested upon their having been made holy by virtue of their baptism. They didn't make themselves holy. God made them holy. Over time, however, it was a natural development for the term “saint” to be reserved for those in whom grace had its greatest triumph, for those who had become, truly and firmly, one with Christ.

Now today, we are standing on the first day of a week that may be different from any week that we've ever experienced. For the first time I can remember, store owners are protecting glass windows with plywood in anticipation of unrest related to a presidential election. For the first time I can remember, people are talking about “a contentious transfer of power” instead of “a peaceful transfer of power.” If the Democratic presidential challenger is elected, some Republicans will believe it was due to a rigged election, an unfair process. If the Republican incumbent is elected, some Democrats will believe the process was manipulated and the election was stolen.

And, in this moment, very few of us are thinking, “I am not afraid because God is with me. I was born for this.” And yet, and yet, we actually were born for this! No, we weren't born specifically for polarized politics or strained political processes. But we were born for difficulty, we were born for challenge, we were born for adversity. By virtue of our baptism we have been made ready for trouble.

We live in a culture with a complete preoccupation with the present and an utter disregard for what is past or what is yet to come. The Christian faith insists we move out of the present to remember the past—our sacred story and how we have survived adversity through history. The Christian faith insists we move out of the present to look to the future and what it promises. We say it every single Sunday: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

The gospel appointed for this morning is actually addressed to all the saints, both past and yet to come. And not just to the Joan of Arcs, but to *everyone* who strives to walk in the way of Christ. In the Gospel according to Matthew, the beatitudes we heard read form the opening to Jesus' great *Sermon on the Mount*. The beatitudes answer the questions:

- What can the poor in spirit hope for?
- What do the meek receive?

- What happens to the pure in heart?

Biblical scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann writes, “On All Saints’ Day, the church celebrates the promise that God has not forgotten the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and surely not the persecuted. But the last beatitude, ‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.’

“That has a strange twist for those who are still alive. They are not invited to expect instant recompense, but rather to be comforted by the eschatological perspective (that is, the hope of the end times) to take heart in the face of opposition, to trust joyfully the divine promise made about the future. (To ‘Rejoice and be glad!’)”^{iv}

Now please [read] very carefully these next sentences in the context of this particular moment.

“Put another way, the celebration of God’s vindication of the saints who have suffered carries with it an encouragement for those who still daily struggle against the forces of oppression in the marketplace, in the home, in the courts, in the government. There may be penultimate battles that are apparently lost, even wounds to be borne, but the final outcome is never in doubt.”^v

It is never in doubt. As the author of the Book of Revelation promised, “They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Each of the beatitudes falls into two halves. The first half describes the humiliation of the present moment and the second half describes the glory that is to come. “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.”

Now the beatitudes aren’t addressed indiscriminately to the general public. They’re addressed specifically to the disciples, the chosen followers, the people who have left homes and families in order to follow Jesus in the Way. In these words, Jesus addresses anyone who has paid a price to follow him and, like the saints of every generation, they find comfort in Christ’s promise to them. They are the poor in spirit. They’ve come to realize that they are spiritual have-nots, with no righteousness of their own, and, therefore, they hunger and thirst sincerely for the righteousness of God.

The second group of beatitudes are challenges to act. They highlight the need for Christians to be more than simply meditative. The merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers—all those who actively seek God’s will in the world through their works—are pronounced “blessed.”

Therefore, it’s those who combine both the reflective and the active aspects of a relationship with God who are pronounced, in the here and now, *blessed*, and they are the ones who are promised future participation in the Kingdom of God.

So here we are, the saints of our time, such as we are. We are, all of us listening today—entrusted with the daily struggle against the forces of oppression in the marketplace, in the home, in the

courts, in the government—remembering always that, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” And

"I am not afraid because God is with me. I was born for this!"

Indeed, we *were*. Indeed, we *are*.

Amen.

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ⁱ Stephen W. Ritchey, (2000). "*Joan of Arc: A Military Appreciation*". The Saint Joan of Arc Center. Accessed 10/30/20

ⁱⁱ Will Willimon, *Plough Quarterly*, Autumn, 2019, "*The Unchosen Calling*", p.23

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 23

^{iv} *Texts for Preaching; A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year A*,

Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, London, and Leiden, c. 1995, p. 586

^v *Ibid*, p. 586