



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Waiting for New Heavens

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 6, 2020

The Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

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

I know that it is the season of Advent and that it is not yet Christmas. I know this. My liturgical training has lodged this firmly in my mind. We are waiting for new heavens. I understand; I really do: the theological and spiritual need for “watching and waiting and quietly preparing.”

Yet, still... I so love Christmas music, and this year, just as soon as Thanksgiving Day was over, I gave myself over to it entirely. I just couldn't seem to help myself! I fell prey to the culture completely. Now I realize this doesn't fall into the “mortal sins” category, but I know I am rushing the season just a bit.

I love almost every kind of Christmas music, and our collection of albums and CD's reflects a pretty eclectic mix. I realize these are now “older storage technologies,” which reflect my *age* as well. We have Handel's incomparable *Messiah* right next to Alvin and the Chipmunks. (I know; I know. Perhaps this is more of a confession.) We have Amy Grant singing “It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year” and Burl Ives imploring us to “Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas.” We have the classics: Bing Crosby, Perry Como and Johnny Mathis, along with the more recent Michael Bublé.

We have James Taylor, John Rutter, and a well-worn CD of the Trinity Church in the City of Boston choir singing Candlelight Carols. We have the sound track from the movie *Love Actually*, with Mariah Carey singing “All I Want for Christmas Is You,” a movie I've seen enough times to make the sound track no longer necessary. There is Pentatonix singing “Mary Did You Know?” and, of course, the unforgettably urgent voice of 10-year-old Gayla Peevey singing “I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas.” Oh, if you haven't heard it, you are in for a treat!

I like to joke about there being different levels of Christmas music, with some music more appropriate for what I call “early Christmas,” like “Jingle Bell Rock” or “Walking in a Winter Wonderland.” And then there's music appropriate for “middle Christmas,” like “Deck the Halls” or “Do You Hear What I Hear?” And as we approach the big day, there's music best suited to “late Christmas”: “O Come All Ye Faithful” and “O' Holy Night.” And finally the finale, which in my mind is only truly appropriate for late Christmas Eve: “Silent Night.” It's been pointed out by members of my family that my approach to Christmas music is similar to my approach to Christmas decorating, with quantity sometimes edging out quality.

But what are *you* doing to get through all of this? What strategies are *you* using to cope with a difficult time? I think we are all working out our own ways to beat back the darkness this year. And this year, more than any other in recent memory, I've needed more of a glimpse of the joy—which comes in knowing how the story ends. I just didn't have the capacity this year for a long slog through the December darkness.

Preacher Fleming Rutledge said, "Of all the seasons of the year, Advent preaching is the easiest." And 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."ⁱ What's interesting is that she made that observation before a devastating pandemic and an ensuing economic and political crisis making this Advent one of the darker in recent memory.

- Yesterday, NBC News broadcaster Jose Diaz-Balart began his evening broadcast by saying, "We've been running out of ways to say grim new milestone" as he reported more than 281,000 deaths from Covid-19.
- The Director of the Centers for Disease Control, Dr. Robert Redfield, said this week, "The reality is December and January and February are going to be rough times. I actually believe they're going to be the most difficult in the public health history of this nation, largely because of the stress that is going to be put on our health care system."ⁱⁱ
- This week, deaths from the coronavirus surpassed heart disease as the leading cause of death in the United States.
- And the Mayor of Los Angeles, Eric Garcetti, said in an address to the city, "This is the greatest threat to life in Los Angeles that we have ever faced."

This really isn't a time for preachers to be mucking about, because the needs of the people are so grave, and the hope borne by the gospel so crucial. I've said it before, but I don't know that I've ever had the privilege (or the responsibility) of preaching in a more important time.

The British novelist Louis De Bernières wrote, "The trouble with fulfilling your ambitions is you think you will be transformed into some sort of archangel and you're not. You still have to wash your socks."ⁱⁱⁱ A lot of us came to New York because of our ambitions but no one is being transformed into archangels here. We're all dealing with the day-to-day responsibilities of really difficult incarnational life, and we have never been more aware of our need for, or our dependence on, a higher power.

Today the gospel lesson comes from the first verses of the Gospel According to Mark, and how the story begins in Mark is a little underwhelming. I mean there's no genealogy to contextualize the coming Messiah, as is found in Matthew. There's no soaring prose like, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God," as is found in John. There's no extended birth narrative with shepherds and stars and wise men, as is found in Luke.

No, Mark's unvarnished story begins simply by saying, "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." And then Mark remembers the prophet Isaiah who proclaims, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

We are to understand that John the baptizer *is* the messenger who has been sent and who prepares the way for the Messiah by crying out in the wilderness, a geographic place as well as a theological construct that both John and Jesus share. And so, John the baptizer makes his brief appearance, the extraordinary prophet whose opening words are an act of contrition, as he claims he is unworthy to stoop down and

untie even the thong of the sandal of the One who is to come. We are introduced to Jesus in this gospel only as John baptizes him, and the Holy Spirit descends upon him, and his public ministry begins.

Walter Brueggemann suggests that John the Baptist is “the carrier of costly readiness, a wake-up call to Christians to get back to the basics in faith, to recover initial resolve, and to be in a mode of hungry receptiveness.”^{iv} John’s cry in the wilderness is no warmhearted welcome to stand manger-side and gaze upon the brightness of the newborn Christ child. This birth is a wake-up call to action. “John’s accent is on active, concrete intentionality...”^v

In Luke, John the Baptist instructs the people, saying, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none. And whoever has food must do likewise.” He tells tax collectors, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” And he tells soldiers, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” For John, preparing the way of the Lord involves confession and repentance, justice and reconciliation. This makes Advent not merely a time of passively waiting and watching, but it also makes Advent a time of making preparation; it involves doing the work *we know we must do* as people of faith.

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid.*

These words must have been like a soothing balm to the Israelites, to whom they were first addressed. And who, in that particular moment, were a frightened, disoriented people who had seen their temple destroyed, their monarchy collapsed, and the covenants of the past broken.

“Advent makes it easy to think of the coming of a baby who is greeted by an angelic chorus, astonished shepherds, and the praise of the prophets in the Temple. But Mark’s presentation of the forerunner of Jesus does not allow readers to lose sight of the fact that the “one who is coming” comes to be betrayed and to die. This is why scholars have long referred to the Gospel of Mark as a “passion narrative with a long introduction.”^{vi} John goes to the wilderness/Jesus goes to the wilderness. John proclaims the Good News/Jesus proclaims the Good News. John is handed over to death/Jesus is handed over to be crucified. Truly, John foreshadowed in his life what would be asked of Jesus, the Christ. And Christ, lest we forget, foreshadows what is called of all Christians. Not that we are called to crucifixion, although many Christians *have* been martyred, but that we are called to pour out our lives on behalf of others.

We are not living in an ordinary time, and it may be easier than it has been for some time for us to hear the clarion call of the prophets and the clarion call of Christ.

- Our God suffers with us and for us.
- Our God is present with every lonely person in an ICU bed struggling for each and every breath.
- Our God is present with every caregiver, exhausted and in tears, who wonders if they will be able to make it to the end of their shift.
- Our God is present with every restaurant and shop owner who cannot fall asleep because they do not know how they are going to pay the rent or meet the payroll.

- Our God is present with every isolated person who is finding the loneliness of this time more and more debilitating.
- Our God is present with every worker whose job has become exponentially more difficult because of this pandemic.
- Our God is present with every older person who, for the very first time in their lives, have become anxious about their health.
- Our God is present with every child and every student who misses friends and teachers and who never thought they could miss school so much.

Yes, by all means, do wait and watch and quietly prepare. But know—KNOW—that the God who says, “Comfort, O comfort my people” will indeed bring comfort. Know that the voice that cries out in the wilderness does not go unheard.

*“Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

Allow those words to wash over you, to baptize you in hope. For, as the author of the Second Letter of Peter says, “In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.”

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”

Amen.

ⁱ The Reverend Fleming Rutledge, *Advent; The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, c. 2018

ⁱⁱ Dr. Robert Redfield, addressing a U.S. Chamber of Commerce event, December 2nd, 2020 (as quoted by CNBC, Wednesday, December 2, 2020)

ⁱⁱⁱ Louis De Bernières, “Quotes of the Week.” *Independent.co.uk*, The Independent (UK), February 14, 1999, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/quotes-of-the-week-1070900.html>. Accessed December 4, 2020.

^{iv} Walter Brueggemann, *Sojourners, Back to Basics*, <https://sojo.net>

^v Ibid, Brueggemann

^{vi} *Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year B*, Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, c. 1993, p. 20