



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## The Long Arc

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 28, 2015*

*The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15; 2:23-24 and Mark 5:21-43*

In some traditions, the preacher chooses his/her preaching text from the Bible, depending on what is in his/her mind and heart. The Episcopal Church doesn't do that. We follow the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), a schedule of readings set out for the liturgical year, actually over a three-year period. The RCL was developed by a collaboration of Roman Catholic, Episcopal and mainline Protestant churches. It's widely used by churches in the US, Canada, the UK, Australia and some others. When you travel and visit other churches—as I'm sure you do—you'll likely hear the same readings you would hear in your home church. The RCL usually gives only one choice for the Gospel reading, but usually there are two or more choices for the other reading (the Lesson).

At St. Bart's, it's our custom for the preacher to choose the Lesson that is read along with the Gospel. For today, I selected this Wisdom of Solomon reading. I was drawn to it because we hardly ever get to hear readings from the Wisdom of Solomon in our services, and I was intrigued by the statements of God's not making death but creating all things—including us humans—for LIFE.

*God did not make death,  
And God does not delight in the death of the living.  
God created all things so that they might exist;  
The generative forces of the world are wholesome,  
And there is no destructive poison in them.*

What I didn't know when I selected this Wisdom reading was what would happen between then and now that would give, by today, a different context for this reading. Much like a painting now hung on different wallpaper.

We never know, do we, what will happen, and how our context will change?

Only ten days ago, Dylann Roof shot and killed nine people after studying the Bible with them at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC. My home state. My absolute shock gave way to tears at witnessing the forgiveness offered to Dylann by the families of those he killed, and Charleston's coming together in support, steadfastly refusing to give in to hate.

One—not the only one, but an important one—action stemming from those killings has been the very public conversation about removing the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State Capitol. A conversation long overdue.

In a still more personal turn of events, my long-time friend Jane died this week. Jane was almost 92, and a 50-year member of another Episcopal Church, but St. Bart's was a second church home for her. She graduated from our Education for Ministry (EFM) program and sang Evensong for years with our *Schola Cantorum*. She was a friend to several of us here. I was able to be with Jane in the last hours of her life: a rare privilege. Anointing her, offering prayers, reading a psalm to her, speaking to her of the great gift her friendship has been to me over the 25 years we've known each other. Then attending her funeral, a true celebration of her life—full of love, long friendships, glorious music, and a great reception. Jane would have loved every bit of it.

Death has felt very close these weeks. So what to make of this statement by the author of this Wisdom text? "God does not make death ..." Really?

It may help to know that the Wisdom of Solomon was written as a message of encouragement for Jewish communities living outside the land of Israel. It was written either just before or right about the time of Jesus. These Jewish communities living amidst pagan ("multicultural") environments would have struggled to hold fast to the principles

and practices of their faith. The author of this text is encouraging the Jewish communities to be faithful, to seek wisdom and righteousness. The author takes pains to show how the power of divine wisdom operates in human history.

God did not make Dylann Roof kill the nine members of Mother Emanuel. That was pure human choice, a bad choice, the wrong choice, driven by hate, which is as old as humanity itself.

God does, however, create us and all living things to have a natural life span. We are given the great gift of life. Our physical bodies are not designed to last forever, despite the effort and expense we go to to try to make them. And despite our culture's efforts to keep death unseen and un-talked about.

We see death coming close in these intertwined stories in Mark's Gospel. Stories so familiar that we forget how astonishing the details are. Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, falls at the feet of an unknown, itinerant healer, begging him repeatedly to come heal his little daughter, now at the point of death.

What parent here, what parent anywhere, no matter how important you are, would not do the same thing—anything—to save the life of your child?

Jairus must have been persuasive. Jesus has compassion and starts to go with him, still followed and surrounded by the large crowd. This unnamed woman, unclean from her flow of blood, has come to be healed, too. She doesn't plan to interact with Jesus at all. Her plan is to remain anonymous and just touch Jesus' clothes. She's certain even that minimal contact will be enough to heal her.

It's an act of desperation. Who has endured twelve years of poking and prodding by physicians? Who has spent all you've had on cure after cure that didn't work? What would you not try if you felt deep in your heart it would make you well? What would you not do to be able to live a normal life, to have a husband/wife and children and interact normally with your family and your community?

As soon as she touched Jesus' cloak, she felt in her body that she was healed. We know that feeling. We, too, can tell when something in our body is not right. We know the moment everything is ok again—there is a peace, a rightness, a wholeness. That's what the woman feels.

She didn't expect Jesus to notice. But he did. She didn't have to go forward and identify herself. But she did. In fear and trembling, she tells Jesus everything. He listens. In front of the crowd, Jesus calls her "daughter." The language of relationship. He tells her to go in peace, to live as one healed, to live as a whole person restored to community with others.

At Jairus' house, people are already mourning loudly for his little daughter. Her funeral is already beginning. Jesus takes the daughter by the hand. At his touch, she is immediately alive—and apparently hungry.

Two miracle stories. Two stories that show who Jesus is. Jesus is of God, bringing God's love and abundant life to us. Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him? I'd like to acknowledge these can also be painful stories. What if we're not healed of our disease? What if our child, our parent, the one we love most, died? These can be difficult stories to hear at those times.

Yesterday I attended a wedding here—a beautiful, joyous wedding of two people, two men, who glowed with love for each other, love which spread to all those gathered to support them. They committed themselves to each other for life. I happen to know each has what it takes to keep that commitment. One of the most endearing things to me was that these two men set their wedding date long ago without realizing it was Pride Weekend. And they never knew the Supreme Court would affirm the right to same-sex marriage across the United States the day before they married.

The history-making public events of these past two weeks have made me think of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s statement: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

The long arc of justice has bent a bit more toward justice for all, thanks to the faithful work of many people over many years. There are steps forward to be celebrated. AND we are not there yet. In our country alone, racism and discrimination, despite all the laws in place, remain part of the fabric of our lives.

In responding to King's statement, it has been observed that the long arc doesn't bend by itself. We are called to bend it. We particularly, as followers of Jesus, are called to help bend that long arc toward justice.

King's image of the long arc of justice is fundamentally a statement of hope. As are these two stories in Mark's gospel. Amidst all the changes and chances of this world, amidst the public and private events that change our contexts, we are anchored in hope, in faith in God's goodness, God's healing power, in the wholeness and abundant life God wants for each person.

For each person, period.

Yesterday, there was another historic event. The Episcopal Church elected its next Presiding Bishop: The Right Reverend Michael Curry, Bishop of North Carolina. Bishop Curry will be the first African American Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church. He is also the first Presiding Bishop ever elected on the first ballot. (A very big deal in The Episcopal Church. It shows the clearness and immediacy of the decision.) Bishop Curry's term will follow that of the first female Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori.

Presiding Bishop-elect Curry made this statement at his election yesterday: "I am looking forward to serving and working for the cause of the Jesus movement in the world ... to help this become a transformed world that looks more like God's dream and less like our nightmare."

The long arc.

God, make us instruments of your hope. Make us instruments of your peace. Help us bring the wholeness you intend for every human being.

Amen.

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