

Sermon
Christ Church, Cooperstown
Epiphany 1B 2012

*“A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.” Isaiah 42:3*

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

The big news in politics this past week, was, of course, presidential candidate Rick Santorum’s near defeat of Mitt Romney in the Iowa caucuses, the first round of the Republican primary contest. It’s difficult to imagine how, in our time, you can win a statewide election by a margin of only eight votes. But it was also pretty difficult to imagine, before last week, that Santorum had much of a chance. Here’s a man whose most recent election performance was an 18 point loss in a race for the US Senate, a candidate who is massively outgunned in the financing race, who couldn’t afford much air time and has been pretty much ignored by the national media. And the heir apparent, his war-chest overflowing, can only beat him by eight votes—how do you explain that one?

I was listening to the news on the radio early Tuesday morning, and a politics professor from Iowa State was predicting that Santorum would probably do much better than anyone was expecting. Because unlike all the other candidates, he was trying to win the race in Iowa the old-fashioned way. Santorum had spent something like 290 days campaigning in Iowa over the past year. He visited every one of the state’s 99 counties. He had spent day after day talking to old men in feed caps in small town diners and handing out the ribbons at livestock shows and working the crowds at little league baseball games. He knew how to handle the questions about corn subsidies and veterans’ benefits. Iowans like that sort of thing. They like to think that they know the presidential candidates on a first name basis. The big names: Romney, Gingrich, Perry—they blanketed the airwaves with flashy ads, made the talk show circuit, talked about strategy and big issues, and generally spent their time back home behind the desk talking on the phone to people who really matter.

Because, let’s face it, if you’re Mitt Romney or Newt Gingrich, it cramps your style to play the diner circuit in the cornfields of Northwestern Iowa. You’re made for the big lights and the important questions. You let your staff handle the queries about corn subsidies and veteran’s benefits. But, of course, that’s also what’s tricky about elections. Because lots of ordinary

people pull the levers in the voting booths, and if they think you think they don't matter very much, well they have ways of letting you know that. At least in Iowa, to get the job done, you have let down your guard, you have to get among the people, lower yourself a little bit, become one with the people you are trying to reach.

Jesus stands on the banks of the Jordan and tells John that he wants to be baptized. And in the version of the story that Matthew tells, John wants nothing of it “forbid it Lord,” says, “I should be baptized by you¹.” And of course, John is right. John's baptism is about repentance. It's about confessing your sins, and telling God that you want to make a new start. It's about letting all those wicked deeds that hang on your conscience slide right off you and leaving them behind there in the muddy water. And Jesus doesn't need that kind of baptism. He has no stains on His conscience, nothing He needs to leave behind. His heart is clean, He alone can bring the will of the Father to life. John had sinned, like we all have sinned. But Jesus is like us in all respects, except He has not sinned².

The Scriptures never tell us, precisely why Jesus was baptized. But I think we can find a pretty powerful hint in our Old Testament lesson. It is a description of the servant of the Lord, God's chosen instrument to deliver his people. The words that the Father speaks when Jesus is baptized, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”—they echo the Father's words to the servant quite closely. And God sends the servant to do his greatest work in a most unusual way. “A bruised reed he will not break,” Isaiah says, “and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” What he means is that the Lord's servant will be gentle and patient in dealing with broken people. He will not force his will and overwhelm them. He will not stand over them. Instead, he will lower himself to meet them, he will take on their weaknesses, so that he can bring them with him back to the Father. Ultimately, the servant will be victorious. “He will faithfully bring forth justice,” Isaiah promises, “He will not fail or be discouraged until he has established justice in the earth.” He stoops, but he stoops to conquer. And because he has stooped, when he conquers, he brings those bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks with him. They share in his victory.

Jesus is not baptized for his own sake, but for ours. He goes into the water to identify with us in our failure and alienation, in our need for God's mercy. He chose the Santorum

¹ Matthew 3:14

² Hebrews 4:15

strategy for redemption, not the Romney one. He could have set up base at the royal palace, reformed the temple's worship, used armies to enforce the law of God. But instead, He lowered himself to become one with the least of us. He was born a poor child, in a cold stable. He was baptized in the muddy river, called fisherman as his captains and shared his table with tax collectors. And it all would lead him to that ultimate act of identifying with us, his death for our sake, in our place, on the lonely hill of Calvary.

This is how much God loves us, you see, this is how far He will go to claim us and bring us back to Himself. The Father is pleased because when He steps into that water, Jesus is taking the first step on that path that lies ahead of him, the long hard road to the Cross.

He invites us to join him on that road. When we are baptized, we meet Him there in the water. We are baptized into Christ, Saint Paul tells us, into His death and resurrection, into His way of life. We live in the grace He provides, in fellowship with Him. And part of that life is this humility, this willingness to suffer, this kind of love that becomes one with broken reeds and dimly burning wicks. It is, he assures us, God's way and it leads to victory. Let us stoop with him, and share in His victory.

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