

THE PRODIGAL / Sun. Dec. 5, 2010

Sermon: "Invite a Baptist Over for Christmas"

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Please write to a prisoner seeking recovery. Lists are available from Bill before or after the service / Copies of all sermons can be found at austinrecovery.org

Tonight's first reading is from *the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*. It's taken from Chapter Two titled: "There Is a Solution" and it tells the story of Rowland Hazard and his treatment experience with C.G. Jung.

A certain American businessman had ability, good sense, and high character. (But he was an alcoholic and) for years he had floundered from one sanitarium to another. He had consulted the best-known American psychiatrists. Then he had gone to Europe, placing himself in the care of a celebrated physician (the psychiatrist, Dr. Jung).

Though experience had made him skeptical, he finished his treatment with unusual confidence. His physical and mental condition were unusually good. Above all, he believed he had acquired such a profound knowledge of the inner workings of his mind and its hidden springs that *relapse* was unthinkable. Nevertheless, he was drunk in a short time. More baffling still, he could give himself no satisfactory explanation for his fall.

So he returned to this doctor, whom he admired, and asked him point-blank why he could not recover. He begged the doctor to tell him the whole truth, and he got it.

The doctor said: *"You have the mind of a chronic alcoholic. I have never seen one single case recover, where that state of mind existed to the extent that it does in you."*

Our friend felt as though the gates of hell had closed on him with a clang. He said to the doctor, *"Is there no exception?"*

"Yes," replied the doctor, *"there is. Exceptions to cases such as yours have been occurring since early times. Here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called vital spiritual experiences. They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes*

which were once the guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them." ...

Upon hearing this, our friend was somewhat relieved, for he reflected that, after all, he was a good church member.

This hope, however, was destroyed by the doctor's telling him that *while his religious convictions were very good*, in his case they did not spell the necessary vital spiritual experience.

Here was the terrible dilemma in which our friend found himself when he (finally) had the extraordinary (spiritual) experience, which made him a free man.

We, in our turn, sought the same (spiritual) escape with all the desperation of drowning men. What seemed at first a flimsy reed, has proved to be the loving and powerful hand of God. A new life has been given us or, if you prefer, "a design for living" that really works.

Here ends the reading.

The second reading is taken from the book of the prophet Isaiah:

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her

That her warfare is ended, that her trespasses are forgiven,

that she has received from the Lord's hand, double pardon for all her sins

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,

make straight in the desert a highway for our God

Every valley shall be lifted up, ***and every mountain and hill be made low***

The uneven ground shall become level, ***and the rough places a plain***

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Behold, the Lord comes with power and might, He will feed his

flock like a shepherd, ***he will gather the lambs in his arms;***

He will carry them home in his bosom, ***and gently lead those that are with young.***

Here ends the second reading.

Tonight's gospel reading is a modern translation of the Good News according to Matthew. (Taken from The Message)

While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John the Baptist was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like the desert that surrounded him: *“Change your life. God's kingdom is here.”*

This is the one that Isaiah spoke of when he said:

“The voice of one cries out: in the wilderness,

prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

John dressed in an outfit made from camel-hair with a leather belt tied around his waist. He lived on a diet of locusts and wild honey.

People poured out of Jerusalem, Judea, and the Jordanian countryside to hear him and to see him in action.

There at the Jordan River those who came to confess their sins were baptized into a new and a changed life.

When John realized that a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was becoming the popular thing to do, he exploded:

“You brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river?

Do you think a little water on your snake-skins is going to make any difference?

It's your life that has to change, not your skin!

And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham

as your father. Being a descendent of Abraham is neither here nor there.

Descendents of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life.

Is it green and are you growing; because if it's dead wood, it goes into the fire.

I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a new life in the kingdom. The real action comes next:

There's one coming after me who's more powerful than me and I'm not even worthy to carry his sandals.

But he will come and he'll ignite the life of the kingdom within you. He'll bring fire and holy-spirit that will change you from the inside out.

He's coming to make a clean sweep of your lives; He'll place everything true in you in its proper place before God; and everything that's false in you he'll put out with the trash to be burned."

Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee.

He wanted John to baptize him. But John objected, "*I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not you!*" But Jesus insisted. "*Just Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.*" So John did it

The moment Jesus came up out of the waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's spirit – it looked like a dove – descending and landing on him. And along with the spirit, he heard a voice: *This is my Son, the delight of my life, chosen and marked by my love.*"

Here ends the reading.

Sermon in a sentence: Our experience *both of God & recovery* need to bring fire and spirit into our hearts – if not, we'll soon return to our old ways of drinking & drugging & slithering.

Sermon: Well once again welcome & good evening – how're you all doin' tonight?

As I mentioned earlier – we're now into the season of Advent.

- It's a time for getting ready –
- Getting ready for the real meaning of Christmas.

And so each year, the assigned gospel readings help get us ready.

And each year, ***long about this time***, we receive our annual visit from a very strange looking dude by the name of: ***John the Baptist.***

Now any time a Baptist shows up, you can be pretty sure he's gonna start *quotin' you some scripture!* –

And this Baptist doesn't disappoint!

He quotes Isaiah the prophet, saying:

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

John's message is the same every year.

"Get yourself ready for what God's about to do.

Cause what God's about to do is gonna blow your sock off!"

But at first glance, John seems like a **really odd choice** to be one of God's messengers.

If he showed up in most churches today – ***the way he's dressed***, he'd never make it past the first set of ushers!

- ***John's wearin' only a loin-cloth made out of camel's hair!***
(and that's really gotta itch!)
- And instead of bringing a big, box of donuts for the church choir,

- he's totin' a **bag full of bugs** – *locust and a few crickets* -
- Some **wild honey** drippin from an old can of Bugler.
- **John seems like he's one of the homeless** –
- Maybe he's parked his shopping cart and his dog right out on the church lawn.
- **What kind of a crazy Baptist is this?**

... **And that's** just what the people of his day were also asking –
So John's starting to attract quite a crowd.

People are streaming *out into the desert.*

They've come to hear God's word preached with fire and spirit.

And the thing we might *miss*, is that the people herin' him should never be going *there in the first place.*

- **These people are Jews**, and they're supposed to be going to their own Temple to hear God's word –
 - **But something's terribly wrong in their Temple** –
 - **God doesn't seem to live there any more!**
 - **God's spirit and God' light seem to have gone out.**
 - **It's dark and it's cold inside.**
 - **Lack of power was the people's dilemma!**

...So here's John, standing knee-deep in the river Jordan
and he's announcing to them that:

"God's coming here to meet you!-

He's sayin,' "Hurry-up - get yourself ready to receive him!"

... John's message is sometimes translated as *"repent"*–

but the Greek word used in the gospel

really goes *a whole lot deeper than that.*

- He's really telling people ***they need to change*** –
- And they need to change ***radically*** –
- ***from the inside out.***
- ***"Half measures will avail them nothing!***
- So *one by one* the people begin to come.

And after they do their Third Step there on the shore,
they step off the bank and step out into the river.

John meets each one, takes a hold, and plunges 'em down **deep** –

John doesn't just sprinkle a little holy water on their heads –

He sends 'em **down!** - ***Way down below the surface*** –

**And they come up out of that water feeling
new and clean - ready to live a new life.**

So let's leave John *standing & dripping there in the Jordan,*
and turn for just a minute to tonight's other reading –

Because ***it too*** introduces us to a pretty strange character –

- **He's a wise man but also a little bit of a wild-man by the name of C.G. Jung.**

And Jung is sometimes credited *with being the one* who set the

whole **"AA recovery thing"** in motion through an alcoholic patient of his named *Rowland Hazard.*

- **Rowland's story appears in the Big Book**, but he's never mentioned by name, and his story doesn't often get enough attention.
- *Tonight, we'll try to make up for that!*

It seems Rowland was truly **one of us** –

He was a drunk who'd tried every treatment program available –

But, in the end, he always wound up drunk and in trouble again. (Can anyone relate?)

So Rowland's family has money and they send him

over to Switzerland to get treated by Carl Jung,
one of the very best shrinks in the world.

Rowland goes willingly – he wants to get well - and he does all the treatment that's prescribed for him.

- He analyzes his dreams -
- He meets some of his inner demons.

Rowland thinks he's finally gotten a handle on things – **so back he comes** to the States.

And Rowland does stay sober for: maybe a month!

But then he's drunk again –

And as the Big Book says, "**he doesn't know why.**"

(More needed to be revealed!)

So back he travels to Switzerland for a second time.

Back he goes to see *the one guy in the world* who he thinks can help him –

And what happens next *proves to be the real turning point* for him

and maybe it ought to be for us too: **Jung refuses to treat him.**

- He tells Rowland that **he's tried** helping him –
- He tells him he's tried given him *everything that psychiatry had to offer* –
but that still wasn't good enough.
- Jung pronounces Rowland "an alcoholic, of **the hopeless variety.**"
- **Rowland is stunned.** He's just been declared: **Hopeless!**
- His very last hope – the great Doctor Jung - just stamped a **great big "H"** on his forehead!

So after a minute or two of doin' *the deer in the headlights thing*, he asks his famous teacher:

"Is there anything – anything at all that I can do?"

And here's where Jung makes his great contribution to our

understanding of what real recovery from addiction is all about.

- Jung tells Rowland that what he needs to do is **to change.**
- **He needs to undergo a very, very deep sort of change** –
- (*Maybe in the same sort of way that John was telling his people that they needed to change –*)

But Jung called it by a different name –

He called it "**a psychic change**" – and **psyche** means *soul* -

Rowland needed a *spiritual awakening* deep in his soul –

An awakening that *involved*

(and I'm quoting *straight* from the Big Book)

**"Huge emotional displacements and
re-arrangements (of) ideas, emotions, and attitudes.**

Those things that were once the guiding forces of his life –

(things like selfishness & self-centeredness)

(they) now they need to be cast to one side,

and a completely new set of conceptions and motives needed to dominate him –

(things like God consciousness – like seeking & doing God's will)."

Jung said he'd seen alcoholics and addicts recover through such a change. ... "**Here and there, once in a while, a conversion experience (like that) happens.**"

So now Rowland's face brightens a bit and he says,

**"Well, Doc, looks like I'm in luck! See, I go to church; I'm even an Episcopalian –
so maybe that'll do it for me."**

But Jung bursts his balloon a second when he tells him

that just **going to church** probably ain't gonna work for him

just like *going to the Temple* wasn't working for

the people back in the days of John the Baptist.

- **Maybe like some of those slithering snakes, us alcoholics and addicts, we need a deeper kind of change than that.**

So now back to the Jordan - and now, enters Jesus.

- *The story says Jesus has been up north in Galilee, but now he's come down to be baptized by John.*
- **John hesitates.** "*You oughta be the one baptizing me!*" he says.
- **"Let that go for now."** Jesus responds.
- **And then, sounding like that old Nike ad, Jesus says:**
"Just do it." ... And John does.

Jesus slips beneath the waves.

(And what Jung would tell us is that the water in this story represents the unconscious.)

Jesus now enters *what the Big Book calls the 4th level of our existence* –

He enters into a new consciousness –

a full awareness of who he is and why he's here.

Water's a very powerful symbol.

... We're made up *mostly of water* –

In the womb we float in it –

When we're born *we're washed with it* –

Water keeps us alive *and without drinking it, we'd die* –

And even when we do die, we're washed in water one last time.

... We usually can't see what's happening to us **under water** –

Just like we usually can't see what's happening to us

in our own un-conscious –

But what Jesus, and Jung, and Bill Wilson all knew

is that we can experience our unconscious –

We can experience it – and that

experience has the power to change us!

So when Jesus comes up from the water –

the story tries to tell us that something **very deep** has happened to him there.

- **What was un-conscious in him - now becomes conscious!**
- The gospel writer tries to express it in the form of a **vision.**

He says:

"Suddenly, the whole sky opened up – and Jesus saw the spirit of God coming down in the form of a dove –

*And then, when God's spirit **rested on him**, he heard a*

*Voice say: "**You are my Son - the delight of my life!***

Chosen - and marked by my love."

Maybe like some of you here, visions aren't something I was very familiar with.

But a few years back, I helped support some people going out on what's called **a Vision Quest.**

Ten or twelve men and women, *one by one*, headed out alone into the wilderness to see what's inside them and to connect with it *at a whole new level.*

They were each *going to go* and sit on a blanket **anywhere from one to four days** and do only one thing:

Beg God for a vision!

They'd fasted & prayed –

Almost all of them were people in recovery –

Some had just a few years – some had twenty or more.

- Incidentally, I ran into an old friend at the camp – a guy I hadn't seen in 30 years – *We we're both still sober after all that time.*
- And we laughed and said – Of course we'd wind up here –

Where else are you gonna go

with that much *sober time* under your loin cloth?

- And we also agreed **there isn't too much happening in our own temples these days; they're kind of dead and desolate**
- **But God can still be found in the wilderness –**
- God's always waiting for *any and all* who'll *step off the safety of the shore* and give themselves to his care.

John said: “I baptize you with water – but there’s one coming after me who’ll baptize you **with fire and with spirit.**”

- I think that’s pretty much what Jung was trying to tell his young friend Rowland.
- **“I can’t help you because what you really need is the power of God in your life.**
- **And what you need** is not a God *who lives up in your head* – but a God who burns deep down in your soul.
- A God who comes to you *like fire* and sets your heart aflame.”

I was praying about how *to end* this sermon-

(and by now some of you may be praying for that too!)

Anyway, I thought it called for **some kind of a story** –

Hopefully, a story about *fire & spirit* that could maybe pull some of these loose ends together.

- So after saying that prayer, I opened a book that was sitting right next to me – and the very first thing I saw – *and I promise you this is true* – is a short piece by Robert Johnson called: **The Spirit Man on Mount St. Helens. (Inner Work by Robert Johnson, p.219.**
- It was a vision Johnson had when he was a very young man.
- And Johnson is both a follower of Jesus *and follower of Carl Jung* – so let me read you a few passages from the very strange thing that this man saw: **Johnson writes:**

“One evening I made *a campfire* on the side of Mt. St. Helens, where I had spent many happy summers in childhood before the volcano erupted.

I squatted on my heels looking into my campfire at dusk.

“Even today I can remember the vivid colors of that evening and how they thrilled me.

The orange of the campfire, the dark blue color of the evening sky, the purple-gray shadows on the mountain.

I felt a great sense of joy, beauty, peacefulness – **but also expectancy.**

“A young man, about my own age, came walking up and stood just on the other side of the fire.

I was on my heels by the fire; **he was standing quietly;** and we just **looked at each other** for a (very) long time.

“Then to my astonishment, **the fire moved** and transported itself down into Spirit Lake, **way at the bottom**, and burned *there* as a *tiny orange speck* in the midst of that *indigo blue water.*

Then the fire came back and burned before me.

“The young man took one step - **into the middle of the fire.**

He absorbed the fire into his bloodstream so that **he had fire circulating in his veins** rather than blood.

We stood there for some time, I *looking in awe* at these events, and then he said:

“Come, I’m going to show you how the world was made.”

And here, Johnson’s vision deepens and the spirit-man shows him *colossal diamond formed out of fire* – And that diamond had streams of energy erupting all around it – Energy exploding from the top and coming into it at the bottom. – It was *an endless flow* of power and light.

Johnson says *he was embarrassed* to tell *what he said next* –

But he tugged at the sleeve of the spirit-man,
and being a very practical American, he said rather irreverently,

“This is fine, - but what’s it good for?”

Johnson said: “The spirit-man looked at me in disgust:

*‘It isn’t **good** for anything. **Just watch!**’”*

“That silenced me,” Johnson said.

We watched, and I felt that the colors - the light...the infinite energy and brightness *were etched forever*
on my memory

and had almost entered into *the physical cells of my body*.

“(Then) the young man turned around *without a word* and walked
back out into the twilight from where he had come.

The vision ended, and I found myself back in my normal, mundane, physical world.”

- Johnson says, ***“It’s difficult to know what to do with a visionlike this.”***
- And the church **also** *has had a hard time* figuring out what to do with this vision of Jesus there at the Jordan –
- **God coming to rest on a man in the form of a dove!**
- (Every so often, some fundamentalist will actually claim he’s actually discovered a feather from *that holy, little bird!*)

- But when people believe that,
- people wind up **worshiping what isn’t real on the outside and missing forever what’s most real on the inside.**

- **Human conscious probably gets set back another hundred years and Jung turns over in his grave!**

- ... ***“But here and there, once in a while, a conversion experience happens.”***
- ***Here and there, once in a while, people come to see into that 4th dimension of God’s existence –***
- People see that **they too** are God’s very own son or God’s very own daughter - ***and once they know that, they’re never the same!***

- ***I’ve done my share of hallucinogens in the ‘60’s. –***
- ***But contact with God & with you people feels a whole lot better ~***

- **We read the story of John the Baptist every year to help get us ready for Christmas.**
- God’s coming into the world **and coming into our lives in a whole new way.**
- **We need to get ready –**
- **A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,**
- **Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”**

And when we do that – When we really do it!

Then watch those visions start happening to us too:

Watch every valley and every low spot in our lives

Watch ‘em be lifted up.

And those mountains in our lives that we still need to climb -

Watch ‘em be made low.

Dive into the water – Don't just stand on the shore!

"Just do it!" Jesus says.

Take the steps! —

Go deep

and find the fire and the spirit burning inside you –

And then, in just a few more weeks, Christmas will come -

And the glory of the Lord **will** be revealed,

And all flesh – maybe this year *including our own* - will see it and feel it together.

Amen.