

Series: Upstream

June 12, 2016

Title: Dirty Water

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Text: Acts 19:11-20

How's the water?

"Love That Dirty Water"

Sometime during the mid-1960's a man named Ed Cobb and his girlfriend had a run-in with a mugger. It happened in Boston and gave birth to a song: "Dirty Water." The Standells debuted the song in April of 1966 and peaked at #8. Most hits from the 60's have been long since forgotten. But not "Dirty Water." The Boston Bruins began playing the song after home victories in 1991. The Red Sox followed suit in 1997. The Standells have even played the song on top of the Green Monster.

Well, I love that dirty water

Oh, Boston, you're my home.

Let's hope they get to play the song lots of times this summer.

Not so nice for fish:

Dirty water may be fun to sing about from the top of the Green Monster, but it's no fun if you're a fish. For a salmon, nothing is more important than healthy gills. Gills are a salmon's lungs: they take oxygen from the water and regulate key electrolytes necessary for survival. If the water is dirty, the gills become clogged and the fish can't make its upstream journey.

Waterfalls and swamps may be powerful obstacles to that journey, but unseen and ever-present pollution in the river can make the difference between life and death.

How's the water?

In our upstream faith journey we face powerful pollutants that can weaken us to the point that we no longer are able or willing to fulfill our God-given mission in this life. These pollutants are unseen and ever-present in our

culture. And they attack at the very heart of our spiritual life. As Paul wrote to the very Christians that we will get to know this morning:

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Ephesians 6:11-12 Phillips

Put on God's complete armour so that you can successfully resist all the devil's methods of attack. For our fight is not against any physical enemy: it is against organisations and powers that are spiritual. We are up against the unseen power that controls this dark world, and spiritual agents from the very headquarters of evil.

Abacadabra

Ephesus, A.D. 52:

The city of Ephesus, in what is now southern Turkey, was the 3rd largest city in the Roman Empire. It was also in many ways the most superstitious. As Bruce Metzger writes:

Of all the ancient Graeco-Roman cities, Ephesus, the 3rd largest city in the Empire was by far the most hospitable to magicians, sorcerers, and charlatans of all sorts.

Ephesus was dominated by the massive Temple of Artemis – a structure 4 times bigger than the Parthenon in Athens. This temple served as worship center, court, bank, library, and asylum for wrong-doers. It had vast real estate holdings, and even sent its own athletes to the Olympic Games. In short, it was the foundation of the entire culture in the entire region.

Inscribed on the statue of Artemis were magical words – spells, if you will – that were famous for their supposed power. These words, and hundreds of other such spells were to be found all over Ephesus. Say the words in just the right way, and you could make things happen. You could make someone love you, predict who would win the next chariot race, cure illnesses, get rid of house vermin. You could also put a hex on an enemy.

No wonder, then, that the place was crawling with magicians and sorcerers. Here was a place where anything was possible. Just make sure you had the secret formula. Love that dirty water.

Abacadabra:

Magic is the bottom feeder of spirituality. It is based upon the notion that if you say the right words or perform the right ritual, you can manipulate some deity or supernatural power into doing what you want. No relationship with anyone or anything. No moral requirements. Just power.

It's sort of like cheat codes in video games. A video game creates its own world with its own rules. When you play the game, you are a part of that world and subject to its restrictions – unless you can get your hands on a cheat code. A cheat code is activated by typing in a secret password or pressing controller buttons in a certain sequence. Think “magic spell” and “magic ritual.” Once activated, the cheat code gives you the power to unlock characters, improve their performance, or go into god mode. Can't beat that monster at the end of a level? Punch in the cheat code and you're immortal. Can't get past a certain level? The cheat code will open it for you.

Magic presumes the existence of a spiritual world that influences or controls every aspect of life. But if you have the secret code, you can manipulate those unseen spirits and powers. And that is what Ephesus was all about.

Power encounter:

Luke tells us that Paul set up shop in Ephesus and taught in the city for two years. During that time, God worked incredible miracles through him:

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Acts 19:11-12 NIV

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.

Imagine the impact such miracles must have had on the local populace! Luke goes on to tell how Jewish exorcists tried to copy Paul – using the name of Jesus as a magic incantation to gain power over evil spirits. They thought that Paul was using a spiritual cheat code to manipulate the spirit world. This was a big deal, because Ephesus was widely known as a place of demonic activity. No wonder, given the fact that people had opened themselves up to all kinds of dark spiritual forces!

Well, it turns out that borrowing the name of Jesus to do some magic didn't work out for the exorcists. The evil spirit they were trying to chase off turned on them, causing the man it possessed to attack them and beat them up.

Here at last was the supreme spiritual power: the Lord of the world. Jesus wasn't a name to be worked into a magic spell. He wasn't a spiritual force to be manipulated. He was the Creator God who had come in human flesh and blood to die for our sins and give us eternal life. He was God's *love* in person. The only way to respond to Him was to love him in return.

Dirty Water

Coming Clean:

The failure of the Jewish exorcists to use Jesus as a cheat code had quite an impact:

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Acts 19:17 NIV

When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.

What's more, those who had already become Christians found that they had some serious housecleaning to attend to:

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Acts 19:18-20 NIV [amended]

Many of those who had believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand day's wages. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

These believers were Christians who had been content to continue swimming in the spiritual pollution of the occult. Yes, they had placed faith in Jesus. But they had held on to their magic scrolls as a back-up. Jesus may have been Lord in some areas of their lives, but not in *every area* of their world.

Now, they could see that it was “all or nothing,” no compromise. So they made a clean break, burning a fortune of occult paraphernalia. And in so doing, God’s word spread ever more widely and grew in power.

Dirty water in our world:

I remember having a car that had an inline fuel filter. I was living in a place where the gasoline was filled with impurities, and over time the fuel filter became more and more plugged. Over that same period of time the car began losing power; but it happened so gradually that I didn’t notice. Until one day the car would barely move along! I took out the filter and found that it was totally plugged with rust and dirt. When I put a new one in, the car drove like it was brand new.

That’s what happens with the spiritual pollution in our culture. The “bottom feeder” spirituality of our culture is present in everything from the daily horoscope with its supposed glimpse into the future, to the promise of power or healing through spirit guides and incantations, crystals and rituals. Like the Ephesians, Christians today are tempted to add a little magic to their belief system – to cover all the bases.

Don’t be fooled by these seductive and increasingly popular forms of spirituality. They are 100% antithetical to following Jesus. No swimming around in dirty water.

The full armor of God:

The Good News is that God has made a way for us to stay free of the pollution in our culture and our world. In writing to the Ephesians about the spiritual battle we face every day, Paul commands them to arm themselves with God’s armor:

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Ephesians 6:13 NIV

Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

What’s this armor look like, and what does it do for us?

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- The Belt of Truth protects us from the subtle lies of our spiritual foe.
- The Breastplate of Righteousness defines us as belonging to God's family.
- The Sandals of Peace carry us forward on our faith journey.
- The Shield of Faith protects us from the flaming arrows of the evil one.
- The Helmet of Salvation protects our thoughts from discouragement and deception.
- And the Sword of the Spirit – God's Word – unleashes God's creative and redeeming power.

So when you think of the biggest challenges that you face right now, what are you trusting in to make things better? Who or what are you counting on to help you move forward? And where are you heading?

Can you say with full confidence that Jesus is all you need?

If not, it's time to come clean, put on the Armor of God, and get back to the Upstream Journey. No more dirty water.