

“A WORD TO THE BROOD”
Isaiah 11:1-9; Matthew 3:1-12
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December 9, 2007

I love words. Ever since I discovered the word “vicissitude” at age nine or ten, I’ve been hooked. I love the texture of words like: redolent, mischief, strenuous, juxtapose. And then there are the ten dollar words that you learn but never quite find a way to use in a sentence—words like “crepuscular” and “quotidian.” Our language is rich with vocabulary that conveys both a wideness and a depth of nuance, multiple shades of meaning. And then there are the subsets of language, particular idioms within our language as a whole. I listen to computer geeks talking, and often they could be speaking a foreign tongue as far as I’m concerned. Medicine has its vernacular, as do law enforcement or horticulture. And we in the church, we have our own vocabulary and ways of speaking that are particular to faith. We have our ten-dollar words—sauteriology, paracleses, amphycionioic—and words that delight the tongue—like verily or thither--but most of us don’t bother much with them. It’s hard enough to come to terms with the day to day idioms of faith—words like sin, repentance, redemption, salvation, incarnation, righteousness, grace, holiness.

For a variety of reasons, in the last thirty years, the liberal church has backed away from these particular churchly words, the rich language of our heritage. Some of it has to do with the rise of conservative Christianity and the fact that conservative churches use faith language differently than we do. Years ago, we pretty much handed over the word “Christian” to them with barely a fight; and with “Christian” went all the rest of the traditional vocabulary of faith.

And maybe, on the one hand, it is good for the church to be always reinventing itself, to find new and fresh words for old mysteries and commitments, but when we lose the language of our scripture and history, we are left unprepared, theologically untethered on days like today when John the Baptist walks out of his wilderness and strides across the Galilean plain preaching a baptism of repentance. John the Baptizer was all about sin and repentance, and if we don’t understand those particular church words, or if we understand them incorrectly, we will never understand the gift John brings us as we prepare for Christ’s coming again into the world.

I want to talk with you about these words “sin” and “repentance,” for they are words commonly abused, misunderstood, denied and even rejected in our community, and yet they remain central, absolutely central, to the biblical view of who we are as human beings and how we live in relation to God and God’s world. They are so important that I’m going to take two weeks to talk about them. Today I want to talk mostly about sin with a little repentance thrown in. Next week, I’ll focus on repentance; but be assured that sin, as sin does, will sneak in the back door.

So, a quick survey here: How many of you have good feelings about the word “sin,” think it’s a helpful word in understanding yourself and the world? How many of you think of your life and choices in terms of sin? How many of you think the prayer of confession is an important part of worship? How many of you feel lighter, changed, in any way affected by the assurance of forgiveness. Finally, do you think the

act of confession and forgiveness makes you behave differently in the world? Interesting. Clearly my work is cut out for me.

First, I'd like to start with a definition of what sin is not. Sin is not an accusation that you or I or all of us have been singled out as being bad—as opposed to some other person or group of people who are good. Sin is best understood as a descriptive word, a word that makes sense for us of the significant separations, the alienations we experience as humans: separation or alienation from God, separation or alienation from each other, separation or alienation from the created world, separation or alienation from our very selves.

We, none of us experience ourselves as totally whole; there are broken places and uneasy silences even in our most intimate relationships. We live enmeshed in social, political, and economic systems that oppress. There are some secrets we dare not speak even to ourselves. And when we seek God's peace, or want to know God's grace, too often we cannot find it. I'm not accusing you of anything when I say these things; nor am I telling you anything you don't already know and suffer from. In our faith tradition we have a name for this pain, this darkness both personal and corporate that is part of all of our experience. That name is sin. And I for one am grateful for the word because it helps me make sense of my experience, and it gives me hope. I hear Paul lamenting, "The good that I would do, I do not do; and the evil I would not do, I do anyway." And I am comforted to know that perhaps the greatest Christian of all time is like me. I read of the Israelite people making a golden calf and dancing before the altar of false gods, and I realize that we are not the first generation to look for security and hope in the wrong places. I hear the stories of Sarah's jealousy, of Jacob's lying and cheating, of Jonah's pettishness, of Jeremiah's despair, and even the posturing and presumption of the Pharisees, that brood of vipers in today's gospel lesson, and I realize that we, yes, we can be instruments of grace and transformation not because we are so good, but because God has always worked with and through ordinary, fragile, sinful people.

So I'm a sinner, and you all are sinners too. Where do we go from here? The one thing we need to know about sin, and to know without doubt; this is perhaps the most important promise of both the Bible and the church: there is no one sin so large or no catalog of sins so numerous that they will make God turn away from us. Nothing we can do. Which should not be interpreted in the community of faith as license to do any old thing because God will just get over it. Instead, the wideness of God's love and forgiveness is the context that should make possible our telling the truth to ourselves and to each other about who we are: what we have done, what we fear, where we find both our hope and our hopelessness. The first step away from sin is honest truth-telling, and the more we dare to name the failures and brokenness of our individual lives and our life as community, the less power they have over us. You shall know the truth, said Jesus, and the truth shall set you free. Anyone who has been through therapy or a twelve step program or serious marriage counseling knows this as a certainty. There is freedom in putting words to the silence and the darkness, the freedom finally to stand apart from it, to move towards repentance, which is to move towards the possibility—the very real possibility—of hope and a new and better life. Which I'll speak about more next Sunday. But for this morning, just know that this is where we are going, not to acknowledge our sin to further burden ourselves with it or to wrap ourselves in it as an excuse for our ineffectualness at changing. We speak of sin so that we might be

made ready to accept the gift of new life that God holds out to us, that God makes possible for us to accomplish.

Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my favorite theologians, insists that reclaiming the language of sin is our only hope as the people of God: to understand sin rightly, to name it, and claim that because of the sin in and around us, our hopes and dreams, our expectations of ourselves have been too small; they have been stunted by our silence, our pain, our confusion, and our fear. And it is, I believe, for these reasons that John the Baptist is essential to our advent journey . He came in the time of Augustus Caesar and found a sin-sick and weary world. Two thousand years later, that still remains true. We are tired. We have lived long enough in a landscape of personal and communal brokenness. We yearn for new life.

When we tell the truth about that, we know with our whole hearts how much we need to hear the angels' song of peace on earth and good will to all. When we confess the sin that lies within and around us, we celebrate rejoicing the great good news that this year, like the year before that and the one before that, and all years past, this year once again God consents to come, to dwell among us, and even we—even our world—can still be made new. For with God, we are told, all things are possible. Thanks be to God. Amen.