

The One, Who is More Powerful than I, Is Coming

December 7, 2008 | Second Sunday of Advent

Lectionary citations

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Psalms 85: 1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. (2 Peter 3:11b-12a)

In my work with mental illness, I have come across clients with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Sometimes, I even think I have a touch of that disorder myself, at least to the extent of double checking doors to make sure that I have locked them. One of the crippling symptoms of that disorder can be a compulsion to wash one's hands many times a day, so often and at such great length, that the clients cannot accomplish anything else in life. Sometimes when I am reading the Old Testament, I see the repeated concern with ritual cleanliness and washing to be almost as crippling. Jesus seems to have come to the same conclusion, that excessive concern for remaining clean and pure separates our neighbor and us from God and cripples us from carrying out God's work of love. The early church transformed washing for spiritual cleanliness into something much more powerful—the sacrament of baptism. Yet it was not Jesus, but John the Baptist who introduced baptism.

John was the perfect picture of an Old Testament prophet—dressed in strange clothes, eating strange food, preaching in the wilderness. His message, called in a loud voice, was for everyone to repent of his or her sins before the Messiah comes. In many ways, he was not much different from the last Old Testament prophets, 400 years earlier. Yet John was also an innovator—the first called by God to baptize. Through John, God sent something new into the world—baptism—and baptism had a tremendous impact.

Washing with water had great religious significance for the Jews. In the Law of Moses, if someone becomes ritually unclean, for example by eating an animal found dead—that is to say, road kill—they had to bathe before they could enter the camp. Women had to undergo a ritual bath after their periods or after childbirth. The priests had to bathe before entering the Holy Tabernacle. Converts to Judaism went through a ritual bath.

The idea of ritual cleanliness and uncleanness is difficult to explain. It has little to do with our ideas of cleanliness—being free of dirt and germs. It reminds me of the childhood condition of “having cooties.” Being impure means that you have done something—like touching a dead body—or have a condition—

like a skin disease—that disrupts your relationship with God and the Israelite community. Bathing was part of a process of restoring yourself to a right relationship with God and your fellow Israelites. A ritually clean person could participate in all the normal religious, social, and economic activities of daily life. As we have seen in our Acts study, the reason it was difficult for Jews and Gentiles to mix in the early church was that Gentiles were always ritually unclean.

Being ritually clean was part of what set aside the Israelites as a distinct people—God’s chosen people. However, being ritually clean was not the same thing as being righteous—being free from sin. The Ten Commandments say, “Thou shalt not steal.” Nevertheless, theft does not make you unclean. Neither does lying or breaking many of the other moral laws of the Old Testament. Yet, the Pharisees went to a great deal of effort to make sure they stayed ritually clean.

John’s challenge was to question whether what the Pharisees valued so much—the ritual cleanliness that separated them from other nations—was of any value to God. John was saying that what disrupts our relationship with God and our neighbor is not our failure to follow rituals but our failure to treat our brothers and sisters with decency and respect. John’s baptism was that of repentance—a turning away from evil conduct and a plea to God for forgiveness. It was an act of preparation for the day when God would hold us accountable for our sins. John challenged a religious establishment who claimed to be following God’s law down to the letter, but was in fact picking and choosing which laws to observe—carefully observing the rituals of cleanliness, but forgetting to love their neighbor and to care for the widows, orphans, and the poor, as the law also required.

For those who were willing to admit their moral shortcomings, John’s baptism was a chance to start fresh, to unburden themselves of their guilt, and turn towards a more moral life. This had great appeal, and in the years after John’s death, his followers spread his baptism through the Mediterranean world. As we have been reading in the Book of Acts, when the Apostles went out years later to spread the Good News of Jesus, they kept running into folks who had been baptized by followers of John. Even some of those who considered themselves followers of Jesus knew about baptism only from John. The Book of Acts describes Apollos, one the colleagues of Paul as *“a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.”* (Acts 18:24b-25)

What was missing in John’s baptism? The answer is given in today’s Gospel. *“I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”* (Mark 1:8) The baptism of Jesus incorporates the baptism of John, but goes beyond repentance by offering us the gift of Grace. The baptism of John challenged the people to admit their weakness and ask God for forgiveness. It was a baptism of hope—hope that the Lord would come to forgive. The Lord came in Jesus Christ and he not only **forgave** us, but also **gave** to us. He gave us his life and his Spirit, the gift of being born again as a new creation in Christ. Through our faith in Christ, we can receive this Spirit and have a chance to live in holiness and godliness in a way that we could never do on our own.

Through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, we are also born into a new chosen people, a people raised up by Christ to be God’s children. We are part of a new people, not separated by ritual and custom, but

joined together with people of all nations, languages, colors, and customs through Christ. This is a new nation joined together in love of God and neighbor in care and service to each other.

As baptized people, we can live without fear, knowing that whatever happens, God will take care of us. We can wait calmly for the day of the Lord, when this world will pass away and a new heaven and a new earth will be born. We are a people of hope, and as Paul says, *“And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:4-6)*

Yet what do we do while we are waiting? Like John, if we listen to our hearts, we are compelled to cry out that the Lord Jesus has come and will come again. If we let the Holy Spirit guide us, we will be compelled to do whatever we can to “prepare the way for the Lord.”

I participated this weekend in a march through some of the troubled neighborhoods of South Cape Girardeau, joining with other pastors and leaders of this city, to say that there is no street in this city that will be given up to crime, violence and hatred. As I considered going on the march, a part of me said, “This is not my neighborhood and these are not my people.” Of course, when I go there, I realized that these people were my people and when the singing began, I felt perfectly at home! The problems in South Cape are long standing and one march will not solve them. Yet, wherever there is violence, disorder, and cruelty, I believe that God is calling us baptized people to stand up and to witness that there is another way to live, a better way to live under God’s authority and love. Baptized people are called to separate themselves from evil, not by running away from it, but by standing up to it, wherever it is found.

As you wait this Advent season, please ask yourself, “what can I do to live out my baptism by the Holy Spirit? What mission can I support through prayer, financial gifts, donations, and the gift of my time?” Just because we are waiting for Jesus does not mean God wants us to sit on our hands. No, he wants us to get our hands dirty for Jesus. We can get our hands dirty knowing that, as baptized children of God, our hearts will always stay clean. God has given us these days—these few thousand years, a mere moment to God, to show him that we want his love and are worthy to receive his gifts.

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. (2 Peter 3:8-15)

Amen.

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