

"Achilles and John."

I sa. 42:1-9; Ps. 29; Matt. 3:13-17

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Do you remember the story of Achilles from Greek mythology? There are a number of different stories about him but the one I remember involves his mother grabbing him by the heel and dipping him into the river Styx because she was told that this would make him invulnerable to any injury. It worked, all except for the heel by which she held him by and which she forgot to wet with the river's water.

When he grew up he became a mighty warrior, the hero of the Trojan War. Paris, the prince of Troy who had started the war in the first place by kidnapping Helen, was also the one who killed Achilles. Paris' arrow found its mark in Achilles' heel - the one place that he was vulnerable.

Since then the Achilles' Heel has come to symbolize that part of a person's history or behavior or personality that works against them or leaves them vulnerable.

When I was a kid I loved the stories of Greek mythology and I would throw myself into things with abandon, imagining I had some special, Achilles-like protection. This was especially true in the summer, down at the shore. We'd throw ourselves into the waves, allowing ourselves to be pounded and tossed and rolled in the sand, coming up dizzy and squinting through the salt water, but exhilarated by the experience.

Those earlier thoughts of invincibility quickly vanish when we gain life experience and know that it just isn't that way at all. Life

hits us hard. Things happen to us that leave us reeling. We lose our bearings and we lose our way. There are few guarantees and few protections.

Sometimes we look at baptism as some kind of supernatural dipping that is supposed to render us impervious to pain and invulnerable to the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

But we know that isn't so and it isn't what baptism is for. Taking our lead from John the Baptist we learn that baptism is a spiritual activity tied to repentance. It is symbolic of washing away of sin. It isn't adding a thin coat of protection!

Rather than leaving us impervious baptism often leaves us feeling powerless. In baptism we are called to a new way of life, a way of life that takes God more into account and pulls us off of center stage. In this new life we are less willing to return evil for evil, unable to live just for ourselves with no regard for the welfare of others. Rather than making us invulnerable to pain, if anything baptism makes us more vulnerable to pain because we become more connected to God and the family of God's people.

But there are times when I wish it was different. There are many times when I wish that baptism could offer more of an "Achilles" kind of protection. I wish that God would just send down a dove and let me hear a voice that tells me just how special I am!

I wish that joining a church gave us some guarantees. I wish that the people of God were more effective in their ministry, more powerful in their prayers and more assured of their salvation.

We are - - and then again we aren't. We know that there are times when we have an amazing, miraculous really, effectiveness in our ministry, in our prayer and in our praise. We know there are times when God is so powerfully present that we have no doubt.

In this season of Epiphany - of God showing or revealing himself to us - we read stories of when God was particularly present to his people. With Jesus' baptism he is announced as God-with-us and God revealed to us.

But Epiphany is just a season and the special times of God's revelation of himself to us are more than balanced by those times when we wonder where God is and we entertain thoughts like: "if I'm so precious in God's sight, why don't things break my way just a little more?"

Rather than having a ministry in which miraculous things happen at the drop of a hat or at the mention of a prayer request, we know that much of the time ours is a ministry of "presence" - of standing alongside of others letting them know that they are not alone in the midst of their struggles.

So often it seems like so little, so inadequate.

So, what is baptism good for? I'd like to have a baptism like Achilles' baptism rather than John's. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't it be great if baptism made an obvious difference and resulted in protection and guarantees and the good life.

What baptism gives us instead is a way of honoring God by doing what he has commanded us. It is a way of showing obedience and

following in the steps of our Lord who was likewise obedient to God.

What Jesus received in his baptism was hardly the kind of protection we associate with someone like Achilles. In Jesus' baptism he shows he is united with us. He models for us the obedience to God that was at the center of his life. In his baptism Jesus received the visible sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit and the audible sign of his relationship with God the Father. These are the things that we also receive in the water and the word.

Baptism gave Jesus and it gives us the assurance that we are part of the family of faith and that the love of God toward us is not wishful thinking but a full reality.

Baptism doesn't protect us from harm or allow us to behave any way we wish because we are "special". It gives us a place and a promise and a potential to live into the inheritance we have as children of God.

Have you expected things to be different than they are because of your baptism? Read the rest of the Gospel. Jesus' baptism doesn't keep him from temptations and trials and crucifixion.

It serves as a powerful reminder that God's people are not kept from harm but they are carried through it by the God who loves them and is with them and will not let them go.

And when we stand with others who are going through trying times we do so as a sacred calling, a ministry of embodying the presence of God in their midst. It may not seem like much.

But often it is our calling, and it is enough.

Fred Craddock tells a story of vacationing in the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee. He and his wife were in this lovely restaurant at a place call the Black Bear Inn.

All of a sudden this old man, with shocking white hair - a real Carl Sandburg-looking individual - came over and said to them: "You're on vacation?"

They said "yes" and he just kept right on talking. "What do you do?" he asked. Craddock was thinking: "That's really none of your business," but he somehow let it slip that he was a minister.

"Oh, a minister," the man said, "we'll I've got a story for you." With that, he pulled up a chair and sat down.

The man said: "I was born back here in these mountains and when I was growing up I attended Laurel Springs Church. My mother wasn't married and as you might expect in those days, I was embarrassed about that. At school I would hide in the weeds by a nearby river and eat my lunch alone because the other children were very cruel. And when I went to town with my courageous mother I would see the way people looked at me trying to guess who my daddy was.

"The preacher fascinated me, but at the same time he scared me. He had a long beard, a rough hewn face and a deep voice, and I sure liked to hear him preach. But I didn't think I was welcome at church so I would go just for the sermon. As soon as the sermon was over, I would rush out so nobody would say, 'What's a boy like you doing here in church?'

"One day, though, I was trying to get out but some people had already gotten into the aisle so I had to remain where I was. I was waiting to get free, and starting to sweat when I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder. I looked, and out of the corner of my eye I saw it was the preacher. I was scared to death.

"He looked at me without saying a word. He just looked at me and then he said, 'Well, boy, you're a child of ...' and he paused. I just knew he was going to try to guess not who my mother was, but who my father was.

"The preacher said, 'You're a child of ...ummm. Why, you're a child of God! I see a striking resemblance, boy!' Then he swatted me across the rear and said: 'Go claim your inheritance!'"

And the old man looked at Craddock and simply said: "I was born on that day." As it turns out this 80 year old man had been a former governor of the state of Tennessee.

But isn't it interesting the story he remembered of how someone had set him free to live as a child of God?

Too many people are dead-in-the-water when it comes to their spiritual life. You and I have an opportunity to see a striking resemblance to the family of God in one another and then to lay claim to our inheritance and to serve God from this day forward.

Let's be about our Father's business in this New Year, serving God with joy!

May it be so for us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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