



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Pointing to Jesus

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 6, 2015
The Second Sunday of Advent—Based on Luke 3: 1-6*

I love the story of the burglar who broke into a house he thought was empty.

He tiptoed through the living room, but suddenly he froze in his tracks when he heard a loud voice say, "Jesus sees you."

Silence returned to the house, so the burglar crept forward and began to place items in his bag.

"Jesus is coming to you," the voice boomed again.

The burglar stopped dead again. He was frightened. Frantically he looked around. In a dark corner, he spotted a birdcage and in the cage sat on a perch a large parrot.

He asked the parrot, "Was that you who said Jesus is coming to me?"

"Yes," said the parrot.

The burglar breathed a sigh of relief, then asked the parrot, "What's your name?"

"John the Baptist," said the bird.

"That's a dumb name for a parrot," sneered the burglar. "What idiot named a bird 'John the Baptist'?"

The parrot said, "The same idiot who named the Rottweiler Jesus."

This is the Sunday during Advent that we begin to focus on John the Baptist, who points toward Jesus.

Somewhere east of Berlin, I visited a Lutheran Church whose name I don't remember. And there is an altar in the church made out of dark wood. The front is covered by figures of people from the Bible, who for the most part are hard to identify, because they all have the same long robes, long hair, and long beards.

But the figure of John the Baptist is easy to spot. He is the one whose uplifted arm is pointing straight ahead. John is the finger-pointer to Jesus.

Today, on our journey through Advent, we stand with John the Baptist and look where his finger points. We look past Christmas crowds in Midtown Manhattan, past all the lavish department store displays, past our own business and social pressures, and try to focus on Jesus.

I always think of John the Baptist as short and stocky—I don't know why except most of ancient and modern art depicts him that way. I can see him standing by the River Jordan, in robes woven of rough camel's hair. Over his shoulder, he has a bag filled with locusts and a pot of wild honey. I imagine him to be a very intense person, brutally honest, and obsessed with calling the whole Jewish community to repent.

John was a desert dweller, likely raised by the monastics in the Qumran community, who dedicated themselves to living simply and faithfully while they waited for the kingdom of God.

I can see John standing by the river, surrounded by hundreds of curious people who came out from Jerusalem—city people with city clothes and city ways, who must have found John almost as odd as we would. And in that setting, John pointed beyond himself toward the One who was coming.

That's our invitation this Advent. We can stop and ask ourselves, "What am I doing—and what is St. Bart's doing—that points beyond ourselves to the One coming into the world?"

... It's a good time to take stock of our personal lives, to consider our daily work, our words, our actions, and our relationships. Do they point toward ourselves or toward Jesus? It's a good time to look at our congregation. Do our budgets, our ministries, our plans for the future point toward ourselves or toward Jesus?

... It's a good time to choose to walk through the rest of Advent looking for ways we and this congregation can point to Christ.

To begin to respond to this invitation, I would like to look at the person of John the Baptist—to take up his statement (from Isaiah) and to take up his mantle and place it upon each of us. He stated, "I am a voice crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord."

First, we are given a voice—a voice that is different from any other voice in this world. I urge you to leave this nave today knowing that God needs your kind of voice to prepare others for his coming in Christ. Think of some ways that your voice—your message—might be the healing, reconciling, bridge-building love of God this season. Then think of the people whom you know who this day most need to hear your voice.

I encourage you to then take an action: Write them a note; call them on the phone; write them an email or a text; go and visit them. Speak to them of the good news of the gospel; plant the seed and prepare their hearts. You don't have to use religious language (although we shouldn't be afraid of the faithful language of our tradition).

The simple act of speaking to another person about your faith is a much better gift than something off the rack at Macy's or from the LL Bean catalogue.

Secondly, your voice and my voice need to cry out in the wilderness. We don't need to go very far to find a wilderness. It's any place where people are hungry and thirsty, where souls are parched and spirits diminished. It's anywhere that a person is in the midst of pain and suffering ... it could be in your close domain of living ... someone in your office, in your school, across your breakfast counter, in your own soul.

This is a season of joy and wonder. It's also a season when the lonely feel greater loneliness, the broken have their wounds opened again, the weary end up more exhausted, and everyone is poorer. It's a season when we feel deeply the trauma of immigration, the excesses of our culture, the needs of extreme poverty, and on-going environmental issues.

Our voices and actions need to be heard and felt in that world because that is where people and the created order are shackled and die.

Some years ago, near the Golden Gate Bridge, a female humpback whale became entangled in a spider web of hundreds of pounds of crab traps and lines and was struggling to stay afloat. The line rope was wrapped around her body, her tail, and her torso. A fisherman saw her and radioed an environmental group for help.

They determined that the whale was so bad off that the only way to save her was to dive in and untangle her. It was a dangerous mission because one slap of the whale's tail could kill a person. The team worked for hours, carefully slashing through the labyrinth of lines with curved knives. Eventually they freed her.

The divers say that once the female humpback was free to move, she swam in joyous circles and then came to each diver, nudging each one of them as if thanking them for her freedom. The diver who cut the final rope said her eyes followed him the whole time, as if to say, "I trust you." And he said that he, the diver, would never be the same again.

And, thirdly, we are called to prepare the way of God. Another way of saying this is to say that the church needs to be a gift to a society hell-bent on swallowing whole all the secular yuletide it can get. We need to help our world slow down and look with longing anticipation and patient waiting.

Flannery O'Connor has stated rightly, "I think the Church is the only reality that can make our troubled world endurable and the only reality that makes the Church endurable is that somehow it is the Body of Christ, and on that we feed."

We can prepare the way by allowing the holy words of the scriptures sink into our lives this season... We can invite

people to join us for the holy meal each week ... We can prepare ourselves by having an active and consistent prayer life ... We can fast from the destructive possessiveness and angst of the season ... We can assure others of our genuine love and respect ... and we can show a radical hospitality both here in this building and out there in the city.

So, what would it look like in your life and mine to take up the mantle of Isaiah and John the Baptist ... to say in our own language, "Here is God ... loving and mending this world."

Three years ago the BBC produced another one of its television masterpieces titled, "Call the Midwife," a series about a group of midwives in the 1950's London who are based in a hospital run by a group of nuns. These midwives would go out on bicycles to tend home-births in some of the poorest areas of London's East End, usually not knowing what they would encounter when they arrived in their blue and white nurse's uniforms with their newborn kit containing sheets, baby items supplies needed to tend the laboring mother, and large amounts of patience and compassion.

When the midwives set out on a call, the supervising nun always said the same thing as they get on their bicycles, "Go on now, and let's see what love can do."

So, go on now, Bob ... Bill, Mary, Lakisha, Bernard, Lucia, Fernando, Charles, Nina, people of St. Bart's ... Let's see what love can do.

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