

Wellsprings

Sometimes we think that the Gay Rights movement started with the riot at Stonewall Inn or that the Civil Rights movement began the day Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus, but of course they didn't. They started long, long before those iconic moments. They are the moments around which something that had been building coalesced. Something that had been building in people's hearts and minds for years. When a new social movement breaks out and becomes visible, it is a special moment. We might call it a Kairos moment. Kairos is a Greek word which means the right time, the time when everything comes together for an action to take place. We might say that the Republicans just experienced their Kairos moment – the analysts may tell us all sorts of reasons they won, but there was no single reason. Things came together - their stars aligned.

Palestine in the first century was a Kairos moment. And John the Baptizer is an important part of making the time right for the Messiah to appear, so we hear about him every Advent, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Because the time was just right, John was not just another wild man preaching to a handful of curious people in the heat of the desert. No, John became the talk of Jerusalem. Everyone went out to hear him preach. And some of them got baptized.

In their book, "Saving Paradise", Rita Nakishima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker describe baptism at the time of Jesus like this:

Baptism was more than a personal choice about one's beliefs. It was a ritual that incorporated initiates into a community and its sources of power. As such, it was inseparable from social and political issues. John the Baptizer and Jesus came from groups that were critical of the ruling aristocracy in Jerusalem. The baptizing sects offered a path by which people separated and purified themselves from the corruptions of the Roman occupation and its client-king. To be baptized was to renounce allegiance to the polluting and false powers of Rome and to join movements that drew on different wellsprings – Wisdom, Word, Torah and Spirit.¹

Today, particularly churches that practice adult baptism tend to focus on the individual's faith in Jesus and desire to be saved. Brock and Parker are talking about something very different. They are talking about baptism as a way to separate from the corrupt socio-political system and declare oneself in opposition to all that was polluting and false – what I might call the sin matrix. So baptism was not a statement just about repentance from one's sins but repentance – turning back from – the lifestyle of cooperation with Rome.

What really caught my attention was their final sentence. "To be baptized was to renounce allegiance to the polluting and false powers of Rome and to join movements that drew on different wellsprings – Wisdom, Word, Torah and Spirit." By wellsprings they mean the sources of power, the energizers of the community.

¹ Rita Nakishima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2008, p.41

This seems to me to be a very helpful way of thinking about our preparation for the coming of Christ. What wellsprings are we drawing from? I'm going to give you a couple of minutes to think about that, you might want to discuss it with your neighbor. What wellsprings are we as Christians drawing from?

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I'm going to suggest four wellsprings which may or may not be the same as the ones you thought of. They are Compassion, Humility, Word and Spirit.

I don't think I need say much about Compassion; it is at the core of all the great religions. For us it's encapsulated in the second great commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." We do not have the luxury of ignoring those around us. But let's think about compassion as a wellspring, a source of power. When we have compassion, we align ourselves with the great movement of self-less love who we call God. In the incarnation for which we now ready ourselves, God gave up the power and glory which are rightly God's and became human. Whenever we love our neighbor as ourselves we are drawing on the wellspring of God's compassion. So it becomes something greater than ourselves and it makes us as individuals a little larger, a little less self-obsessed. Now if every Christian across the world draws from that same source of power, the force of Compassion becomes stronger and stronger and it becomes a whole movement swept along by the Spirit of God.

Humility is a little harder than Compassion. By humility, I mean knowing our place in the world and not needing to be the center of everything. It means being willing to be called to positions of leadership but not being downcast when we are not. It means giving our gift whether or not it is received in the way we hope or expect. It means showing up and doing our part even when it seems trivial or no one seems to appreciate us. Humility is very hard to learn because as small children we need to develop our own centers, our egos and then as we mature we need to learn that balance between self-love and self-giving. Humility is in that balance.

Humility is also in knowing that we are entirely dependent on God. We didn't do it all ourselves. If we think we are self-made men and women it's time to look again. Our strength and our power come from knowing that we are not alone and we didn't get where we are today by ourselves. As Christians, we are called to imitate the humility of Christ who was born away from home in a stable. Christ, who allowed himself to be captured, mocked and killed. Christ who emptied himself in order to bring redemption. In humility is our power.

When we use Word with a capital W there is a double or even triple-entendre. Jesus Christ is the living Word, Scripture is the Word of God written and it is God's Word that creates the universe. So the Word is our power source in several ways and without any one of these we are infinitely poorer.

I think that modern Bible scholarship has made us a little afraid to read the Bible without a guide to hand. We are perhaps afraid that we won't understand the Word or that we'll get it completely wrong. Certainly Bible Study in a group and with a guide whether another person or a commentary of some sort is very valuable, but so is chewing on it quietly on your own. The

Benedictine way has always included some form of personal deep reflection on Scripture, when we sit in silence listening for the word of the Spirit coming to us and transforming us. God can use any literature in this way, but Scripture is the traditional source of our nourishment. You can join with others practicing this spiritual discipline on the next two Thursday mornings, and starting next week, the Benediction Weekly will be making suggestions for passages you can chew on during the week.

My final power source is Spirit, which either needs no discussion or an entire sermon series. John the Baptizer says, the one coming after me “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Spirit and fire go together because it is the Spirit which gives us enthusiasm and passion. It is the Spirit who interprets God to us and enables us to participate in God’s great mission for the redemption of the world. The Spirit is our greatest source of power as we seek to expand the reign of God here on earth.

So in this season of preparation and self-examination, let us ask ourselves – what are the wellsprings for my life? Am I drawing my power from Compassion, Humility, Word and Spirit, or have I been drawn into the cultural norms of Fear, Competition, Anger and Anxiety?