

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY: THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

Isaiah 42:1-7; Matthew 3:13-17

“A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.”

God bless substitute teachers. I wouldn't wish substituting teaching on anyone. It's like wearing a target, asking for trouble, begging to be given a hard time. In high school, our art teacher was sick for quite sometime. We had a new sub every few days—they never lasted long. It was for art class, and most of us were taking it because it was art class, if you know what I mean.

They were adding on to the school at the time. There were construction guys working everywhere—constant noise. One week they were working right above our classroom. We were drawing cattails. The sub had to leave the room for a while. Some kids came up with an idea. They banged the cattails against the table until there was a cloud of what looked like dust, and then sat back down. The sub came in and asked what happened. They told her one of the workers fell through the roof. She went to get help, and they cleaned up the mess almost as quickly as they had made it. When she came back with some assistant principals, everyone was sitting at their tables, angelic, like nothing happened. God bless substitute teachers.

“A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.”

The Book of Isaiah is perhaps the most beautiful in all of the Old Testament—it's in a close race the Psalms, a photo finish. One of the reasons it's so beautiful is that Isaiah lives the Gospels before they're ever written, picturing the Messiah throughout. Yet it's hard not to sometimes get the notion there must be two Messiahs. One moment He's a conquering Hero, the next a sacrificial Victim. One moment He has His enemies under His feet, the next He's stricken, smitten, and afflicted by them. He's the Shepherd and the Lamb, the King and the Beggar.

We see that contrast again in our first lesson. Christ is strong and mighty, in charge. Yet He's also gentle and tender. He cares for the ***bruised reed***, for the ***smoldering wick***. He doesn't lift up His voice, doesn't shout in the street. He could break a neck with the blink of His eye, but He's eager to mend wounds and heal.

I've never seen the Green Mile, but if I understand the little I know about it correctly, Michael Clarke Duncan plays a huge black inmate incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit. He could easily crush his foes like bugs, but is the most gentle man most have ever met. He's meekness wrapped in strength, tenderness dressed in power. Unfortunately, he's eventually executed for another's crimes.

The same is true of our Jesus. He's the wrongly incarcerated inmate. He could easily crush His every foe like bugs—remember that they all fall down before they arrest Him in Gethsemane, that He tells Pilate that if He wanted He could call down angels, bring His whole holy Passion to a triumphant end—triumphant for Him, that is, though not for us. He's meekness wrapped in strength, tenderness dressed in power, and He uses all He is and has not for Himself, but for us, to free us by His chains, to save us through His seeming defeat, as He's executed for another's crimes, for your crimes. ***“A bruised reed he will not break.”*** And we are the bruised reed.

Luther wrote the book *The Bondage of the Will* against Desiderius Erasmus, a humanist who taught that the gospel was about moral improvement, a wonderful thought, but not a biblical one. You improve a house with a broken window or a ragged carpet. You tear down and rebuild a house that has been condemned. We're the house condemned. The law tears us down. The gospel does not improve us. The gospel gives us new birth, starts again from scratch, laying even a new foundation and cornerstone: Jesus Christ.

In that book, Luther compares us to a mule. Where we go depends upon who's riding us. When God has the reigns, things go well. When we take the reigns, which is really the devil taking the reigns, we walk right into the fire, we trot towards destruction. We are the bruised reed, and we're the bruised reed because of who we've let do the swinging. Broken reeds are the devil's trophies. Thankfully, Christ has a healing touch, turning bruises to blossoms.

"A bruised reed he will not break." What about you? We're a heap of bruised reeds, a two-cent light show of smoldering wicks. Have we treated each other as such? Christ chose to receive wrong rather than cause it, to receive bruises with the bruised rather than abandon them in their need. What about you? Have you mended wounds or poured salt in them, felt compassion for the bruised or been embarrassed by them, guarded the flame of your fellow smoldering wicks or spit uncaring words upon them? Have you put the best construction on another's teetering words or actions, or have you left them to the wind, tossed them in the trash?

You've been the devil's baseball bat, and so have I. And he's batted like an all-star. We're all smoldering wicks, slow to appreciate the gospel's oil. You can't light a smoldering flame when you're running on empty. You cannot mend a bruised reed when you're at the breaking point. You need a Helper. You need gentle but powerful hands.

"Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.'" Don't be the dry guy at the pool. Jesus does a giant cannonball here to make sure you get wet. Jump in these waters, because there's your Helper fulfilling your righteousness, there are gentle but powerful hands, gesturing where to go, and it's not to hell. There's Life in your Baptism, together with Way and Truth. There's your Substitute in your Baptism, because there's Jesus in your Baptism. Be glad He takes your place, drowns your sin on His way to crucify your death. Why? So that what is spoken of Him at His Baptism should be spoken of you through yours: **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."**

God bless substitutes. It's like wearing a target, asking for trouble, begging to be given a hard time. No one knows this better than Jesus. The ministry He begins today will bring Him nothing but pain, hatred, suffering, and death. But it brings you healing, love, peace, and life. You're the bruised reed, but you're not yet broken. You're the smoldering wick, but you're not out. And you've come to the right place. You've come to Christ. He will make you straight again as you draw the water of life from your Baptism, will stoke the flames of your love for Him and your neighbor with Word-wed-waters that don't extinguish smoldering wicks, but set them

ablaze. Look to Him to finish what He's started. Trust Him to bring to glory what He's bought on the cross. Let go of the reins. He knows where to take you. In Him you'll never get lost. Amen.