



SUNDAY SERMON

Yearning and Turning Toward God

A Reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

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 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. 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 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. On 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.

DATE

The Second Sunday
of Advent
Sun., Dec. 4, 2016

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

READINGS

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 24:36-44

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 3, verses 1 to 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 worthy 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 therefore 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 me; 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 his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

My brothers and sisters, we've just received word—from two prophets, so listen up. Before moving into the substance of the word, I want to give a shout-out to those who speak; to the journalists across the land—the journalists and the preachers. In the Book of Common Prayer (p. 827) we find this prayer: Almighty God, you proclaim your truth in every age by many voices: Direct, in our time, we pray, those who speak where many listen and write what many read; that they may do their part in making the heart of this people wise, its mind sound, and its will righteous; to the honor of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Continued

As a people, we are hungry for truth, hungry for a word of hope, hungry for a light upon our path. So, may the very hand of God guide those of you who speak—save you from guile, falsehood, and serving merely what consumer’s want. May God inspire you to speak truth as if your life and the life of this people depend upon it. For we look to you for truth.

Now, about the word from those two prophets:

Stump: an onomatopoetic word that one. A stump. Isaiah’s prophecy begins with a stump: a living plant whose life has been cut off, a family line with no offspring. Yet from this stump, Isaiah proclaims, a shoot will come out, a branch shall grow; the Spirit of the Lord—the creative ruach—wind and breath of God—shall give new life. This new life will come with one who brings faithfulness, righteousness, and justice. And in this time of new life, we shall see what? The wolf with the lamb; the leopard with the kid; the calf, the lion, and the little child.

In the Gospel, we encounter the prophet John, a voice crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord; make the path straight. Repent, says he. Which means: turn from your present ways; turn toward the coming Kingdom. With fierce warnings against those who smugly cling to false presumptions of security in the Lord, of security in the inheritance of their faith, John cautions: “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees.” “I come with a baptism of repentance; the one who follows will come with a baptism of Spirit and of fire.”

Both prophets proclaim a new era, a new order of life, that will come about with the arrival of this One who is coming. For both prophets, the vision overwhelms all else; compelling, inescapable, the vision defines the present reality. Neither pay any attention to time: the impending arrival of this Holy One and the new order could be an eternity away or in the flash of a moment. It matters not; for the vision dominates.

Isaiah articulates what it will look like when this One arrives: calf, lion, child—together. John articulates how it will come about: with ax, repentance, baptism, fire and Spirit. Even so, John embraces a coupling of opposites familiar to Isaiah. Just as we have the cow with the bear, the wolf with the lamb; we also have the mountains brought low, and the valleys lifted up – as the paths are made straight in preparation.

What’s going on here? It is a vision of a coming time, a vision of the coming of God. This is Advent; the season in which we prepare for the coming of God – both as incarnate infant in Christmas, and as mighty judge at the end of time.

What’s going on is the announcement that we hear through-out our Scripture of God’s glorious, terrifying reversal. Mary will announce: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” (Luke 2:52) Jesus’ first words in the temple: “God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind.” (Luke 4:18) And later will teach “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” (Luke 6:21). What was up will be down; those who were out shall be in; the dark shall be light, and in God’s kingdom, all of the arrangements that we know as defining in our lives today will be otherwise. Glorious, terrifying: depends upon your perspective.

Now, for us today: Toward this vision, Isaiah evokes deep yearning, while John calls for sincere turning. Yearning and turning are the emotions and motions of this day. Yearning for and turning toward God’s promise.

First, the yearning: The word of Isaiah was spoken to people in exile, who had been forcibly removed from their homes by an invading army, now living in a strange and foreign land. Not only have they lost the familiar streets and landmarks of their neighborhood, they have lost the patterns and routines of life at home.

Shattered streets of Aleppo come to mind, and of refugee families in makeshift villages alongside wire-fenced borders, with mother’s gathering their children. But I need not go to such extremes. For each of us, despite our relative privilege, security and comfortable lives... we too know something about loss and desolation. I don’t know the hardships you’ve faced, but I know that hardship comes with the human condition. Betrayal, abuse, illness, loss have carried us against our will to dark and distant lands, places where we lost our bearings, lost our sense of purpose, our hopes or drive, our joy and laughter.

It is to you and for you in these times that God sends Isaiah. Says Isaiah, new life will come, even from the stump cut off. The new life will come in the form of some one filled with the spirit. This one who is coming will not see or measure or judge as the world does; righteousness shall be her measure, faithfulness his gift, favoring that which you think is weak and without value. Even natural enemies will not destroy one another, but will live together in peace. When these things happen, says the prophet, when life for us begins anew, we will awaken to the knowledge of the presence of God. We will know deep in our bones that God was with us all along. And we will be glad.

This is for me the most potent of all God’s gifts: the deep yearning that comes from a sense that all is not yet right within me or with the world, and yet, and still, God sets before us all, a promise, a vision of a peaceable kingdom. That yearning gets us up in the morning, propels us through all manner of times, and leads us to rest at night. Even when it feels that all evidence is to the contrary, God is with us all along.

While Isaiah evokes yearning, John the Baptist calls for turning. Turning is the true meaning of the Greek word *metanoia* translated in our text as repentance. Repentance has little to do with being sorry. In repentance we turn; we turn from what has been and what is, to receive and embrace what will be in a new future. In the call to repent, John speaks first to the establishment—priests, lawyers, the upper class. Then, to all who will listen—and says, if you keep doing what you’ve been doing all along, you cannot possibly receive something new. If you keep clinging to what you already have, your familiar patterns, that’s all you’ll have. So open your hands, your hearts and minds to something new, some one new, and coming. You cannot do both—cling and receive.

Now is the time to hear the prophets. Those who speak must speak of hope; those who hear must open to possibility. So for you, an invitation to live this day of Christ’s nearing Advent, with possibility and hope.

“I dwell in Possibility”

a poem by Emily Dickinson

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –
Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof –
The Gambrels of the Sky –
Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –