

Out of Your Comfort Zone

In the name of him at whose coming the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn, dear friends in Christ: Last Sunday we began our Advent preparations for the Christmas coming of our Savior by zeroing in on that one critical reason that our gracious God needed to send us a Savior in the first place. It's a reason that we don't like to admit; one that we seek to avoid, find excuses for, or otherwise downplay in order to make it seem less serious ... but in the end, no amount of ducking or sidestepping can help us to escape the appalling truth: we need a Savior because of our sins.

But I wonder if even calling the human problem "sin" isn't just another dodge for most of us. It is, after all, one of those out-of style, "churchy-sounding" words used only by preachers or people making fun of preachers. It really doesn't mean anything to most of us *personally*. I mean, "That guy in the pulpit can rant and rave all day long about *sin* and *sinner*s (believe me, I know; I've heard him); but when he does, rarely if ever is he talking about *me*." Well, maybe so ... so let me be more specific: when I speak of your need for a Savior from your sin, I'm talking about your own personal rebellion against the God of Creation. I'm talking about the war you are waging against him: your refusal to adhere to his design for your life, your violation of his commands in *all* that you think, say, and do, and your failure to treat your fellow humans with the love and care that God demands. I'm talking about the fact that without a Savior, you would die in your rebellion as an enemy of God and justly be condemned to an eternity of suffering in hell. And mind you, when I speak of your sin, I'm not just talking about that occasional faux pas, that *once in a great while* error of judgment or restraint in which you allow your baser desires or irritability to get the best of you; no, I'm talking about the uninterrupted flow of evil thoughts and unacceptable behavior that mark your every living moment. According to Scripture we are corrupt through and through. Like the fabled King Midas whose touch turned things to gold, everything with which we have any contact turns to filth and ruin and is an offense to the God who made us – an offense that rightly fills him with anger and indignation.

And part of our problem is that when we hear these very basic biblical truths, we think to ourselves, "*No*, that really doesn't describe *me*. I'm usually pretty good. For the most part I try to do what's right. Surely God knows that and he's pleased me – at least most of the time." What we fail to understand is *that very thought* is one of the most sinister symptoms of our sin problem – the fact that we don't realize how sinful we are. We are deceived. What we think is good and right in ourselves, God calls disgusting filth. But we prefer to view ourselves with our own system of evaluation – it makes us feel better about ourselves; and so we end up ignoring what God says and calling what he says is evil "good". And we continue to produce more of the so-called good, falsely believing that by so doing we are getting ahead; when in fact by thinking that way, we're moving in exactly the opposite direction: farther from God and the light of his truth and deeper into sin and all of its dreadful consequences. So, when we think that we are doing something good – or imagine that by our efforts we are moving toward God and contributing toward our salvation in some way – we're in worse shape than ever. This is why we so desperately need to confront the truth the way the Lord describes it and turn all our attention to him and the Savior he sent us from heaven.

Now, *if* we were to come to that perception of ourselves and properly understand the plight we are in, then we'd be literally aching to hear the good news proclaimed so clearly in today's Old Testament lesson and which we sang about in that last hymn: "'Comfort, comfort my people', says your God. 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her hard warfare has ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.'" That's pure delight for the troubled soul, a spiritual

soak in a Jacuzzi and a full body massage to someone who's spent a day at hard labor—but quite frankly, I'm willing to bet that for most of us those words just sort of fell flat. What I mean is this: here we have the Lord's invitation for us to enter into the comfort and relief he extends; but none of us really felt uncomfortable or troubled to begin with. Even now, after everything I've said thus far – what should have been a blistering attack on your smug spiritual position – most of us weren't even phased. We're thinking, "What do I need comfort for? I'm feeling pretty good as it is. All that talk of my sin and God's anger, well, it can't touch me. I'm not worried about it in the slightest. I've got Jesus. He died for my sins, so I'm covered."

Okay. If something like that's what you're thinking, I suppose I should be pleased because it means you've got a good handle on this "saved by grace through faith" thing I'm always talking about. But here's my concern: I wonder if we aren't missing something here. I wonder if we aren't like a seriously ill patient whose condition is such that he could be in a lot of pain, and so he's been given one of those morphine drips that allow the patient to administer the powerful pain-killer to himself whenever he begins to feel the slightest bit of discomfort. I wonder if we aren't overmedicating ourselves with spiritual morphine so that we end up numb to a good deal of what God says to us in his holy Word. I wonder if instead of fighting the battle with a lot of the sin in our lives, we haven't simply come to terms with it. "Sure, I'm a sinner. So what of it? I've been forgiven. And tomorrow when I sin again in the same way, I'll just give myself another dose of God's grace and then I'll feel fine." Such an attitude is not what could be called spiritually healthy. It's more like an addiction, one that leaves us stuck in self-indulgent spiritual stupor and apathy. Worse, it's an abuse of God's grace to us in Christ Jesus. It's using a good thing for an evil purpose.

The result is that we never really let the Law of God do its work. All we ever get is a surface treatment. We put Band-Aids on our souls instead of performing the surgery that's required to get in there and dig out the deep seated problems that we have accepted as status quo because we've found a way to be comfortable with them. We have no real desire or intent to make use of the gifts God gives us to change and amend our lives. I mean, here we are preparing for Christ's coming at Christmas. We're to be sweeping the house, as it were, preparing our hearts and minds to receive the King; but deep down inside we don't really want anything to change. "Christmas will come and go, and then it'll be back to the same old me." And then we wonder why we have such a hard time getting excited about Christmas and why we feel so empty and unfulfilled afterward.

So look: if anything I'm saying is striking a chord with you, then let me suggest that it doesn't have to be that way. There's something we *can* do here; but let me tell you up front: it won't be easy, and it certainly won't be pleasant. But what we've got to do is move you out of your comfort zone.

And we're going to get some help here, because that just happens to be what the ministry of St. John the Baptizer is all about. Though he was of the priestly class and could have got himself a comparatively cushy job hanging around the glorious, white marble Temple in Jerusalem offering sacrifices all day and enjoying the esteem and honor of even the very best people, he chose instead to leave the comforts and perks of that life in order to go down into the dry desert wasteland and preach to the worst of sinners. He exchanged the fine, soft linen tunic he could have worn for a scratchy, hot, heavy coat of camel's hair. And instead of living off the fat of the land and dining daily on the best offerings of meat, cheese, bread, and wine like he could have, he ate grasshoppers and nasty tasting wild honey. John left the creature comforts behind and deliberately made himself miserable.

Why? He did it to proclaim by his life the message he was sent to deliver to people. The message was this: “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” And this makes a lot of sense because we know that there’s nothing quite like physical discomfort to turn our minds to spiritual things. When we’re healthy, well fed, and everything is going fine, we tend not to think so much about the Lord and what he’s doing in our lives. Ah, but when we are uncomfortable, especially when we’re in chronic pain, or when we are worried about something, or otherwise experiencing a hardship, then it’s “Lord, where are you? Why are you letting this happen to me?” And the thing is, as soon as you ask that question, a lot of good answers come popping up, don’t they? “Let’s see, why might the Lord be bringing this trouble into my life? Oh, maybe it’s this sin, or that one, or the fact that I’ve been ignoring him completely, or maybe it’s all of them together.” There’s nothing like a crisis to drive people to consider their sins, repent, and turn to the Lord.

Now, I’m not suggesting that what we should do is artificially create a crisis. Nor do we need to move the desert and eat bugs – *although* a little fasting *is* a biblically recommended spiritual discipline that can help you focus on your needs for true nourishment – so I wouldn’t count it out altogether. But what John did was to make himself a living picture of what repentance looks like – except what John showed *externally* by his austere choices in dwelling environment, clothing, and diet is what’s supposed to be going on inside the sinner who’s come to repentance. That is to say that it’s inside the soul the sinner needs to feel the heat of the hot sun and the gritty sand chafing away under the coarse camel wool. It’s in there that he needs to experience the dryness and thirst, and know both the empty hunger and the lack of satisfaction that comes from eating crunchy insects dipped in bitter wild honey. That’s where we need to be. So what I’m suggesting is that we take a spiritual journey to go where John is in the desert wasteland and spend some time with him there roughing it without immediately rushing back to the comforting solution.

To get there, first we need to consider the problem of our sin in general in a brighter light. Like I said before, we tend to minimize it or to think that since it’s been covered, it’s nothing that should concern us that much anymore. That’s not how God looks at it. From his point of view, it is and remains our biggest problem – and he’s deadly serious about it. I think that one of the worse notions that’s been foisted upon Christians by well-intentioned but theologically sloppy Bible teachers is the platitude, “God hates the sin; but he loves the sinner.” You won’t find that statement anywhere in the Bible. And I’ve got news for you: God doesn’t send sins to hell, he sends sinners there to suffer eternal torments. Nor did God nail sins to a cross; he nailed his Son there to be the sinner in your place, and upon him he poured out all his wrath, fury, and hatred against those who rebelled against him. We only fool ourselves when we imagine that the Lord just sort of overlooks all those sins great and small we’ve made ourselves so comfortable with.

But now let’s get specific: we’ve been talking about sins; but what’s yours? I want you to put a name on it. Sure, we’re all guilty of all of them; but I’m asking you now to consider that one or two that you know very well you’ve always struggled with and that you’ve simply given up fighting and have allowed yourself to get comfortable with. I want you to see it like God sees it: a cancer on your soul that is putting you at risk of hellfire, and that you are abusing the shed blood of Christ to protect and keep in your life. What is it? Is it greed? Are you always thinking that a just little more income will put you over the top? Are you stingy when it comes to sharing with those less fortunate? Is it envy? Are you always comparing your situation to others and thinking, “Oh, how I wish I could be in their shoes or have what they have?” Is it pride? Are you always comparing yourself to people and thinking that you’re better in some way than they are? Is it anger? Is there someone with whom you are furious and won’t speak? Is it unforgiveness? Are you holding a grudge against someone or harboring thoughts of revenge? Is it a sexual

sin? Are you despising God's gift of marriage by your involvement in fornication? If you are married, are you being unfaithful to your spouse – even if only in your mind? If you are a child, are you being obedient and respectful to your parents? If you are a parent, are you doing what you should to raise your children in the fear of the Lord and always setting a good example for them? Are you violating the 8th Commandment, always talking about people and complaining about their faults to third parties? Are you despising the Lord's grace by your frequent absence from the worship of the church or the study of God's Word? Of what sin is the Spirit of God convicting you? Oh, and if the answer is "none the above", let me suggest that self-righteousness is a good place to start.

I could go on asking until I hit everybody, or maybe you need more time to consider; but whatever the case, I'd like to lay down this challenge to you. Now in the season of Advent we are to be about the task of preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ. In the course of this coming week I invite you to spend some time with John in the desert. Take that sin you've named into the bright, hot, merciless light of God's truth and see it for what it is: ugly and soul-destroying. Let yourself get *uncomfortable* with it. Then renounce it. Repent of it. And bring it to the Savior for his forgiveness and the power of his Spirit to refrain from it in the future – or at least to give you the strength to continue the struggle against it. And then see for yourself how you will know in a surer and more certain way the true comfort, joy, and peace the Lord promises to you today in his holy Word. In this way, prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for your God. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed. You and all flesh will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!