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Weekend of Sunday, December 4, 2022

2nd Sunday of Advent/Year A

First Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10

Second Reading: Romans 15:4-13

Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:1-12

Sermon Title: “Hope Is On The Way”

Theme

At the heart of our Advent preparation stands John the Baptist, who calls us to repent and make a new beginning. As the darkness increases we turn toward the approaching light of Christ. For Christians he is the root of Jesse, the righteous judge who welcomes all, especially the poor and meek of the earth. We wait with hope for that day when the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and there will be no more hurt or destruction. From the Lord’s table we are sent in the spirit of John the Baptist to proclaim that in Christ the kingdom of God has come near.

Texts:

First Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10

- ¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

⁹They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Second Reading: Romans 15:4-13

⁴Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name”;

¹⁰and again he says,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”;

¹¹and again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him”;

¹²and again Isaiah says,

“The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Gospel: Matthew 3:1-12

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,

²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’ ”

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Sermon

Geniene Hankey, the Administrator of our school, bought what looked like an adorable Advent calendar that she hoped to use in chapel with the children. Each day she was to open a little window and pull out a little figure of the nativity story, and by the end of Advent, Christmas Eve, the last piece one would think would be the baby Jesus. No, the baby Jesus has to have a premature birth, because we all know we have to get the three wise guys in before Christmas too, even though their arrival is not celebrated until January 6, but by then the tree is down and out at the curb, and the nativity set along with all the other decorations that have been up since the weekend after Halloween are back in the basement. And so she, Geniene, has a conundrum. How does she use this adorable Advent calendar to meet her need to generate excitement among the children for the birth of baby Jesus?

My parent's pastor used to move Mary and Joseph from a place farther from the sanctuary toward the sanctuary as Christmas got nearer as a way of telling children the story of Joseph and Mary and the shepherds and wise men moving toward the stable in Bethlehem. Each week they all moved a little closer. I like the idea, but in my opinion, to be truly authentic we would need a pregnant Mary on a donkey. And not just a pregnant Mary on a donkey, but a pregnant Mary who gets bigger the closer she and Joseph get to Bethlehem. I can imagine it, can't you? There is a knob in her back that you give one turn a week and it pushes her belly out! But you never see the blessed virgin pregnant. All we ever see is a thin peasant Mary with not an ounce of postpartum weight. It's a conundrum, isn't it?

You know what else you never see? John the Baptist! Seriously, he shows up every Advent, but you will never find a John the Baptist figure to go with a nativity set either. But that would surely mess with people too, because, as you know, John was a contemporary of Jesus, just a few months older, so would John the Baptist be characterized as another baby? Or as the bearded grown-up? A conundrum!

How could it be that we have the pregnant Mary on a donkey being led to Bethlehem by Joseph and over in the corner of the scene is John? We would have to have a "Back to the Future" moment to make that happen. So today's Gospel Reading presents us with an interruption in the journey toward Bethlehem by John the Baptist every Advent, and it is quite a conundrum. We really don't know what to do with him.

John and his message, albeit an inconvenient interruption, is a central theme of Advent. John foretold, (actually, I've always imagined him as loud, a yeller), John proclaimed the coming of God's Messiah. But no one, not even John, expected his coming, as a baby in Bethlehem, but as the man he was born to become - the Messiah who is the savior of the world. And so, on this Second Week of Advent, we are presented with a conundrum.

This John invades our simple nativity scene just as his message invades our happy and pleasant lives. In the days immediately before Jesus began his ministry, God sent his prophet John to prepare the way for his coming. This wild and wooly prophet went out and, in his zeal, invaded the traditions of the religious people of his day. Like a street-corner preacher, he showed up unexpectedly at the Jordan River, without a permit, without a license, without a diploma, without credentials of ordination -- but with a passion energized by the Spirit of God to speak the truth of God.

In today's Gospel, we hear Matthew declaring simply that in those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea. He burst onto the scene without the affirmation of the religious authority, but with a call from God. In this invasion, John spoke of another invasion to come; an invasion that would be mighty and lasting, actually, ever-lasting. He said that God was sending the most powerful leader ever, to defeat all the powers the world could muster.

'This invasion is already underway. God's Messiah is coming!' John said to those of old, and on this Second Week of Advent, he says it to us still. 'He is coming, and you better get ready for what he brings and what he reveals about God and us.' John the Baptist invades the spirits of his hearers with a word of judgment, his way of making us prepare for the coming Christ.

John calls us to self-examination and confession. He demands that we look in the mirror but not merely to look at a reflection of ourselves. No, John demands that we stare into our own eyes and see beyond that which we want others to see, to examine what is really at our core - the reality of our lives, at the dirt and sin that separate us from God who is so holy that God cannot bear to look upon us in our sinful state, and so God has a conundrum too.

If you have ever done this, the real laborious work of self-examination, then you know it can be a disturbing process. But having looked deeply at that which we really would prefer no one else know about us, we can confess those areas, receive God's forgiveness, and begin the process of being and doing better in our goal of holy living, and not for that end alone, but so we can draw closer to God, who is no longer put off by our sinfulness. So God's answer to God's conundrum of our separation from God is John and his message of repentance.

Let me give you a personal example. Carol and I think and talk about retirement more now than ever before. Those of you who are there, know what we think and talk about: "Can we afford to? When is the right time? If we stop earning and saving before we have enough, what happens to us when we run out of money?" It could be a conundrum for us, but in this stage of life, when we look into the mirror we don't want to see someone who is less generous because we are thinking only of ourselves – ones who have turned in on ourselves and neglect God's call to serve him and serve those whom he loves (namely the poor, those devastated by natural disasters, etc.). So Carol and I have increased our giving to our church knowing that it is doing godly work, and we continue to give to the numerous causes we have supported for many years.

The question all of us are confronted with today is, can we let John invade our thoughts by hearing him call us to look deeply at what we are without God – (the answer would be nothing) - and to look at what part we may have to play in contributing, by action or inaction, to a broken world?

Closer to my home, that question is, is saving every penny for retirement a good and right thing to do when natural disasters, famines, and wars continue to disrupt the lives of innocent people who are also created and loved by the God I trust with my life? Or will I continue to serve my God who has safely gotten me this far, and who promises, that come what may, will take me home?

You take your life situation and ask yourself the same questions. If you can work through the discomfort of self-examination, how much are you like a brood of vipers, how much good fruit have you *not* born? Now we are beginning to see why John the Baptist is never an invited guest to our Advent and Christmas celebrations. He is a buzz-kill.

But if we listen closely, John invades the spirits of his hearers with a second word-a word of hope, because you see, “Hope is on the way.” The judgment is not the last message, only the first. The reason for self-examination and confession is so we can repent – which means to turn ourselves around and face God-ward. It means changing for the better. And if we are serious about changing, it means that we can begin to change the direction of our lives.

And when we resolve to do so, we change our direction to choose God's way, rather than our own. You see, each of us must listen to this crude prophet, this John the Baptist, who invades our pleasant Advent season. We listen to him in this season by preparing *our* way for the Lord; preparing *our* way so God can renew us and change us into people who act and live by following the example of the Son he gave us. And more than merely act and live by following the example of his Jesus, when we do, we participate in the healing of our broken world.

Yes, every Advent we are presented with a conundrum. How do we fit John the Baptizer into our nativity scenes? He just doesn't fit! And yet, here he is again. John invades our lives to make sure we know that Jesus, who is born to Mary and Joseph is also born to us – born to set us free from the materialistic and self-centered values of the world.

And so each Advent, the Church sees fit to invite John back, the awkward guest at the party, because John's mission was and is to make sure we know that Jesus is coming to save us, so we may become his children and follow in his way.

Prayer

Almighty God, we give you thanks for the eccentricity and courage of servants like John who came *not* with words of love that stroke our complacency, but rather with challenges that irritate us to action. Help each of us to prepare for your Son's promised return by true reflection and repentance so that we will be prepared for his promised return. We pray this in the name of Jesus, Christ our long-awaited messiah. Amen