

“The Peaceable Kingdom”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
December 4, 2022

Friends in Christ....

A short time ago we observed the lighting of the second candle of Advent, the candle of Peace. Peace is something that we long for in this troubled world, but we do not seem to be getting any closer to peace. Just watch the news for all the things that are happening around the world, in America, and in Iowa. It is like peace is an impossible dream. Yet there are people who are peacemakers in the world around them. They have not given up hope for today and for tomorrow.

Our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah gives us an ultimate vision of The Peaceable Kingdom when God reigns supreme bringing all creation together. On the other hand, our Gospel Lesson from Matthew introduces us to John the Baptist who has a different vision of how the Messiah will rule. The Isaiah text heading is A Shoot From Jesse’s Stump is a reference to the Davidic line which Jesus traced his genealogy. Isaiah 11:

Old Testament Lesson

**Isaiah 11:1-10(CEB)
A Shoot From Jesse’s Stump**

- 11** A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;
a branch will sprout from his roots.
- ²The LORD’s spirit will rest upon him,
a spirit of wisdom and understanding,
a spirit of planning and strength,
a spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.
- ³He will delight in fearing the LORD.
He will not judge by appearances,
nor decide by hearsay.
- ⁴He will judge the needy with righteousness,
and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land.
He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth;
by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.
- ⁵Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,
and faithfulness the belt around his waist.
- ⁶The wolf will live with the lamb,
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;
the calf and the young lion will feed together,
and a little child will lead them.
- ⁷The cow and the bear will graze.
Their young will lie down together,
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.
- ⁸A nursing child will play over the snake’s hole;
toddlers will reach right over the serpent’s den.
- ⁹They will not harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.

The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD,
just as the water covers the sea.

A Signal to the Peoples

¹⁰ On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples. The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious.

The word of the Lord.

At the time of the writing of this Isaiah reading, people did not have a lot of reasons to be hopeful. Their country had been overtaken by Assyria, their dreams of a united and powerful kingdom crushed by oppression and warring. They felt like a stump of a mighty tree, cut off and worthless. But the prophet Isaiah paints a picture of hope—a branch growing out of that stump, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, actions of mercy founded on words rather than weapons. We too, have been through hard times, facing natural disasters, a pandemic, and war. Isaiah's words encourage us to remember that God has acted in the past to make new beginnings out of that which we thought would be the end, and that God will do so again.

Isaiah preaches hope in a time of terror and justice in a time of oppression.

Isaiah 11:1-10 answers fear of Assyrian armies with fear of God. Assyria's false wisdom—arts of plunder and destruction (10:13)—cedes to true wisdom, discernment, and counsel (11:2). Isaiah declares that Assyria's tree will be cut down (10:17-18, 33-34), while a new tree will grow in Judah and bear fruit (11:1). Shoulders stooped under the yoke (10:27) will stand tall (11:10). Captivity will give way to rest, and shame to glory (11:10).

The visions of 11:1-10 are characterized by a remarkable dynamism that is at the same time the mark and guarantee of stability and peace. In the visions, the order of nature, political and social life, and the common life of humans and animals are organically linked and woven together.

The first vision begins with the metaphor of new growth, giving a trampled people gazing on a trampled land the power to imagine a different polity and a transformed world. The Hebrew word for “shoot” (11:1) can also mean “rod” or “scepter.” Wordplay here links the promise of new growth and life with that of a new ruler. The image of a branch from the roots of Jesse links future with past, with Judah's history with God, a history of election and favor. It also links the stability of this chosen dynasty with chosen place and promises that this land is still good; its soil still watered and fertile. The branch will flower and bear fruit: it will flourish in order to provide protection and nourishment for the people of Judah.

The next image promises rest, security, stability. The Spirit of the Lord, wind and breath, dynamic, ever-moving force of life, will rest and settle on this fruit-bearing branch (11:2). This animating Spirit confers on the ruler six qualities, each presented in pairs that culminate with fear of God: wisdom and discernment; counsel and might; knowledge and fear of the Lord. The pairs operate together and empower the ruler for the work of governance.

It is a vision of peace. It is a vision of hope.

In Jesus' time the people looked for a Messiah that would lead them into battle and drive out their enemies and make them a regional power. They were not looking for a Messiah that

would preach and demonstrate love, compassion, and hope. They were living under a *Pax Romana*, a peace “enforced” by the Roman legions. This was their image of peace, not a Peaceable Kingdom where all of creation got along.

This is the kind of Messiah that John the Baptist was telling the people to be prepared for as we hear from the third chapter of Matthew:

Gospel Lesson:

**Matthew 3:1-12 (CEB)
Ministry of John the Baptist**

³ In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, ²“Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” ³He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

*The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.”*

⁴ John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

⁵ People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him.

⁶ As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁷ Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? ⁸ Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. ⁹ And do not even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. ¹¹ I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that cannot be put out.”

May God bless our hearing of his holy word? Amen.

John the Baptizer is a colorful prophetic figure who introduces the story of Jesus in all four gospels. He dressed like the prophet Elijah and sounded like Isaiah.

As I looked at this text, I wondered what would make me leave my comfortable home and venture out into the wilderness to hear a fiery prophet tell me to repent and prepare the way of the Lord?

If I had a sense that the world was wrong, that the scales of justice were unbalanced, that my body and my soul were languishing from what I was witnessing and perhaps even benefitting from myself, then I might venture into the wild, curious to hear this prophet dressed in camel's hair and foraging for food.

I hope I would be among the seekers in this passage from Matthew. But I could be like the Pharisee or Sadducee. When the world gets ugly, it is tempting to grab what you can, to align with the powerful and privileged and convince yourself that this is the way of righteousness. Maybe I would note John the Baptist's influence and feel unnerved by how many he was baptizing — a sacrament traditionally reserved for the Temple and performed by priests within

the approved religious system. Maybe I would venture into the wilderness not out of curiosity or humility but seeking to discredit John as a weirdo and a fraud.

In the CEB translation of verse 7, the Pharisees and Sadducees come to John "to be baptized." But Teri McDowell Ott wrote that the NIV is more accurate in describing them "coming to where [John] was baptizing." These religious leaders – who did not get along and were unlikely to work together – were united in their opposition to John. They did not venture into the wilderness receptive to his ministry, but to oppose a threat to their power and influence.

John the Baptist's appearance in Matthew's Gospel is abrupt. There is nothing subtle or graceful about this disrupter extraordinaire. He came to deliberately shake things up. To prepare the way for the Messiah, John preaches outside the city center, outside worldly power and privilege, where people would not normally go to get their needs met — spiritual or otherwise. John calls us to meet God off the beaten path and on the margins of our society, among the poor and powerless.

His message was one of repentance, both individual and communal. He called for justice for the least and the marginalized like the widows and orphans. His message struck a nerve as we are told that people came from far and wide to confess their sin and be baptized. John's baptism can most likely be understood in light of ancient Jewish proselyte baptism. When gentiles were received into membership in the Jewish community, both men and women were baptized signifying a ritual cleansing which was not required of Jews.

Repentance, or *metanoia*, to use the Greek word, refers to far more than a simply being or saying one is sorry for past sins, far more than mere regret or remorse for such sins. It refers to a turning away from the past way of life and the inauguration of a new one, in this case initialized by an act of baptism.

What is interesting about John's call to repentance and baptism is that he seems to be offering a way for remission of sins without requiring going to Jerusalem and offering a sacrifice. If this is correct, it explains why the Jerusalem leadership would have been uneasy with John the prophet, and it may explain the adversarial attitude John had towards them in Matthew 3:7-10 where he calls them snake spawn!

Equally interesting is John's affirmation that merely being a descendant of Abraham or even a pious person of faith in itself does not exempt that person from the coming judgment, if they do not change their ways. John foresees a judgment falling on Israel separating the wheat from the chaff or husks, something Jesus also seems to have envisioned as well.

Let us be the wheat and seek justice and peace. Amen.