

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Baptism of Our Lord, 1/9/2011
Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17
Bruised Reeds¹

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

... a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench...(Isa 42:3)

I was a boy who grew up on the river, and so I know a thing or two about bruised reeds. I recall the reeds growing in the old Choptank River back home in Maryland. Those reeds, naturally, were swollen with water. They were not stiff. They were not tough. If your boat bumped into them, or if your paddle whacked them, they would bruise and become limp. It was an easy job to rather break their backs and leave them dangling, they were so vulnerable. But if you dealt gently with them, you could pass on by, perhaps bruising them, yet not breaking them entire. You could leave them in peace if you tried.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of some of the people of this earth that way. They are bruised reeds. They are dimly burning wicks. Sometimes you can sense it. A person may be so timid in speech, for example, that you sorrow to think that speech has never brought them much luck, and they almost fear to try it again. They have been beaten down, so that they hardly have strength to talk any more. Their words seem to fall to the ground, as if they haven't the energy to propel them very far. They believe that no good will come from their talking, so they can hardly talk anymore. They are bruised reeds.

Or perhaps they can talk just fine, but are bruised nonetheless. They may seem strong and vigorous. Their words may seem confident and everything they do, they seem to do with energy. And yet, they are built on a foundation of sand. Even a mild wind might cause them to collapse. Some New Yorkers are like that: they live on the edge. They may do so with verve and bravado, but the truth is that they are near to collapse. They look as strong as a horse, yet inside they are bruised reeds -- overstressed, overworked, underpaid, heartbroken, with worries upon worries mounting up. Be careful with them. Be gentle with them, for they cannot take much more.

One of the chief advantages of faith is that when we encounter setbacks and frustrations, as is common to the world, faith beckons us onwards, comforting us with the assurance that God still holds us close, that the everlasting arms are still underneath holding us, and therefore there is some path forward, some step we can take to regain our progress. God's promises to the baptized never fail, and therefore we need only seek for his paths. We need not succumb to despair, but pick up our strength and interest and search for that path ahead.

But, oh, the dimly burning wicks in our world! Oh, the poor bruised reeds. There are some, perhaps many, people in our modern world who have no faith. Maybe their parents

¹ This sermon is a reworking of my sermon for the Baptism of Our Lord for January 10, 1999.

did not teach it to them. They have not received the gift of faith. And therefore, they are on the verge of being overwhelmed. If they suffer a series of setbacks, who could blame them from thinking that they will never recover? Who could blame them from thinking that their sins cannot be forgiven and their errors cannot be repaired? They may look as strong as some oak tree in the forest, but inside they have been weakened. They do not have the inner substance to withstand much because they do not have the hope that faith permits. And so, they are bruised reeds. They are burning dimly.

There are people in our city whose bodies ache, whose lungs wheeze, whose heart can barely force the blood through the body any more, or whose immune system can hardly ward off sickness anymore. Bruised reeds all of them.

Help them if you can. Be gentle with them, for they can break. Right in the midst of our city, these folks are bruised reeds on the verge of breaking.

In today's Gospel story we read about Someone who will steadily follow his mission, but will do so in such a manner that he does not break the bruised reed, nor quench the dimly burning wick. All three members of the Holy Trinity are present for the Baptism of Jesus. Avoid the heresy of Modalism. Do not think that God manifests himself first as Father, then as Son, and then as Holy Spirit. No, the work of human salvation is too great for such a paltry concept of God. The true God consists of three divine persons. Their joint work is our hope. Here they are in today's Gospel story. God the Father speaks, saying: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." The beloved Son is this man who has come to John in the wilderness. He is Jesus from the town of Nazareth, who today is baptized in the Jordan River. And God the Holy Spirit is present in the form of the dove descending and alighting on Jesus. Go to any theological library and you can find massive volumes on the doctrine of the Trinity. But they all get their origin from the Bible, including today's story of the Baptism of Jesus. Those tough books of theology are simply abstract meditations on stories that are available to any Christian.

So, Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan, and the other two members of the Holy Trinity give their consent. The last we heard of Jesus, he was but a child, too young probably to even understand the gifts brought to him by the Wise Men from the East. Now, he is a grown man. As with every grown-up, his future is wide-open. And like other grown-ups, he must make up his mind about what kind of person he is going to be and what goal he shall set for his life. He must forge his own character. He must dedicate himself to some end. The drama of the Baptism of Jesus is that here he is choosing his path in life. Here he begins his way of the Cross. Here he is commissioned for a great work -- the work of human salvation. And in St. Matthew's story, he is soon to it: he rises up from his baptism and immediately begins his mission by going out into the desert, fasting for forty days, and wrestling a terrible battle with the devil.

The Bible does not say whether Mary was there at the baptism of her son. But if she had been there, and if she could have understood the path being accepted by her son, I bet she would have been proud of him, yet she would have grieved at the hardships ahead of him. A sword would have pierced through her heart, to contemplate the mission of her son.

Sometimes we are able to point to the decisive events in life. For a physician, the decisive events probably include his or her licensing to be a medical doctor and taking of

the solemn medical vows. For a pastor, it is the rite of Ordination to the Holy Ministry of the Church. For a husband, for a wife, it is the solemn vows of marriage. For a military person or a political representative, it is the commissioning and swearing in to office. For a Christian, it is Baptism. Henceforth, the bewildering choices before a young man or a young woman are considerably narrowed down. Henceforth, some paths are open, but some paths are closed. In particular, the paths of injustice and hatred are closed.

So it was with Jesus. In his Baptism, he committed himself to a certain path in life. There was a role to be fulfilled. For ages past, there had been a prophecy from Isaiah that one day, the God of Israel would raise up on earth a special servant in whom his soul would delight. God would uphold this servant. God would put his Spirit upon him. God would launch him out on earth to bring forth justice to the nations.

But this good servant was to accomplish this in a highly distinctive and disciplined way. That is, he was to protect the bruised reed and the dimly burning wick. He was to persevere and never give up. But in the accomplishment of his mission, he is to sacrifice no one. No matter how lowly they may be. No matter how insignificant. No matter how dimly their star shines, or how lukewarm their personalities, or how bruised they are, they can never be sacrificed for the sake of some greater good. There are to be no pawns in this game. There are no dispensable pieces. Everyone, everyone on earth is to be considered precious. These are the marching orders given and accepted by Jesus in his Baptism. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth, and yet in the conduct of his mission, he will not break the bruised, nor quench the faint.

Let us briefly consider an example. I am thinking of the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, in the Fourth Chapter of St. John. Jesus speaks to the woman about the water of life, which she says that she would be very glad to have. Jesus then asks her to go and fetch her husband to him:

Jesus saith unto her, Go, call thy husband, and come hither. (John 4:16, KJV)

She answers that she has no husband.

But Jesus knows the one to whom he is speaking. Indeed, he knows each of us very well. And so, we have this exchange of conversation:

¹⁷The woman answered and said, I have no husband. Jesus said unto her, Thou hast well said, I have no husband: ¹⁸For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly. ¹⁹The woman saith unto him, Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet. (John 4:17-19, KJV)

Now, the thing that strikes me about this conversation is that the woman calmly acknowledges the truth of what Jesus has said, but we do not know the state of her heart about these matters. Five husbands! The story of each one might have filled a book. We do not know the human details. We do not know the passions that were involved, the hopes, the dreams, the sorrows, the betrayals, the heartaches, the loneliness, the collateral damage in children and in-laws and mutual friends. Nor do we know the multitude of factors that

might be involved in her current affair. She lives with a man, but is not married to him. What is involved in all that?

What we do know is that if this Samaritan woman at the well is a bruised reed, Jesus does not break her. He speaks the truth to her, but in such a way that he does not crush her. Indeed, she ends up being his witness in that town:

And many of the Samaritans of that city believed on him for the saying of the woman, which testified, He told me all that ever I did. (John 4:39, KJV)

Such should be our aim in dealing with others. We should speak the truth, but with the aim of helping, not hurting. We should strive to speak the truth with love.

Baptism means many things, including the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. But also Baptism means this: that the newly baptized person links his life, links her life, with that of Jesus. This is the moral content of Baptism. We commit ourselves to Jesus, and therefore we commit ourselves to living and working in this world, but living and working in such a way that we sacrifice no one. We will leave the ninety-nine in order to save the one lost sheep. We will rejoice at the return of the Prodigal Son. We will not stone the adulterer, but call that one in the name of Jesus to go and sin no more. We will be a friend to sinners, inviting them to join us in following Jesus. We will give hope even to the awful man or awful woman dying on the cross. We will weep at the grave of loved ones. And we will comfort those who mourn by telling them the truth about things, which is that even death and life belong to Jesus.

Most holy God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are all in agreement on this mission for Jesus. And likewise, they all agree on this mission for us too. We are to live and work, but not to break nor quench the Spirit of others along the way. That is why a Christian is to be a blessing on earth. That is why the earth should be able to be glad at the existence of Christians. We are to be light in darkness, warmth in the cold, hope against despair.

In sacred scripture, Jesus does not thrash about, as if in a panic, frowning with impatience at people, without calm, without peace, without a sense of what he is doing and that he will get it done. Nor should we who seek to walk in his Spirit be people who thrash around and lash out in impatience.

In the great chorus of sounds arise from our city, there can be found voices of strength and triumph. On Wall Street and in corporate offices throughout the city, there can be shouts of victory or smiles of satisfaction. But also within this great chorus of sounds, there can be heard the sighing of the bruised and the sorrow of the dimly burning wicks. Christians are trying to follow Jesus in his mission, and so there should be someone to try to help the weak of this world.

I am sure that there is untold good radiating from this congregation before me. In your jobs, in your volunteer work, and in your charitable contributions, you are blessing this world as you ought to, because you are baptized into the One who will not fail nor be discouraged until he has established justice on earth.

There are bruised reeds out there. There are dimly burning wicks. Be good to them in the Name of Him who loves them, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.