

SLD12.07.08 Second Advent
Emory Presbyterian Church
Ro. 7:14-8:2, Mark 1:1-8
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“BKTYS” Day (Be Kind To Your Shadow)

Okay, so last week’s sermon was pretty heavy. I’ve gotten plenty of feedback. But it was *supposed* to be, see, because it was based on Psalm 80, and Psalm 80 is a lament. So last week’s sermon was meant to be a lament, too. A lament in the manner of Hebrew Psalmists, which baldly names before God all humanity’s darkness and disappointment, personal and corporate; the things that upset us, the things that we don’t understand, the things that scare us or confuse us and get us down. The things we wonder why God allows, or even blame God for. The Hebrew psalmists didn’t hold anything back, and neither did we. Because, as we learned, to put it all out there, to name all our heartbreak and anger and dismay and shake our fist before God, is, in itself an act of faith.

At the same time, for your average mainline protestant church, it’s a bit of gamble to risk a lament in worship. We don’t generally prefer God, or life, for that matter, to be so upsetting. And anyway, we don’t come to worship to name and wallow in our miseries but to escape them, perhaps, or at least to seek forgiveness and healing . But then I heard someone I respect say this: that “to enable a congregation to make a lament its own is also to enable it to profess and deepen its own faith in God.”¹ And that’s something I want for us here at Emory Church - to keep professing and deepening our faith in God.

¹ From a lecture by Walter Brueggemann at CTS, _/08.

Anyway, the way I see it, we're not an average mainline protestant church. Sure, we're mainline protestant but I experience us here at this church as above average, way above average, in our capacity for honesty and intimacy with one another and with God. It's a mature Christian who keeps shaking his fist at God. A vital and thinking Christian who maintains an honest, passionate and bold relationship with God whether we like what's going on or not. And since the first Sunday of Advent is when we reflect on the coming of a Kingdom that ain't here yet, it seemed an appropriate time to name and mourn the seeming absences of God. So I figured we could handle a worshipful lament. And we did.

But now, here, the Second Sunday of Advent, which traditionally is John the Baptist's Sunday, I'm not sure too many of us are up for yet another brow-beating diatribe on the inescapable nature of our darkness and depravity, you know what I mean? After the intensity of last week's lament, I'm just not really in the mood for a whole lot of heavy prophetic carrying-on about what wretches and vipers we all are. So this year, I thought we'd give ourselves a break from the Baptist's usual hellfire and brimstone. If last week we boldly named before God our personal and corporate sin, maybe this week we can look at it with a little more tenderness and acceptance. First let's hear together these words from today's lectionary's text.

from **Mark 1:1-8**

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

(Wayne enters and starts wandering around the front, saying
"Prepare the way of the Lord, make God's paths straight.")

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*

(Wayne turns to congregation and says, not too gruffly,
“Repent! For the Kingdom of heaven has come near!”)

*And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were
going out to him*

(Wayne makes motion with his arms beckoning people toward him)

And were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

(Wayne pretends to dip someone in baptism)

*Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate
locusts and wild honey.*

(Hold out the sides of your robe and turn a couple times to show people how you’re
dressed, and pop something in your mouth.)

He proclaimed to the people

(Now turn ferociously on the congregation, knees bent and arms out ragged, and shout,
“You brood of vipers! Who told YOU to flee from the wrath to come?!”)

Jill: “Now calm down, John. We’re not going there today.

Wayne: (turns to face Jill) “Not going where?”

Jill: “This time we’re not heading down that whole outraged wild prophet path.”

Wayne: surprised, chagrined. “We’re not? How come?”

Jill: “Well, today we’re going to try something different. We’re gonna look at our
personal sin, all right, only not with *your* eyes but with *God’s* eyes, hear? Today, just for
kicks, we’re gonna try looking at the worst we got but with the eyes of divine love. .

Wayne: “Well, okay. But how come I had to get all dressed down and mess up my
hair?”

Jill: “Well, it *is* your Sunday and I wanted you to make an appearance. So you can go
ahead and finish your part of the gospel if you want to.”

Wayne: “Harumph. Well. One who is more powerful than I IS coming after me, you know. (mumbling as you walk toward the door) “I’m not worthy to even untie his sandals.” (Loud again as you start to exit the door and turn back to the congregation) “I’ve baptized you with water, but HE’S fixin’ to baptize you with the Holy Spirit! You’ll see!” (Go out and let the door slam after you)

Bye.

Listen, it’s not that I don’t think we’re a brood of vipers – of course we are! If we Presbyterians know anything, we know that.

As the Apostle Paul complains, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it! ...I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do *not* want is what I do!” (Ro 7: 15-19)

Sound familiar? Tell me Paul wasn’t a Presbyterian.

Sure we’re a brood of vipers. But even vipers have mamas who love them. Sure we’re all sinners before God, but God doesn’t love us any the less for it (which is, of course, the good news of the gospel.)

So today I’m asking for a little pause in the damning peroration, a brief stay on the endless condemnation, a short hold on the faithful self-flagellation, just long enough for us broken, limited, wayward people to try looking at our weaknesses and bad habits with a little less judgment. Maybe even to listen to what our worst behaviors might have to teach us.

I declare today to be “BKTYS Day” – “Be Kind to Your Shadow Day” – a day during which, instead of condemning, confessing or otherwise feeling bad or hopeless about our uncontrollable impulses, we intend to be kind to them. Today, just for the

novelty of it, accept our addiction, bless our badness, snuggle up to our sin, and wave a wand of mercy over our wayward behaviors, just to see what happens.

Tomorrow we can go back to our respective corners and glare. Tomorrow we can go right back to whatever concrete wall of defense or denial, whatever personal Maginot line, helps us get through the day. Or night.

But this morning how about we relax our aggression and declare a temporary ceasefire on all that disappoints or disgusts us about ourselves. Just for this moment, let's try granting amnesty to whatever about ourselves we least like or are most ashamed of.

Take a deep breath and acknowledge the worst about yourself. Then scoot over on the pew and make room for it, maybe even put your arm around it – after all, you're old acquaintances – and greet it in a friendly, cordial manner.

“Hey, Alcohol. Hey, Porn. Envy. Greed. How ya' doin,' Avarice? What's up, Lust? Ha. Ha. How you hangin', Binge?”

On this “Be Kind to Your Shadow Day,” let's take a step back from judgment and regard these old inner enemies like annoying neighbors whom we've never liked very much but with whom we are momentarily united in common cause. Soon we can go back to our lifetime battles to control whatever we or others wish were different ourselves. But today let's try to regard our inner darkness as friends, neighbors, even teachers. Today let's us brood of vipers uncoil from our self-deprecation long enough to listen to what our poison has to say. Today, instead of giving charitably to the “least among us,” let's try being generous with the “least *within* us,” to see what happens.

Paul does that, in a manner of speaking, in his second letter to the Corinthians. He's got this "something" that keeps plaguing him – we never get to know exactly what it is – but he calls it a thorn in the flesh, "a messenger of Satan to torment me, and keep me from being too elated." (as though it's pretty important to Paul not to get too high on life, in case you wondered where the Puritans got the idea.) "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me," says Paul. "But God said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' ...therefore," says Paul, "I am content with weaknesses...for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor. 12:7b-9a, 10b) The gift of Paul's weakness, whatever it was, seems to have been both humility and a renewed strength in Christ.

Recall Jacob's struggling with the angel at Peniel? Some dark figure who came to Jacob in the night and assaulted him and would not let him go? Those two struggled against each other all night. Ever struggled all night with something? And lost? That was Jacob. But he wouldn't let that dark angel go, wouldn't give up the fight, wouldn't release his grip on that dark angel until...what. Not until he defeated the angel but until he could get that dark angel to *bless* him!

That's what I'm talking about. Demanding from the shadowy angels we struggle with, the sins and weaknesses we wrestle with in the night, the ones we don't talk much about in church, whatever blessing they may have for us. We know all about their capacity to detract, to distract, to destroy. But what might they tell us about ourselves and our deepest longings, our most aching needs?

"Yo, stinginess. Was'up infidelity? How ya' doing, drugs?"

Shine a friendly light on these dark angels and what might they offer, if we insisted? We're accustomed to regarding them as enemies, but Jesus said to love our enemies. What if we actually did?

You know, Jacob never defeated his dark angel, never quite identified him or understood him, either. And that dark angel hurt Jacob, crippled him for life, matter of fact. But still Jacob wouldn't let it go until he got the blessing he knew it could give.

And the blessing that angel finally gave Jacob was a new name. A new way of knowing himself. Called him "Israel," which means "he who struggles with God." 'Cause, guess what. Guess who that shadowy presence, turned out to be: God. Imagine that. The mean ole' tormenter that Jacob fought all night turned out to be God. Or at least, *of* God.

The way I see it, that story tells us that something about our own shadow, our own sin, the thorns in our own flesh, the darkest angels with which we struggle. I know we're not used to thinking of them this way, but maybe something of our own shadow is "of God," too. Maybe something of our own darkness has the capacity to bless us, if we demand it.

All I know is that Jacob struggled, Paul struggled, I struggle; we all struggle with our own dark angels. But I hear scripture suggesting that there may be something in the mystery of our darkness that hold God's blessing in it. Jacob's shadowy angel blessed him with new identity and hope. Paul's blessed him with strength out of weakness. Who knows what blessing our own dark angels may have in store for us?

I'm only inviting us to listen to them. Be kind to your shadow today and hear what it has to say. I don't mean indulge it or surrender to it or get lost in it...again. We

have the rest of our lives for that. Today let's just name our darkness, and listen to it in a friendly way for some new word - of insight, maybe. Or wisdom. Or even of blessing. Remember that in the darkness shines the light, and the darkness does not overcome it. Listen for that light. And who knows – you may even hear some voice crying out from your wilderness, some messenger of God to “sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.”

In his book Addiction and Grace, Gerald May remarks that “all people are addicts. The addictions to alcohol and other drugs are simply the more obvious and tragic attachments.... To be alive is to be addicted,” May says, “and to be alive and addicted is to stand in need of grace.²” Perhaps this is what Rumi means when he says that “the worst enemy is hiding within us.”

But Jesus says, “love your enemies.” So on this “BKTYS Day,” let's you and I try looking at our worst through the eyes of divine love, and listening for the blessing of the Light in our darkness.

To the glory of God. Amen.

² Gerald G. May, M.D., Addiction and Grace, Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco, 1988. Front flap.