

TOO GOD-INTOXICATED TO BE ASTRONOMICALLY INTIMIDATED
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
JANUARY 20, 2008—MARTIN LUTHER KING WEEKEND
THE LESSON FROM THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES—ISAIAH 49:1-7
THE LESSON FROM THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES—JOHN 1:29-42
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Brothers Andrew and Simon ran a small fishing fleet on the Sea of Galilee in partnership with those other brothers James and John. Carp, sardines, and mullet is what they netted there, also tilapia, which appears even today on restaurant menus under the picturesque name St. Peter's Fish.

Andrew and Simon must have been devout Jews too, because when an eccentric preacher with odd clothes and a wild-eyed look started calling for a wayward people to repent of their sinful ways, Andrew and Simon dropped their nets, at least now and then, to follow John the Baptizer around the countryside.

One day Simon is fishing but Andrew is doing a Bible Study with John when Jesus happens to saunter by, and John suddenly interrupts his close textual analysis and shouts "Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world!" and encourages Andrew to follow Jesus instead, which Andrew does.

When Jesus sees Andrew tagging shyly behind, he says "What are you looking for?" Those are the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John, and he's been asking it of all of us ever since. "What are you looking for?" What are YOU looking for? Andrew promptly chases off to find his brother Simon, and that is the beginning and committed core of Jesus' little band of merry men.

Simon becomes the shining star of all four Gospels, so we know quite a bit about him.

Jesus takes one look at him and instantly gives him a nickname—Peter in Greek, *Cephas* or *Kephas* in Aramaic. Peter in Greek or *Kephas* in Aramaic means 'rock.' I'm not sure I ever really paid attention to this before, but neither Peter in Greek nor *Kephas* in Aramaic is a name parents ever christened their children with. It's a nickname, not something you're born with but something you earn later in life, an affectionate way for friends and family to gather up the essential and endearing attributes of someone they love. We still do it today: Rocky is what we call someone with a thick Bronx accent and quick fists and a six-pack of rock-solid abs and rough street smarts but not given to quoting Shakespeare or Aristotle on a regular basis. So when we call Simon 'Peter,' a common given name today, we're really cloaking what Jesus was getting at when he called him Rocky. Maybe Peter said things like "Yo, Adrian!" and shadow-boxed with slabs of carp and had a bulldog named Butkus.

Jesus takes one look at Simon and instantly calls him Rocky, Rocky for those quick fists and that Bronx accent but also because Jesus knows Rocky will become the dense but dependable foundation of an institution numbering two billion souls today and as eternal as anything else on this spinning rock.

We know a lot about Rocky, but less about his blander brother Andrew. No nickname for Andrew, just Andrew, Rocky's brother. That's his greatest claim to fame: he's

Rocky's brother. Are you somebody's brother? Not just anybody's brother, but **SOME-BODY'S** brother? Did you make your ambling way through an academic career overshadowed by a more famous sibling with a stratospheric GPA, a closet-full of football trophies and All-State awards, a pick of full-rides to Duke, Northwestern, or Cal Berkeley, and a following pack of adoring co-eds, while you worked like a dog for that B- average, made the JV chess team but couldn't make the varsity, never did find a date for the senior prom, and then went on to a stellar career at junior college? Every year at roll-call on the first day of school did you face the teacher's breathless awestruck question, "Are you Rocky's little brother?"

Rocky's brother. How would you like to be—oh, I don't know, Tom Brady's back-up, Einstein's wife, Don Quixote's side-kick, Sandy Koufax's catcher, Roger Clemens trainer, Jack Welch's secretary, Martin Luther King's organist, Brad Pitt's wife (oh wait, that last one doesn't work, does it?)?

Yet, where would Koufax be without his catcher or Welch without his secretary or, most of all, Quixote without Sancho Panza? Scientists sometimes wonder whether Einstein's wife helped him formulate the Theory of Special Relativity. There's plenty of room for **SOMEBODY'S** brother to shine.

It was Andrew who dragged Rocky to see Jesus, and in fact every time we meet Andrew in the Gospels he's dragging somebody to Jesus. It was Andrew who found the little boy with the five loaves and two fishes and that little lunch launched a lavish banquet for five thousand.

Later some Greeks find Andrew and announce "Sir, we would see Jesus," presumably because not just anybody earned an automatic audience with Jesus. Most of the time when *Entertainment Tonight* or *The New York Times* phoned for an interview with the most famous preacher in first-century Palestine he had his press secretary say "No comment," but Andrew thinks about that request by those Greeks for a second and then drags them to see Jesus. We don't know how that audience went or what happened because of it but you could guess that for all practical purposes it was the beginning of the European, Gentile Church. Andrew beat Paul by twenty years. Thus Andrew is the patron saint of evangelists everywhere, anyone who tries to drag people to Jesus.

I guess the lesson I want to learn from John's account of the calling of the first two disciples is how much God can do with modest raw materials: Rocky and his brother changed the world. This is a sermon for **SOMEBODY'S** Brother—the eclipsed, the overshadowed, the unsung, the average, anybody who thinks so little of herself she doesn't think she has a role in the building up of God's kingdom.

It's a sin, you know, insufficient self-esteem, that is. It's the flip-side of excessive egotism. In fact, it's a version of egotism. It's the error of thinking that **you** are just **you**, and forgetting that God always goes with you and shapes and shines and shoulders the tool that is you and puts to use whatever meager gifts you bring to the situation.

Egotism, of course, is the error of filling the world up with 'I': "I, I, I," every sentence begins with a first-person singular pronoun. All there is in the egotist's world is 'I'. But that's also true of those who self-minimize.

All there is in their world is 'I'. No room for God. They forget that God is in their world.

Did somebody ask you to serve as an elder of this church but you said 'no' because you don't think of yourself as a leader? Why does your self-assessment of your ability supercede the opinion of the sanctified community?

Did somebody ask you to teach Sunday School but you said 'no' because you don't know which Testament the Book of Obadiah is in? Neither does anybody else.

Did somebody ask you to go to Honduras with the high school kids but you said 'no' because you don't speak Spanish and don't know which end of the hammer to hold and stammer cluelessly in the presence of teenagers? Can you learn? You're not just SOMEBODY's Brother; you're SOMEBODY who can drag people to Jesus.

Rocky and Rocky's brother. That's all there is, modest raw materials for building a church out of. Who wants to be SOMEBODY's Brother? It's no fun being Einstein's wife or Jack Welch's secretary or Don Quixote's sidekick. How would you like to be Elgin Baylor's teammate? Elgin Baylor played basketball for the Minnesota, later the Los Angeles, Lakers in the 1960's. Elgin Baylor was one of the greatest scoring machines the NBA has ever seen. Rod Hundley was Elgin Baylor's teammate, also his roommate for a while.

On November 15, 1960, Elgin Baylor scored 71 points in a single game against the New York Knicks. At the time it was the most points one player had ever scored in a single game. By the way, did you know that of the top eighteen single-player, single-game point

totals in NBA history, six of them have been compiled against the New York Knicks? I looked it up. One-third have been against the Knicks, including Wilt Chamberlain's record of 100 points in 1962 that will probably never be broken, Kobe Bryant notwithstanding. Somebody needs to teach the Knicks how to play defense. I don't know if Isaiah Thomas is up to the task.

Anyway, on November 15, 1960, Elgin Baylor scored 71 points against the Knicks. Elgin Baylor's teammate Rod Hundley scored two. As Elgin Baylor and Rod Hundley get into a taxi in New York after the game, Rod Hundley turns to Elgin Baylor and says, What a night we had, buddy! Seventy-three points between us!"¹ Now there's SOMEBODY's Brother who refuses to minimize his contribution to the cause. There's somebody who knows that great accomplishments are always a team effort. It's always Rocky, Rocky's brother, and God.

God can do a lot with modest resources and nobody is too small to play a role in the transformation of a broken world into something more beautiful. This holiday weekend I was remembering what happened in 1964 in Selma, Alabama, during the push to secure voting rights for black people. 1964 in the United States of America and still many blacks could not register to vote. Martin Luther King and his colleagues had been having trouble overcoming legitimate fears and mobilizing protests sizable enough for anybody to notice. And then one day after class at the all-black Clark Elementary School a teacher appeared on the steps holding a toothbrush aloft as if it

¹From *The Little-Brown Book of Anecdotes*, ed. Clifton Fadiman (Boston: Little Brown, 1985), 294.

were a sword or a flag, part of a jail kit you give people when they know they're going to spend a night or two behind bars.

There were 110 other teachers behind her. These were the most vulnerable black professionals in the South; all of them owed their jobs to white politicians. Two abreast they marched to City Hall. The schoolchildren were astonished their teachers were this brave; 300 gathered along the side of the road to give them an ovation. "Children hugged classroom taskmasters they had scorned as windbags," writes Taylor Branch. At a chapel along the way they sang "This Little Light of Mine."

When asked why they did it, some teachers said, "We were ashamed to teach civics when we could not vote ourselves." Nothing like this had ever happened across the South during the whole civil rights movement, not even in Birmingham in 1963. When other black professionals saw the teachers' courage, they planned their own protests. The morticians planned one. So did the barbers.²

That's the kind of thing Martin Luther King had in mind when he'd written from that Birmingham Jail about people so God-intoxicated they could never be astronomically intimidated.³ That is to say, when you remember that you are not alone, nothing beneath the stars, nothing in the universe, can threaten you.

²Adapted from Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America During the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 563-564.

³Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 300.

Too God-intoxicated to be astronomically intimidated. Martin Luther King, you see, earned a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Boston University, and he knew what people had said about the seventeenth-century Dutch-Jewish theologian Baruch Spinoza: they called him *ein gott-betrunkener mensch*. Don't you love that? *Ein gott-betrunkener mensch*: the man drunk with God. That's how Rocky and his brother won the world for Christ two thousand years ago. That's how those schoolteachers won the right to vote in Alabama forty years ago. This little light of mine. This little toothbrush of mine.

Rocky and his brother. That's all there is at the beginning. Andrew was always dragging people to see Jesus. Therefore he is the patron saint of evangelists everywhere, anybody who tries to drag people to Jesus. Also, of course, the patron saint of Presbyterians, because he is the patron saint of Scotland, and therefore, I suppose, also of golfers and whiskey distillers.

Leave it to the Presbyterians to choose SOMEBODY's Brother as their patron saint. Rome gets St. Peter himself and we get the sidekick; they get the Lone Ranger and we get Tonto. Still, we see Andrew every time we look at the United Kingdom's Union Jack. Do you notice that there are three crosses on the Union Jack—a square red one for England's St. George, an X-shaped red one for Ireland's St. Patrick, and an X-shaped white one for Scotland's St. Andrew?

Legend has it, you see, that Andrew took the Gospel to the far corners of the earth and at the end was martyred on an X-shaped cross. Just SOMEBODY's Brother. But too God-intoxicated to be astronomically intimidated.