

Isaiah 10:33 -11:10
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3: 1-12

Chopping Down Trees and Making Peace
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This is the Sunday when we light the Advent candle of Peace. It is also the Sunday when John the Baptist cries out in the wilderness: - "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." – "You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come? "Repent, for every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." Today, oddly enough, is the Sunday of Peace - and the Sunday of John the Baptist, with vipers and axes and fire. John – that strange angry man dressed in camel hair and leather, like Elijah, and living off food gathered in the wilderness. Would I like John, if I met him? And what connection is there between this John - out there preparing the way of the Lord in the wilderness - and the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah? Who put these lectionary readings together? Can these prophecies co-exist, or should we drop one like a hot potato?

You can see that I have a lot of questions. These kinds of thoughts were with me last Sunday, too, as we read other passages from Isaiah and Matthew: beautiful visions right next to harsh warnings. The Isaiah readings are clearly the most comfortable for upbeat Advent preaching: images like swords being beaten into plowshares and lions lying down next to lambs. I like to point this out to people who say that the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, show us a violent God, while the New Testament gives us the God of love. It's just not that simple.

Just to complicate things further, though, let's look at that stump of Jesse, the one that sprouts a shoot or a branch. Jesse was King David's father, so the idea is that another king will come from the same family tree, and that this new king will have all the qualities needed for a glorious reign. Do you know why Jesse is only a stump and roots? It's because at the end of chapter 10 God is acting like a cosmic forester, lopping off branches, cutting down trees, hacking down the forest with an axe. The stump of Jesse is the result of some drastic divine pruning. In Advent, we are asked to study the natural world. Today, we are supposed to be arborists, and understand how trees and humans interact.

So: a tree gets chopped down to a stump, and a little shoot starts growing out of it at some point. A lot of people would look at this and call it an eyesore. We call those little shoots growing out of stumps "suckers." We go around asking for advice – from a tree expert or from the internet - on how to discourage a stump from doing this by sealing it off. It looks messy, and somehow like a mistake otherwise. The stump that was the line of descendants from Jesse has been treated by the hardships of history, by the enemies of Israel in every possible way to seal off that raw place. War, exile, slavery, oppression, long periods where there was no king and no stable leadership, and yet... that old damaged stump still is showing signs of life.

Advent is the time when we first see this tiny, fragile shoot. And we know about all the threats to new life: things like too much water or excessive drought, lack of sun, insect invasions and parasites. But there is another threat, one less obvious. It turns out that storms may actually be

important in the growth of the new shoot. When people created a Biodome back in the 1990's, they wanted to create a totally self-contained biological micro-environment: a mini-Earth sealed off from our normal existence. Some of it worked quite well. But the trees were not so successful. Even though they had water and sunlight and all the nutrients they needed, they were weak. They were floppy. They could not stand up and grow up. The people who designed the Biodome figured out they had missed one important part of the environment: wind. The less obvious threat is that of total isolation.

Out in the real world, the effect of wind is to cause little microcracks in the trunks and branches of trees. Research has shown that when you plant a tree, it should only have enough support to allow it to stand upright. The top of the tree should wave in the wind to promote the development of a strong trunk. I wonder if some of the same was true for Jesse's stump... or for us, for that matter. It says that the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon Jesse's branch. The Spirit or Wind of the Lord is not an easy thing. It shows up as challenge. It shows up in words like those of John the Baptist, descending on us like a furious storm. We are not destroyed by those words, but they are creating the microcracks that shock us out of complacency.

John the Baptist says, "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees." He is the very personification of the message of renewal from the Hebrew Scriptures. He has arrived to shock us out of our floppy existence, to call us to chop down and root out all the old habits of greed and shame and selfishness that have grown up in our souls.

Today is the second Sunday in Advent, close to the beginning of our church year: a good time to make an assessment. A good time to think about the Baptist's challenge to "bear fruit worthy of repentance." What does that mean? All the old judgments of ourselves and others are to be chopped down and thrown away, making room for the new shoot of Jesse to grow up within us. That is how we prepare the way of the Lord. John the Baptist is not preaching a message of pure destruction, but rather one of liberation, of freedom from the forces that limit and confine us.

There is an interesting contrast between the ferocity of John's message and the actions that follow. I am talking about water baptism. He is pouring out fiery, challenging words, but also pouring a stream of life-giving water on the heads of those restless seekers at the riverside. He is blessing them with the water that will enable that first shoot of new life to drink deeply – to grow, and maybe even blossom and bear fruit.

There is an emptying out in repentance, throwing away what clutters our hearts and minds, what obscures our vision and blocks our ears. When we do this emptying of useless selfishness, we become our better selves. We have room to grow. We are more in tune with the rest of creation. We are ready for the peaceable kingdom.

Jesus will give us a picture of how to live in the peaceable kingdom before it gets here: an appetizer of the kingdom of heaven. His winnowing shovel scoops all of us, and all that is in us, up like wheat and chaff. His words are gentle, but they are powerful as fire. In the process of following this Messiah, we get sorted, all right. But not into us and them. The winnowing shovel is drastically inclusive. It brings an interior sorting that makes us more perceptive and more fruitful. Even if life has pruned us down into little stumps, we have the opportunity to flower again.

We hear the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, makes his paths straight." On this Sunday, we prepare for Jesus' presence at Christmas, but we also prepare for Jesus' presence in the meal of Holy Communion. Let's discard what we don't need to carry to that table. Discard what gets in the way of peace. Then prepare your heart with the image of the peaceable kingdom: God's dream of a healed and healing creation.

As part of that preparation, I offer you this poem by Wendell Berry,

The Peace of Wild Things

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

Amen.