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Hell Hath No Fury

1 John 1: 1-2:2

I'm the oldest child in my family...sort of. What should be a simple answer has always been a bit tricky to explain because my parents were foster parents for several years before they had me and my younger brother, so even though I was first, I was also seventh! Some of the kids I grew up with, and we lived (and fought) as any siblings would and some of them, the older ones, I never knew well and yet they were completely woven into our family's story. Suzy was one of those.

She was 17 years old when she was placed in foster care. She'd gotten pregnant in her senior year of high school and, when her parents found out, they called her names, kicked her out, and disowned her. She was sent to live with my parents where she stayed throughout her pregnancy. During her time with them she made the difficult decision to give up her child for adoption. When the day came my mother, who was not even a mother herself yet, was there with her through her labor and the child's birth. Her son was adopted immediately and Suzy recovered. It was slow, but she recovered. Eventually she became a pharmacist and, after many turbulent years, she even met a nice guy. We went to their wedding. I have never forgotten it because, during the ceremony, the pastor turned to ask her groom Fred to repeat the vows. The pastor said, "Do you, Fred, take Suzy to be your wife and do you..." and Fred interrupted him saying, "Yes! Yes, I do!" The pastor said, "Whoa there son! She's not going anywhere!" The entire congregation rippled with laughter.

Except she was going somewhere because only a year or so into their marriage Fred came home from a business trip to find her body in their garage with the car's motor running. She'd left a note. It pretty much said that she loved him and she was sorry but that she could not believe her son was now 16 and she didn't even know him. She couldn't think of any way out. You see, I didn't really know her. Except that I did. And you will never meet her, except that you have, at least in part.

It was 18 years ago this past week that Suzy made that decision and, thank God, very few of us have even considered the path that she chose but, at the same time, very few of us could say we don't know what it is like to find ourselves bound up by our own regrets, our own bitterness, our own failings. In the church we have a name for these things. We call them our sin and they can vary for each of us but, when they begin to take over, the world becomes very dark. And you and I and Suzy know that sin likes the dark. It thrives on it because in the dark it begins to grow and convince us that there is no way out, that we have been beaten, that no one really cares and, worst of all, that we are all alone. In the dark of our own sin we feel separated from everyone: from those who love us and from God. This is the very definition of sin: to be separated from God, to be completely cut off.

The writer of this letter, First John, must have known some people like you and me for he sees sinfulness all around him and he knows the dark paths to which it leads. You can see his struggle: fellow believers—followers of Christ—are finding themselves stuck in the dark of their own sin and the writer does not quite know what to do about that. As Christians we are called to be children of light and yet the reality of our own darkness is still obvious. He finally admits: "If we say we have no sin,

we deceive ourselves” but then later he begs his readers saying, “Little children, I am writing these things so you may *not* sin.” He knows it is inevitable and yet he hopes it will not happen. When all is said and done, he cannot explain sin and its hold on us and, two thousand years later, we really cannot explain it either. What he can say with boldness is that sinners now have an Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous.

What does it mean that he is our advocate; our champion? We preach the answers all the time. It means Jesus can relate to us because he is fully human and knows our frailties. It means he cares about us because we are no longer just his servants but, he tells us, we are his friends. It even means he suffered for us, marching all the way up to the cross despite the beatings and the betrayals or, perhaps, because of them. In all these ways Christ serves as our Advocate, as the one who defends us.

Except, have you ever thought about this, all of that relating and caring and suffering was to defend us against God. Our text repeats the idea: “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ...” Jesus is our champion who stands up for us in our dealings with God the Father. This may sound strange since we so often talk of a loving God but we can also never forget that though God is loving, God is also righteous and demands righteousness from each of us. Like our writer of 1 John, God knows it is inevitable that we will get wrapped up in our own sin and yet he hopes it will not happen. So God gives us the gift of an Advocate.

In all these ways Christ is our Advocate but he did not stop there. Yes, he gives us righteousness we cannot muster on our own. Yes, he gives us courage to face the trials of our lives. But he also removes burdens that have nothing to do with righteousness: like death and, perhaps, even like hell. He descended there, remember? Whatever we believe about hell we know it is the place where sin has won, where sin has blotted out any light so that no hope is possible. Hell is that place where you are fully and completely cut off from God. And that’s where Jesus goes. We say it every week when we recite what we believe and we may even mumble through the phrase. But what we are saying is that we believe Jesus descended into the place with no hope. He descended into the place that separated him from his Father. The one who never knew the sin descended to the place where sin reigned.

We might ask ourselves, Why? Why did he do this? We would not be alone for lots of folks have gotten to this question before us. Some have said that he went there to preach to all the people who had not heard the good news so they could be shifted from hell to heaven. Some have said he went there in a symbolic way, through his earthly sufferings. Some have said he went there to continue the battle against good and evil and clean up against the devil. Perhaps so.

But I think he went there to make a liar out of sin. I think he went there so when the dark gathers and our sin starts to speak to us, convincing us that we are unloved and all alone, we can call that voice the liar that it is for we are not alone, even in hell. Christ has been there too.

This Sunday we celebrate our Confirmation Class as they join the church and we can joke sometimes that what it means to be a member of a church is that you get to vote once a year! They might even call you to join a committee! But we don’t really mean that, do we? We know it means more than this. To become a member of a church, to even dare to walk in its doors, in fact, is to say that you are not going to believe sin’s lies anymore. That’s what it means to join. It means you don’t believe the dark road is the one you have to take. It means you refuse to believe you are alone.

It means you believe one other thing as well. The renowned psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor once famously wrote about that experience in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. In describing who

did and did not return from the hell of the gas chambers he said, “the best of us did not return.” To be a part of Christ’s Church means you believe that the best of us, the best of all of us, did return. Hell could not hold him. Remember: “he descended into hell...and on the third day he rose again.” With this, the last of sin’s lies falls away for we believe there is always a way out, Christ blazed that trail of escape for us.

Does this mean that hell has no fury left? No power to wield? Of course not, we can feel its terrible power around every corner. But too often we assume that its power holds sway; that somehow the battle between dark and light is on equal footing. We can live as if Christ did not rise at all. Yet he did. Have we forgotten? He descended and then he rose again. He rose. The best of us returned. As members of his body, as his brothers and sisters, we can too. Amen.