

DAYS OF THE SWAYING REED

*⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John:
"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?
Matthew 11:7*

There are times to be flexible and times when we ought not to be. There are times to compromise and times to be as immovable as rock. Those times of steadfastness involve God's clear Word. We believe in moral absolutes. There is one true God and only one true God. Period. We must never worship another. God's name is holy and there is no circumstance where we can rightly blaspheme him – ever. Marriage is sacred and there is never a time when adulterous actions can be admissible because we believe in moral absolutes! Yet, how many parents find themselves standing on God's Law, and then under pressure from children and even other parents decide to "go with the flow". How many congregations allow public unrepentant sin to go unchecked? How many times do we find ourselves swaying in the wind?

We stand chastised today in the presence of John. John was not a man who swayed in the wind.

He stood before Pharisees, Sadducees, Romans, Generals, Governors and even Kings. Rank had no effect on him. God's law is God's law and he would not fudge it, hedge it, obscure it, or gloss over it. His name John literally means "gift of God" so he knows of God's grace and certainly proclaims it. The very fact of his birth, born of an aged Zechariah and Elizabeth bears witness to God's pure grace and favour. He offers up a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That's grace. But he also proclaims God's Law. He does not shrink from his calling.

To the Pharisees engaged in hypocrisy he said: "You brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the coming wrath". To the tax collectors expected by everyone to live up to their villainy were told "Collect no more than what is appointed for you". To the soldiers, expected to live up to their fearful tough man image were told "intimidate no one" and "be content with your pay". To a lustful Herod, expected by the people of the day to take his position as untouchable tyrant, John rebuked for taking his brother's wife. The days of Herod are approaching upon us again as the prophet's warned where adultery is "a private affair" and when confronted results in a self-righteous attitude of "none of your business".

In the face of all the pressure we ask, "Should I aspire to be as John?" "When should I aspire to be as steadfast as John?" "How can I become like John?"

But I must begin by first setting some limits on John. He was still a sinner. "All men have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)". So as much as our Lord sings his praises saying, "Of men born of women none is greater than John the Baptist" he tempers things a bit by saying "but even he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he". Those entering heaven are purged of the sinful nature and the capacity of sin. So John, while

great was still a sinner. But nevertheless, in his righteousness, one to be a role model in the faith. Therefore John the Baptist has his days of commemoration in the Lutheran Church. It isn't just a Quebec thing. We commemorate the nativity of St. John the Baptist on June 24th. We commemorate the martyrdom of St. John the Baptist on August 29th.

With our Lord's praise of his steadfast character, that in itself ought to be enough for us to say: Yes, I want to be as John. But there is more. John reflects the steadfastness of the Christ. Persevering is a characteristic of the Christ made manifest in him even as a twelve year old boy earnestly saying: "I must be about my father's business". It's perseverance we see in his temptation in the wilderness those forty days and forty nights. It's perseverance we see in him as "he set his face towards Jerusalem". "The Son of Man must..." Now that's a phrase to hear in our days of the swaying reed.

How many times do you ever hear people saying that they simply must be about doing something? We are a people of the maybe. We are a people who want to keep their options open. We avoid commitment like it's some kind of plague. Yet Jesus is about the must. The Son of Man must suffer many things. The Son of Man must go to Jerusalem. John follows in his steps and proclaims what he must.

Should I aspire to be like John? Absolutely! As John aspired to be like the Rock who is Christ the Lord, we ought to aspire to be like John. All the saints have done so. St. Paul for example says in his first letter to the Corinthians 4:16 "imitate me". So likewise with all the saints we commemorate we say, "that these saints are examples by which we may imitate both their faith and their holy living according to our calling in life".

But when? Always? When should we be absolutely rigid? There is a difference between sinful stubbornness in adhering to mere opinions and the traditions of men and steadfast faith and devotion to the law. It takes wisdom to know the difference. It is wisdom that comes down out of heaven from God through his Holy Word. It was a wisdom given to the apostles at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts, chapter 15 for example. They did not want to burden the Gentiles with anything more than what God required and so after much deliberation, debating which manner of laws would be the ones that could not be altered in any way they concluded saying:

²⁸For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.

They would focus on the moral law, the Ten Commandments, concluding that these would be the things to remain rigid on. Still there is more. The apostle Paul preached the support of the state, but he would draw the line when supporting and obeying the state meant sacrificing our ability to worship the true God saying (Acts 5:29). "We must obey God, rather than men".

There is a time to compromise and make peace with men. That time is “whenever possible”. But we set our face towards Jerusalem and the cross with Christ or the blade with John the Baptist if it means breaking God’s Law or denying His name. Should I aspire to be as steadfast as John? Absolutely! When should I aspire to be as John? When we’re in danger of sacrificing our faith or in danger of breaking the moral laws of God or in danger of leading anyone to do either of these. But the hardest question is always ... how?

It is a question as old as fallen humanity. It is the question of the psalmist who sings psalm 119:

⁹How can a young man keep his way pure?

Whether it is purity or perseverance or simple obedience to God, The answer readily follows:

*By guarding it according to your word.
¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you;
 let me not wander from your commandments!
¹¹ I have stored up your word in my heart,
 that I might not sin against you.
¹² Blessed are you, O LORD;
 teach me your statutes!*

Thanks be to God that we know the power of this entity called “Word”. We store the “Word” in our hearts. Christ, the Word enters our hearts. He seeks to dwell with us. He gives us his strength. He gives us strength through His Holy Word and Sacraments. Why the Lutheran emphasis on the Sacraments some might wonder? What are the Sacraments anyway? They are visible elements of water, bread or wine, even the voice of a pastor, made powerfully effective when joined with the Word.

How shall we be steadfast in a land of swaying reeds? Drink from the Rock who is Christ. He turns the coward - courageous, the weak - strong, and the simple - wise. Take hope this day! We are in a week of “Joy”. It is Third Advent. Rejoice! We share the hope

Amen.