

The Third Sunday of Easter / Confirmation Sunday • April 26, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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1 John 3:1-7

“Best”

He's the best at what he does. If you've already guessed who I'm talking about from this short phrase, I'm sure that you'll be going to see his new movie next weekend. It just so happens that our congregation's Confirmation weekend again falls in the same timeframe as the opening of a big superhero movie: *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. If you've seen any of the past three movies in the X-Men franchise, you already know the basics about who Wolverine is. There, as in the comic books, Wolverine (whose non-superhero name is Logan) is a type of human known as a mutant. He has the ability to miraculously regenerate from most any wound or injury, to purify himself of any toxin. Because of this ability, he was selected for a secret military project. Scientists imbued his skeleton with a nearly indestructible metal alloy, even including the three claw-blades that spring out from the backs of both of his hands. He was intended to be the ultimate weapon, an unstoppable assassin. And he *is* the best at what he does. But what he does isn't very nice: he's a killer.

Someone else is the best at what he does. His name is Satan, and he's a killer, too. We don't talk about the devil very much, but he certainly shows up in our text today from 1 John. He doesn't have metal-alloy claws like Wolverine, but he tries constantly to tear us apart from God. He wants us to go on sinning, to continue turning away from God in the choices that we make in life. That's *his* greatest power: temptation. Deception. He wants you to think that you need to have the seemingly good things that he offers – good things which come from God, though the devil would have you focus exclusively on the gift and forget the giver. He really wants to see you dead, captive to sin and under his rule. And if you've been set free from that captivity, if the Holy Spirit has called you to faith in Jesus as the Savior, look out! If you serve Christ, the devil and his allies in the world will be in conflict with you. It would seem an easier path to just go along with them, to not put up a fight. Temptation works that way. It'd be easier to sleep in than to get up and go to worship on Sunday morning. It'd be safer to go along with the crowd than to make a stand for what's right. It'd be simpler to do the bare minimum for an assignment than to go the extra mile to make it excellent. The devil wants you to believe that you can be a follower of Christ, a Christian, without living like one. What is the witness that we set for others? For the people we pass on the road of life? Or for our friends? Or for our children? Are we the best at what we do as Christians? No. But there is another to whom we can turn in our failings.

Jesus is the best at what he does. He's not an assassin; rather, he brings new life. He stands with us and defends us in the conflict against the world that does not know him or those who serve him. He is the one true superhero, the one who could do what the rest of the world could not. He faced the devil head-on and gave himself up for us. Jesus didn't have a near-death experience on the cross, from which he subsequently healed at a superhuman rate. He died and was buried, and the third day he rose again. Through his sacrifice on the cross, he purifies us of the toxin of sin that would kill us all. His regenerating love is a **healing factor** in our lives, lives which have been hurt by struggles with the world and wounded by our own selfish choices and half-efforts. Jesus liberated us from captivity to the devil and his deception. Jesus broke the devil's power: Satan cannot control us or compel us to turn away from God; he cannot make us continue in the practice of sin. And Jesus has the power in love to give us new life, that we should be called the children of God.

In this Easter season, on this weekend when we celebrate the Rite of Confirmation for seven of our young people who are reaffirming their baptismal vows, we rejoice that we are a people whom

God has called to be His own. We have the assurance of Jesus' resurrection to seal the hope that we are His, and that "when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." In Jesus, we receive a new identity.

Identity is a major theme in the Wolverine story. As a result of that military project, he lost the memory of his old life. Between his amnesia and his mutant "healing factor," no one really knew much about Logan – even his age – himself included. Because he'd lost his past, Logan didn't know who he had been, only what he had become. His identity was the one that'd been given to him: he was a weapon. At some point, however, Logan escaped from the shadowy organization that had "enhanced" him, moving on to become a gruff loner, an anti-hero, still chasing after the mystery of his past. I don't know if the Wolverine origin story that features in the plot of the upcoming movie exactly matches that which was finally laid out in the comic books, but the official revelation of Logan's former identity was a pretty big deal at the time: the reader finally found out the starting point of the story. And unfortunately for Logan, his past held more than a lifetime's worth of pain.

In some ways, our story as Christians is mirrored in Wolverine's. As St. John writes in today's text, we too have been given a new identity. We're not forged into living weapons; however, we are still called into conflict. As children of God, we can look to the future in hope through Christ Jesus, yet we keep clinging to the past. Instead of embracing the freedom that Jesus won for us, we seek out the life-draining bonds of the sins that held us captive. The struggle that we face is not against a shadowy government organization, but against our life before Christ!

This is what St. John's message comes down to: **there are implications for living life in the new identity Jesus gives.** You and I are each called to live a changed life as a child of God. Our text today reminds us of this truth, a truth which runs against the desires of our old identity. That past nature keeps trying to get us to believe that things were easier the old way, seeking to deceive us, to give up the fight. We're tempted into thinking that it'd be easier to cut back on sin than it'd be to cut it out completely. But as children of God, we are called to forsake the practice of sinning. Be watchful over your life and practice; pay attention to what you do, how you spend your time, how you treat your neighbor. What changes do you need to make? If you do not make regular prayer and Bible study a part of your day, you can start there. If you only come to worship for "special occasions," come back next week! If you spend more time thinking about clothes or money or pets or soccer or zebras than you spend with God each week, reevaluate your priorities. Strive for perfection, to be the best at what you do as a servant of Christ.

But hear this good news: God is not expecting you to be a superhero, someone who has to do all this alone. That renewing power of the Holy Spirit is at work to make these things happen. Don't shut him out or neglect opportunities to be refueled and strengthened for that constant conflict against the devil. Jesus sends his renewing Spirit into our lives here, through the proclamation of His Word and the administration of Baptism and Holy Communion. God wants to be with you!

As I've mentioned, this is Confirmation weekend at St. John's. As I've said in years past, the Rite of Confirmation might mark the end of a two-year period of study, growing closer to God and to fellow believers; but Confirmation is not a graduation. For these young people, as for the rest of us, the journey continues. Our story is not yet done. But we can see its origin in the waters of Baptism, and we look with John to the empty tomb in expectation of its conclusion.

Remember, God has forgiven you, set you free from captivity to sin, and given you a new identity as His child. And He's the best at what He does.

Amen.