

Stronger Stuff
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Advent 3B
John 1:6-8; 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

John wasn't hurting anybody. He was just out there in the wilderness preaching and baptizing when the posse from the Pharisees rode up. They looked him up and down suspiciously—the camel hair tunic, the wide leather belt, the locusts and wild honey still left on his dinner plate—one of them spit on the ground and asked,

“Who do you think you are, anyway?”

“Well,” he laughed. “I’m not the Messiah, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“So, who are you then?” they sneered. “Elijah?”

“Nope.”

“The Prophet?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Well, who are you then? Give us some kind of answer.”

“Okay. You can tell your friends that I’m the one Isaiah was talking about, the voice crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord!’”

“But why are you baptizing then, if you’re not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet?”

“Look, fellahs,” John said, running out of patience, “I baptize with *water!*”

And maybe it was just the mood I was in when I read it, but the way I imagined John saying those words made water sound like the weakest, flattest, most tasteless stuff on the face of

the earth. “Water!” he said, spraying the word out of his mouth as if he had asked for a shot of whiskey and gotten a glass of lukewarm tap water instead. It made me think that for all its wonderful properties, water is pretty weak stuff. I’ve heard people say, “I feel weak as water.” John Keats’ epitaph reads, “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.” We talk about “watering down” those things that are too strong. All in all, it is a word whose very name connotes weakness. The way John says it in this passage reveals its inability to offer any real help or to do any real damage. “I baptize with *water*,” he says to those who were asking. “What are you worried about?”

In that same tradition one of my minister friends—not John the Baptist but Joe the Baptist—used to counsel with young people before their baptisms. They always wanted to know what baptism would do for them and Joe would say, “All I can guarantee is that it will get you wet.” He said you could almost see the disappointment on their faces. They wanted baptism to do something more for them, wanted it to purge them of their sins and make them pure—like fuller’s soap, refiner’s fire—they wanted it to be some kind of permanent remedy for sin, so that they would not only be forgiven of sins past, but covered with some kind of invisible, sin-proof coating--like Teflon--so that in the future sin would just bounce off of them. At least, that’s what I wanted when I was their age.

I think I’ve told you about the Bible my parents gave me for Christmas when I was thirteen, a big, green Living Bible and in my stocking a set of felt-tip pens. The next morning I sat down at the kitchen table with that Bible and those pens and started reading the Gospel of Matthew. I hadn’t gone very far when I paused to underline verse 21 in bright blue ink: “For he shall save his people from their sins.” Now, what could I have known about sin at such an age? And yet, as I look through that Bible now I see that all the verses I underlined had to do with that

subject. By the time I made it to the book of Romans I was underlining in bright orange ink verses like: “Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners,” and “Should we keep on sinning when we don’t have to?” and “Do not let sin control your puny body any longer.” But in spite of my bright orange underlining I remember that sin did seem to control me. I was a long way from what I thought a good Christian should be, and near the end of Romans 7 I found a perfect description of my condition. Listen to the way the Living Bible puts it. I could have written the words myself, even then:

I know I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn I can’t make myself do right. I want to but I can’t. When I want to do good, I don’t; and when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. Now if I am doing what I don’t want to, it is plain where the trouble is: sin still has me in its evil grasp.

It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love to do God’s will so far as my new nature is concerned; but there is something else, deep within me, in my lower nature, that is at war with my mind and wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me.

But on the page just before that one Paul had said, “Sin’s power over us was broken when we became Christians and were baptized.” He said that in baptism the old “sin-loving nature was buried with Christ.” And on the strength of those passages I made plans to get myself baptized. I had been sprinkled as an infant in the Presbyterian Church, but I hadn’t had any real say in the matter. I thought I should have a say in the matter, and that I should get baptized in the way everybody else in West Virginia seemed to do it.

In the summer of the following year I waded out into a river not a mile from my house and was immersed by my Presbyterian father and a Baptist minister, who dunked me under those muddy brown waters in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. According to Paul, that should do it. One good dunk and the old man would be dead, the sinful self would be buried, and a whole new creation would come up out of the water. I was hoping for that. Shucks, I was

counting on it. I remember wading back toward shore and trying to get a sense of what was different about me. Was there a halo over my head? Some kind of holy aura around me? The people who held out towels to me and welcomed me into their arms were smiling but their faces didn't register any particular surprise. If I was different I must not look that way. And on the walk home, someone asked me if I *felt* different and I surprised myself by saying, "No, not really."

The real surprise came later, when I discovered that in spite of my recent baptism I was still capable of sin. I thought, "They didn't hold me down long enough! That old sin-loving nature hasn't been buried: it's still alive and kicking!" In fact, my old sinful self seemed more alive than ever after baptism, or maybe I was only more aware of it. So, I did what most post-baptismal sinners do, I tried harder than ever to put an end to my sinful ways. If water wouldn't do it, maybe will power would. But you know as well as I do that will power can be even weaker than water. Suppose your sin is one of those real ones, like drinking too much, and suppose you have really tried to stop. If so, then you know what it is like to try to resist that temptation and fail, and then grit your teeth and try again and fail, and then buckle down to try once more and fail. Do you see what I mean? You try and you fail and you try and you fail and you try and you fail until soon you don't even want to try anymore. What's the use?

And that's when you move into the next stage of sin management. If you can't control the behavior, you think, then maybe you can control the result, and the result of sin is guilt. So you try to ease the guilt. You try to convince yourself that your sin is really not that bad. "Hey," you say, "it's not like I'm hurting anyone. I'm not a murderer, or a rapist, or a thief. I just drink a little more than I should. OK, a lot more than I should. So, sue me!" You try to justify the behavior, to "make it right," so that you won't have to feel guilty about it anymore. "Drinking

relaxes me,” you say. “It helps me lose some of my inhibitions. Allows me to express myself more freely, to be more fully myself. It’s an anti-inhibiting agent, if you will, more like medicine than anything else.” If you are successful in these attempts you don’t get over the sin, but you do get over the guilt, and that’s where a lot of us are. “Yes, we sin,” we say, “but since there isn’t anything we can do about it we’ll just have to make the best of it.”

The problem with getting over guilt is that it’s like getting over pain. We think it would be nice to get over pain, but the next time we put our hand down on a hot stove we will be glad for those sensitive nerve endings that tell us to pull our hand away quickly so we don’t do any real damage. The problem with getting over guilt is that we deaden our sense of sin, and don’t know when to pull away, and do some real damage. A little too much drinking is one thing, but suppose you lose your sense of sin altogether, and start drinking as much as you can as often as you can because you no longer feel guilty about it? And what if a little too much to drink becomes a lot too much, and you become an alcoholic who is no longer capable of holding his job or keeping his marriage together? Suppose you lose the house and the kids and the car and find yourself doing whatever you can to buy your next bottle of cheap booze, and then, when some well-meaning Christian offers you a cold cup of water in Jesus’ name you slap it out of her hand and say, “Don’t give me that! I need some stronger stuff!”

Well, of course you do.

We all do. And that’s just what John the Baptist was preaching. If those people who had been baptized by him in the Jordan came back later to demand a refund, to complain that his baptism hadn’t been particularly effective, that they seemed to just as capable of sin as before if not more so, I think he would have said to them what he said to those who were sent from the Pharisees. “I baptize with *water*! What did you think? That a little bath in the river was going

to make a new person out of you?”

“Well, yes,” they would say, stumbling over their words, “actually, we did.”

“No,” John would answer. “Water won’t do anything but make you wet. It’s going to take stronger stuff to make a new person out of you, but I’ve got good news. There’s somebody coming after me who’s got what it takes.” And that’s where Paul takes up the refrain. Although he has promised in chapter 6 of Romans that becoming a Christian and being baptized will kill the power of sin within you he admits in chapter 7 that baptism hasn’t done all he hoped it would, that he still struggles. “It seems to be a fact of life,” he says, “that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love to do God’s will so far as my new nature is concerned; but there is something else, deep within me, in my lower nature, that is at war with my mind and wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Wretched man that I am,” he wails, “who will deliver me from this body of death?” And then he answers his own question: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Or, as the Living Bible puts it: “It has been done!”

In Matthew’s version of this story, and also in Luke’s, John the Baptist says that the one to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Fire to purge the sin of your life, to burn away the dross; Holy Spirit to fill the empty spaces inside you, to overflow you with grace. In the end, John would say, it’s not the water that’s going to do it for you, but the one who is to come. “Behold the Lamb of God,” he marvels, “who takes away the sin of the world!” In the season of Advent we wait for that One as if our lives depended on it, because our lives depend on him. We stand on our tiptoes and crane our necks and try to catch a glimpse of his coming over the heads of the crowd in front of us. We watch and we wait, not with fear but with great joy breaking loose in our hearts like some burst dam of emotion, flooding our senses and making us

giddy with anticipation. We believe, as fervently as we have ever believed anything, that if there is anything that can do us any good, anyone who can give us what we need,

It is the One who comes.

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