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“Watchwords for 2008”

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Isaiah 42: 1-9; Matthew 3: 13-4:1

The Moravian Church, the church into which I was baptized,
has a custom of posting daily watchwords,
verses of scripture to give believers strength, guidance,
and encouragement for the day.

The custom dates back to 1727 in Hernhutt, Germany,
after a particularly powerful worship experience,
when Moravians there desired some means of keeping
that spark of religious zeal burning brightly in their lives.

So, they decided to assign a daily messenger
to visit each home in the little community in the morning,
with the task of encouraging believers
“to watchfulness and faithful endurance” throughout the day.

Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf, leader of the Hernhutt community,
appointed a text appropriate for each day,
“a watchword”, which was then
hand-written on a card and hand-delivered by the messenger
to each doorstep along with greetings.

The German word, *Losung*, translated into English as “watchword”,

is a military term, actually, which is interesting because
Moravians at that time were pacifists, for the most part.
Losung means a password, a countersign or watchword.
The concept was that this watchword,
would help Moravians identify one another,
just as a password helps determine identity in military camps.
And it would bond them together as a community,
as they discussed and shared its meaning in their own particular lives.
And this watchword would encourage them
in their daily spiritual battle with temptation and sin –
hence, perhaps, the military metaphor.

I tell you this, because the Old Testament reading for today,
this first of Isaiah's four servant songs
proclaiming the promise of a Messianic ruler who will lead God's people,
to true justice and righteousness through his personal suffering,
this reading from Isaiah 42 contains MY self-appointed "watchword":
"A bruised reed he will not break,
a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." (Isaiah 42: 3)
It's my watchword for life, not just for the day.
No one appointed the text for me.
No one wrote it on a card and brought it to my doorstep.
I chose it for myself when I was a child.
Or rather, I assumed, in my child's mind,
that God had chosen this text just for me,
because my middle name was Reid, and my name
was in this scripture passage.

Talk about being a literalist!

It didn't matter that my Reid, was spelled differently
than Isaiah's reed; in my mind they were the same.

And so I memorized this verse early on,
and I have pulled it out, mulled it over, rolled it around in my mouth,
repeated it as a sentence prayer, whenever I have felt
overwhelmed by life, which is frequently and often.

"A bruised reed, he will not break...a bruised reed, he will not break...
a bruised reed, he will not break."

It has worked for me in the same way
that Paul's "jars of clay" speech in II Corinthians
is likewise a source of strength and encouragement to many:

"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not in despair,
persecuted, but not abandoned;
struck down, but not destroyed.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus,
so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." (II Cor. 4: 8-10)

So even as a child, when calamity would present itself:

when I would wake, sweating, from a nightmare;
when I a bicycle fall would result in skinned elbows and knees;
when the preacher's kid next door would beat me up;
when I would draw the "wild man of Borneo card" from the
the Old Maids' deck and freak out;
when I would watch the Wizard of Oz;
when my behavior would press my mother to threaten,
you are 'cruisin' for a bruisin';

I would counter internally with my watchword:

"a bruised reed he will not break;
a bruised reed he will not break;
a bruised reed he will not break".

And likewise, even today, I have not deviated far from my childhood pattern:

when one of my children is hospitalized;

when my workload overwhelms;
when someone close dies;
when my beloved spouse and I are at loggerheads;
when one of you suffers an unspeakable tragedy;
I still counter internally with that watchword:
"a bruised reed he will not break,
a smouldering wick he will not snuff out."
Do you have a watchword? An appointed text for your life?
I mention this because when Jesus is baptized by John
in the waters of the Jordan River,
he is baptized into the Spirit of God,
AND he is baptized into the word of God,
"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am pleased."
Consequently, when we are baptized,
we are not baptized in water and in Spirit only;
we also are baptized into the word of God,
which from that point on, has power over us and a claim upon our lives.
Jesus doesn't just go *under* the water, and *under* the Spirit,
which descends from above like a dove;
he also goes *under* the word of God,
as a conveyor of truth for the rest of his journey.
Proof of this is in the very next episode of his life,
as he shakes off the water of his baptism, and
is led by the Spirit into the desert to experience great temptation.
What will be his primary defense in that situation?
The word of the Lord,
with which he fends off every assault of the devil.

The operative word here is "under".
Once Jesus comes up out of the water,

once he comes up from the water,
he stands *under* the guidance, encouragement and power
of God's watchwords for the rest of his ministry.
God's word will hence empower and enable him, like Isaiah's suffering servant,
to humble himself and become obedient to death,
even death on a cross, as a slave;
to bring justice to the nations, and establish justice on earth;
to endure persecution and temptation without crying out;
to be a light for the Gentiles, and to those who sit in darkness;
to not falter or be discouraged.
"A bruised reed he will not break; a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."

I never realized how vital

this concept of placing oneself "under" God's word was,
until I read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*.

Penned in 1938, *Life Together* details Bonhoeffer's experience
of Christian community among a clandestine seminary
for training young pastors in Germany
amidst the oppressive dis-ordering of human life
by Nazi National Socialism.

Frequently and often in this small treatise on Christian life together,
Bonhoeffer uses the word "under" when speaking of
Christian life and its relationship to God's word.

"Spiritual love creates freedom of the brethren *under* the Word," he says.
(Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 37)

"Life together *under* the Word will remain sound and healthy
only where it does not form itself into a movement,
an order, a society, a *collegium pietatis*,
but rather where it understands itself as being a part of the one,
holy, catholic, Christian Church,

where it shares actively and passively in the sufferings
and struggles and promise of the whole Church."

(Bonhoeffer, p. 37)

And "'Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren
to dwell together in unity' – this is Scripture's praise of life together
under the Word, " Bonhoeffer claims. (Bonhoeffer, p. 39)

I never pictured or imagined myself, or the church of baptized believers
as going *under* the authority and power of God's word
just as we go *under* the waters of baptism, until I read Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer explains the power of Holy Scripture in the life of believers
in this way:

"(In the) reading of Biblical books....we become part
of what once took place for our salvation.

Forgetting and losing ourselves, we, too, pass through the Red Sea,
through the desert, across the Jordan into the promised land.

With Israel we fall into doubt and unbelief
and through punishment and repentance
experience again God's help and faithfulness....

We are torn out of our own existence and set down in the midst
of the holy history of God on earth.

There God dealt with us, and there God still deals with us,
our needs and our sins, in judgment and grace.

It is not that God is the spectator and sharer of OUR present life,
howsoever important that is;

but rather that we are the reverent listeners and participants
in God's action in the sacred story, the history of Christ on earth.

And only so far as we are THERE, is God with us today, also."

(Bonhoeffer, p. 53, 54)

When a friend I once knew

was hospitalized for treatment of advanced ovarian cancer,
and subsequently assigned to hospital room 324,
she commented that this must be significant in some way.
“Go look it up for me,” she said, “John 3:24 – I want to know why
this room number is important to me.”
When I returned from my fact-finding mission, I had to tell her, sadly,
that John 3:24 was not a pivotal text, and that it only said,
“John was not in prison yet,” – meaning John the Baptist.
But in the difficult roller-coaster weeks ahead, of treatments,
encouragement, remission, and discouragement,
she fashioned John 3:24 into her watchword.
And when it seemed that cancer would be the defining factor in her life,
she would say, “Well, John is not in prison yet,”
meaning, that she was not going to allow cancer
to imprison her and to define who she was.

Do you have a watchword? An appointed text for your life?
If we have been baptized into the community of the holy catholic church,
and if we have been immersed or dipped or splashed or sprinkled
under the same life-giving waters of Jesus’ own baptism,
then we have a whole book of Holy Scriptures that stand watch
and guard over us as our watchwords for 2008.

And whether we are male or female, child or adult, rich or poor,
Kenyan, or American, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant,
we have been baptized by Spirit and by Word into a beloved community,
in which God finds pleasure.

We are God’s beloved, in whom God is pleased.
As we remember the Baptism of our Lord on this day,
and as we remember our own baptisms, or perhaps,
look forward to our baptism,

and as we hear the concerns of our brothers and sisters
with family connections to Kenya,
remember that we all stand *under* the watchwords of Holy Scripture,
which have the power and authority,
to unify, guard, guide, encourage, protect
comfort and compel us in our daily walk with God
and one another. Amen.