ST BARTS

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

I Am About To Do A New Thing

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, Sunday, April 7, 2019
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Based on John 12:1-8

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.

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

As much as we say we like them or look forward to them, we're not really all that comfortable with new things. There's a cherished story in my family about my great-grandfather who was driving the family's Model-T Ford. The children in the car with him were all yelling, "faster, faster!" To which he replied in exasperation, "We're going faster than a horse can trot now!" It was if to say, "Good heavens, children! Do you want us to fly off the face of the earth?" I used to think about that story back when I was driving the Kansas Turnpike that had a posted speed limit of 75 miles per hour, which meant you could travel right around 80 miles per hour and still not be cited for speeding!

Cultural anthropologist Genevieve Bell explains that fearful reactions to new things are a common phenomenon through the ages, and "have even picked up speed alongside our rate of innovation. Critics of early steam-spewing locomotives, for example, thought 'that women's bodies were not designed to travel at 50 miles an hour…' Others suspected that any human body might simply melt at high speeds."[i] Seriously, that's truly what many folks believed. There's always a risk in something new, both real and perceived.

Professor Tom O'Hare writes,

> The US Standard railroad gauge (distance between the rails) is 4 feet, 8.5 inches. That's an exceedingly odd number. Why was that gauge used? Because that's the way they built them in England, and the US railroads were built by English expatriates.
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> Why did the English people build them like that? Because the first rail lines were built by the same people who built the pre-railroad tramways, and that's the gauge they used. Why did "they" use that gauge then? Because the people who built the tramways used the same jigs and tools that they used for building wagons, which used that wheel spacing.
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> Okay! Why did the wagons use that odd wheel spacing? Well, if they tried to use any other spacing the wagons would break on some of the old, long distance roads, because that's the spacing of the old wheel ruts.
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> So who built these old rutted roads? The first long distance roads in Europe were built by Imperial Rome for the benefit of their legions. The roads have been used ever since. And the ruts? The initial ruts, which everyone else had to match for fear of destroying their wagons, were first made by Roman war chariots. Since the chariots were made for or by Imperial Rome they were all alike in the matter of wheel spacing.

> Thus, we have the answer to the original questions. The United States standard railroad gauge of 4 feet, 8.5 inches derives from the original specification for an Imperial Roman army war chariot…. made to be just wide enough to accommodate the back-ends of two war horses. [ii]

Maybe the old excuse, "that's the way it's always been," isn't such a great response after all.

"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Jesus was a new thing and he did a new thing. It was a new thing when he came teaching that the first would be last and the last would be first. It was a new thing to teach that the rich could actually be poor and the poor might actually be rich. It was a new thing that women had a voice and a place in his movement. It was a new thing when he raised Lazarus from the dead. Raising the dead to life isn't business as usual, and I've always wondered what it must have been like to be present in the house where today's gospel story is set.

There's a dinner party taking place in the house that belongs to Lazarus, and, yes, that Lazarus. I can imagine the people there spending just about as much time staring in wonder at Lazarus as they are staring at Jesus. All of them wondering: What's it like to come back from the dead? What's it like to have decayed skin restored and the light returned to your eyes? What's it like to go back to your life after something as extraordinary as that has happened to you?[iii]

This story would be just too strange for us if it weren't for the fact that some of us know what it's like to come back from the dead. Some of us have fought through terminal diseases that in the end didn't kill us. Some of us have been written off for dead vocationally, and yet we continue to breathe in and out as we search for the next job. More than some of us have experienced the deaths of loved ones that have left us gravely wounded, nearly down for the count, and yet we rise. We still wake up each day and we put on our clothes and we walk out into the world. We take the subway, we find something to eat, we wash the plates, we pay our bills, and we just keep putting one foot in front of the other until our grief becomes a burden we can bear without falling to our knees, staggered by the weight. We are stronger than we look.

In this penitential season of Lent we are called upon to examine our way of life more closely. The Ash Wednesday liturgy says, "We are invited to the observance of a Holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word."[iv] In other words, we're invited to seek a new way of being, a new way of life, a new thing.

Sir Isaac Newton's First Law of Motion states that everything continues in a state of rest unless it is compelled to change by forces impressed upon it. Is that true of human beings as well? What will compel us? Is it Christ or the Holy Spirit who serves as that force impressed upon us? Whatever it is, we desperately need a new way.

The Apostle Paul described it like this. "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith." We need a new way. The old way is to feel overcome by our sins and our inadequacies; to feel them etched into our bodies as inerasable as tattoos.

It's far too common in my line of work for me to speak with someone about their past and to hear them talk as if their past is inescapable. Sins of omission or comission are all indelible, and every one of them is permanent no matter how many prayers have been said or apologies offered. Theologically, if we really believe our sins are forgiven by God, then it would be as if they had never occurred. It would be as if there was no evidence of them ever happening, no discernable trace of them in existence anywhere; removed from us and taken from us as far as the East is from the West, totally and completely gone.

My friend, Kee Sloan, Bishop of Alabama, says it's a kind of arrogance that keeps us believing that our failings are so special that they can never be forgiven. Maybe, secretly, we're like the Duke of Cambridge, who in the 1800's is said to have declared, "Any change, at any time, for any reason, is to be deplored." He really does sound like an Anglican, doesn't he? How many Episcopalians does it take to change a lightbulb? Three: two to change the light bulb and one to remember how good the old light bulb was.

Maybe, we really don't believe in new things. "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. Forget all that. That's over and done with. I'm about to do a new thing; it's right in front of you! Don't you see it?" Let go. Let go of all that. Let it go. For God's sake, please, I beg you, let it go.

There is a cost to holding onto the old things. Over time, they can damage your very soul. The new thing is to discover the love of Jesus and to see what Mary sees in him. Mary of Bethany, Martha's sister, takes a container of oil of nard—oil that's been extracted from a balsam tree, very expensive and very fragrant—breaks it open and anoints the feet of Jesus. The house is filled with a heavenly scent. The smell of death is long gone, and then she wipes his feet with her hair.

Sheila Cassidy, in *Good Friday People* writes,

> And why did she do it? The commentaries talk about her doing it for Jesus' burial, but I can't say that makes a lot of sense to me. I think Mary wanted to say, "I love you. I care that you're lonely and afraid. I wish I could stop it happening, but I know it's got to be. So here is a SIGN, a sign that I know how you feel, that you are precious to me. My wasting this stuff on you is the only way I know how to make up to you for what you're going through now.'"[v]

To break out the bottle of this most costly perfume is to recognize in Christ what Mary and Lazarus saw in him: a man fully human and yet completely divine. A man who can bring you back to life again.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen. (BCP, p. 219)

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[i] Media Alliance@mediaalliance.bayarea, March 4, 2019.

[ii] Professor Tom O'Hare of University of Texas at Austin, http://web.mit.edu/dryfoo/www/Info/specs_eternal.html**.**

[iii] Inspired by an essay by The Reverend Rick Morley, March 6, 2013, ***There He Was; A Reflection on John 12:1-8.***

[iv] ***The Book of Common Prayer, 1979***, Church Publishing Inc., page 265.

[v] Sheila Cassidy, **Good Friday People**, Orbis Books, New York, 1991, page 53.