

ISAIAH 11:1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The 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. His 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, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek, he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The 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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt nor destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

MATTHEW 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This 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.’”

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

But 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? Bear fruit of repentance. Do 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. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees, every tree there that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize

you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

YEARNINGS

Isaiah 11:1-9
Matthew 3:1-12

What do you yearn for? Are you in touch with it or have you grown so cynical with life that you have closed the door on it? I’m not talking about your Christmas wish list or the vision of owning that mansion on the hill or finding the perfect relationship or taking the ultimate vacation, whatever that may be for you. No, I am talking about the deep and passionate desire for your life and the world that erupts with joy, that transcends the complications and pressures that come with daily living. It is a soul thing. There is a Portuguese word, “saudate”, which rather defies definition in English. But the gist of it is a deep Yearning in the soul for something that once existed, but does so no longer. It is often expressed after a tragedy as an expression of hope. It is the vision of it returning in the

future. It is infused with a hint of melancholy. The English equivalent may be “Oh well. That’s life, but things will get better.”

I get goose bumps when I read this passage from Isaiah. He presents a dream of hope and trust that reach into the depths of the soul. It juxtaposes itself over against the broken world we live in which rewards the wealthy, the powerful and the corrupt while literally billions of the world’s citizens are crushed under the boot of poverty, inequality, discrimination and injustice. The power of this passage allows us to touch the Yearnings inside of us.

It is attached to an individual person we could all worship and pledge our fealty to. Can you imagine someone who is driven by the *spirit of wisdom and understanding, knowledge and the fear of the Lord?* Someone who is not tempted by the lure of riches and who sides with those who have been abused by the systemic unfairness of society’s rules and behavior. *With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek.* Who would that individual be?

I believe we know who that person was. And today we begin the season of Advent in which we prepare once again for his coming. Advent is about Yearning. It is about opening our hearts and minds to a world which is not ruled by fear, violence and dictatorships. On the contrary, it is

a world where *the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the lion and the fatling together, and a little child who leads them.* It is a world of peace where *no one seeks to hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain, a world which is full of the knowledge of the Lord.* I Yearn for this. Don't you? Would you if you allowed yourself to?

Where does this person come from? Who will it be? John, known as the Baptizer, emerged from somewhere out of the wilderness and began proclaiming that the appearance of this person was imminent. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.* And he encouraged those who gathered to hear him to prepare themselves for this person's arrival by being baptized to cleanse themselves of sin.

How are we preparing ourselves? Last week, USA Today ran the photograph of a recently deceased ninety-four year old Iranian man who was known as the "dirtiest man in the world." They called him Uncle Haji. He believed in purity foods and applications to the body. No soap! So he hadn't bathed in decades. (He was also single). He was indeed the portrait of filth, his face and beard nearly black with the grime. And if he had been preparing to meet his Lord, would he have presented himself as clean? Probably.

Repentance is a spiritual bath, if you will. If we are to cleanse

ourselves by confessing our sins, hadn't we ought to know what our sins are? In other words, we must engage in serious self-reflection. And by sins, I am referring to those behaviors that separate us from God. And I'm not sure we take this very seriously anymore. A golfing buddy of mine who is a lifetime Catholic confessed to me that he had recently gone to Confession for the first time in years. And the first thing he confessed to his priest was that he hadn't been there for a long time. And the priest chuckled and replied, "Let's start with the top of the list: Have you murdered anyone?" My friend's point was that in the past, there was an air of gravity about it and penances were owed. He was questioning the usefulness of the practice.

But when John 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? Bear fruit of repentance." In other words, don't take for granted that just because you are children of Abraham that you are given a pass on your responsibilities. Oh, no; "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Hell, Fire and Brimstone are not part of my theology. I do not believe scaring people is productive. That's not why we're here, to try to figure out

how we can avoid the burning ovens of hell. Rather, the reason we are here is to participate in a community of faith which is doing its best to move in the direction of our Yearnings. The entire ministry of Jesus was dedicated to bringing compassion into the life of the world. And he was clearly unafraid to confront the corruption and hypocrisy of the authorities. His focus was on the poor and the sick and those who needed healing of the soul. He was down to earth, so to speak, feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty.

We cannot give up Yearning for the vision of Isaiah. We need to understand that while it is beyond the scope of our present reality, it is what God desires for us. In a way, it is like planting fruit trees when you know you are too old to ever enjoy the harvest. But somebody will pick them in the future. God's timeline is not our timeline. The future belongs to God. The present belongs to us. What we do with it has power to affect the days and decades ahead.

Advent, then, is an invitation to put our own baptisms into motion; to examine ourselves for areas of spiritual deficiency and potential areas of growth. We cannot give into to cynicism. We must keep our Yearnings alive for the sake of our children and grandchildren, our communities and our nation. The power of our Yearning will be steps forward toward the

vision of Isaiah. He is coming. Happy Advent!

Reverend Thomas Dunlap December 4, 2022