



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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It's Not About Us

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 9, 2022

The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Based on Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

*Sung: It's not about us. It's about Jesus.
It's not about you or me. It's about Jesus.*

There was an explosion here Monday night. Please don't panic. There were no bombs, no fire. Well, that's not true. There was the fire of the Holy Spirit.

You see, on Monday St. Bart's hosted New York's first Imagine Worship gathering. It's a worship experience that our own Reverend Zack Nyein helped to launch back in his days in Atlanta. It's all about recreating and reimagining what church could be, if we embraced our traditions *and* also embraced people of color and younger people, and embraced the Spirit in our time.

A lot of you were here. If so, please say, "Amen! That was fire!" (Like we did on Monday.)

The big draw for that night was a sermon conversation between Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and Bishop of Atlanta Rob Wright. Separately these men are The Episcopal Church's most powerful preachers. But the two of them together? In one sanctuary, on one night? It had NEVER happened. We were ready for the St. Bart's dome to just lift up and float away.

Except that Friday, Bishop Curry announced he had COVID. By Sunday, Bishop Wright had it, too. Rev. Zack and the team looked around. What do we do now? What we did was welcome three brave lay people to offer testimonies about the healing love and truth of God.

What we did was lean into the leadership of a community gospel choir 100-strong. What we did was gather a huge, diverse crew around a small table on the platform in this sanctuary. Rev. Zack and I lifted our hands, invited everybody to do the same, and blessed bread and wine and shared in sweet, sweet communion. And we danced!

Even if you weren't here, if you close your eyes, listen closely, I hope you can still hear the voices, singing glory to God, praying, testifying to the Good News of God's love. Feel the strike of the drums and thump of the bass, the clapping hands, the stomping feet—so profound they shook the windows. They shook our souls.

I hope you can hear the silence of a meditation on where we've felt God's presence and desperately needed God to enter our emptiness. See a vision like the kingdom of heaven.

People of color and white folks. People wearing jeans, bow ties and clergy collars. Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics. Latino Pentecostal young ones and cradle Episcopalian elders. Praising God and making community together. Folks were radiant, lit up from within.

All that hope. All that fire. All that love. And St. Bart's held it all. Through St. Bart's, God stretched out her arms and gave a blessing to the whole City of New York, to people who had never crossed the threshold of an Episcopal church or even spoken the word "Episcopal." It wasn't about us. We prayed a blessing on our community. But my God, how we were blessed.

This is what I picture when I consider the words of the prophet Jeremiah in today's first reading. Nearly 600 years before the birth of Jesus, he speaks to a hurting and struggling people. He tells them:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel,
to all the exiles from Jerusalem now in Babylon:
Build houses and live in them;
plant gardens and eat what they produce.
Take wives and have sons and daughters;
take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage,
that they may bear sons and daughters;
multiply there, and do not decrease.
*But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you,
and pray to the LORD on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare.* (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

This was not good news to the Israelites in Babylon. The Babylonians had crushed Jerusalem, killed multitudes, dragged away the king, his mother, the court officials, temple priests and prophets, even the stonemasons, artisans and smiths. The Babylonians left NOTHING and NO ONE who could rebuild the ruins. No, they took the most valued members of the kingdom of Judah and imprisoned them in Babylon, 900 miles from home.

Israel wanted nothing more than to get back home, back to what they had known, back to a world where they had control, where they flourished. I imagine they wanted to keep to themselves, revive their own ways.

And then Jeremiah sends his letter from God. He doesn't promise that they'll be home soon. He doesn't promise that the God of Israel will deliver them and restore them to the heights. Instead, he says, God has invited you to look around. Get to know this foreign land and its people. Even if it feels alien. Even if it doesn't love you or acknowledge you. Enter in, all the way in. It's not about you anymore. God is doing something else here.

Let your life and your culture weave together with theirs. Seek the welfare [and the Hebrew word here is *shalom*, the wholeness, the flourishing] ... seek *that* blessing for *this* place where I have sent you. Pray for this city. Your fate and your welfare are wrapped up in theirs. When you bless them, you will find you are blessed.

I saw it Monday night. We joined up with New York, blessed New York. And my God, we were blessed.

What we did here that night, I pray to God we will do again. Maybe not in exactly the same way. Surely we will build on Imagine Worship, nurture all these seeds now sown. I know we will run different experiments for the sake of the gospel, in partnership with neighbors and friends we've never imagined. And when we do, I hope we're clear on two things.

Number One: We do host experiences like Imagine Worship in order to connect with new people, to expand St. Bart's cultural breadth and its capacity to speak the Good News of God's liberating love with people who never would've otherwise known or heard from us. Yes, there is much for us to share with them. Yes, we can bless them.

Number Two: We need this blessing. The Episcopal Church is 90% white. Our average age is 63 and getting older. Meanwhile, the average American is 38. And as of 2020, our nation is only 58% white and getting browner every day.

The voices, cultures and styles that have been a comfortable home for us Episcopalians and Anglicans, they once dominated American life. They do not anymore. They will not again.

And it is tempting to hold that much more tightly to what we love, what we've been good at. That's what the market would tell us. That's what the exiles in Babylon wanted to do. That's anybody's first instinct, when you're surrounded by upheaval.

Jeremiah reminds them, reminds us, that God doesn't need us comfortable, mixing with our own or with those we've chosen. He also reminds us that it's not a zero-sum game—either we love our neighbors' cultures or we love our own, seek their welfare or seek our own, but we can't love both or both be blessed. Divine math doesn't operate that way.

God needs us to stretch our arms and our imaginations. This is no time to hunker down, no time to be strangers in a strange land. This is our moment to fall in love with the city and its cultures, groups, voices, experiences, gifts, hurts. Make its yearning, your yearning. It's hope, your hope. It's song, our song. Lose some of your life. You will find more.

If we are to hear the gospel, if we are to share a vibrant witness, if we are to participate in God's new heaven and new earth, it will only happen when we are inextricably yoked with the people and cultures of the city. Not just midtown East, but the great and glorious City of New York, all 5 boroughs and yeah, Jersey and Connecticut, too! We don't need to be everything to everyone. But in Christ, we can be more. They will grow us into more.

We opened to that fullness Monday night. Maybe the great dome did lift up just a bit. All I know is I saw a young black woman from the community choir looking around and so excited when she found her new friend, a white priest in her 60s, so they could exchange numbers and pray together some time. All I know is the city sparkled more brightly as I stepped out.

We were conduits of blessing in the city. And we were blessed. May it be so again, and again, and again. Amen.

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