

A Signal to the Peoples  
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**Isaiah 11:1-10**

<sup>1</sup> A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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;

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

**Matthew 3:1-12**

<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ <sup>3</sup>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.”’

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

<sup>7</sup> 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?’ <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>Even now the axe 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.

<sup>11</sup> ‘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. <sup>12</sup>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.’

Nothing conveys the joy of the season quite like chaff being burned with an unquenchable fire, right? A couple of weeks ago, before Advent began, we remembered the crucifixion of Christ as part of our recognition of Christ’s kingship above all, even death. I said then that it served as a great reminder of how remarkable it is that Christ of such great power came as one with no power at all in the form of an infant. Our Advent preparations for the coming of the newborn king aren’t like snuggling up with a copy of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. Our preparations for new life in Christ aren’t the same as preparation for a new life. We can certainly enjoy the warm fuzzies of the season, the joy of giving, the pleasure of being with family and friends in celebration, the welcome time to slow down and reflect. However, the warm fuzzies are not what Advent is about biblically.

What we’re preparing for is a radical newness. We read in Isaiah “A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” This stock is not a full-grown tree which puts out another new branch. Isaiah was a prophet, speaking to a people in exile, a people who had lost hope. This stock is a stump, still firmly rooted in the ground but dead in appearance. To all eyes, its time was done. But wait! A branch, new growth! What once was thought lost forever is found and new hope grows as it grows. God is doing something new, like nothing we could ever imagine, like nothing the world has already seen. God is bringing justice, not judged by what eyes can see and ears can hear, but righteous justice for the poor and equity for the meek. God is bringing peace the likes of which has never been known. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together. The cow and the bear shall graze...and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The powerful are not merely stepping down to meet the powerless but the powerless are rising in power. There will be equity. The most powerless among us – the nursing child and the weaned child – small, defenseless children – will be safe with the powerful snakes, by whose bite they might otherwise die, by whose guile they might otherwise be led astray. The knowledge of the Lord will once again surpass the knowledge of people in our eyes; what God deems to be right and righteous will be understood and acknowledged as greater than what we deem to be right and righteous. In the midst of

this all, when this comes to pass, there will be a sign, a signal, a guide in this newness. We recognize this guide as Christ. The one who shows us the way is showing us justice beyond what our eyes and ears perceive, is showing us righteousness and faithfulness, is showing us by example, is leading us to join him in this newness.

This same Jesus ushers in this same newness in Matthew, as told by John the Baptist. Jesus was and is the fullness of this newness, yet John played his own part. It's easy for us to hear that the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going to John the Baptist in the wilderness, and not bat an eye for we travel all the time for things that interest us, things that speak to us. Not so in that day. Not the Pharisees and Sadducees who stuck close to the temple. Not the merchants and the wealthy and the other city-dwellers. Travel was neither quick nor easy nor pleasant. To choose to travel from a place of comfort to the wilderness to hear speak a poor man, one dressed in camel and eating locusts, was far from the norm. To hear him speak and then choose to confess the ways in which you have not been true to God, to receive a renewal by baptism, was radical.

John knows this, this radical nature of what he is proclaiming, and he knows that what he says and does will seem pedestrian compared to the newness that Christ will usher in. So he says, "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I baptize you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John's message is this: I am here to help you prepare for him. Start turning back toward God now. This is what the powerful one will show us; this is what he will ask of us. To the Pharisees and Sadducees, those who have built their lives on teaching others what God desires, and, as we find out in our reading of the gospels, have focused on the wrong things, have led people astray and away from God, to them John says your confession and baptism are not enough. More will be required, more must change, more must be made right. Changing their ways, repenting, confessing for themselves is not enough. As leaders they have a responsibility to bring others to the same repentance, to set on fire within them the urgency to confess, to seek God in this new way. Not only must they bear good fruit themselves but they must cultivate it again in others.

This Advent, and each Advent, John's call for repentance is upon each of us. John's prescription for preparing for Christ's coming is no different today than it was in the wilderness. Bear good fruit! And lead others to bear good fruit. We may not all be ordained leaders in one form or another, leaders like the Pharisees and Sadducees, but, because we trust in Christ, because he has baptized us with the Holy Spirit and fire, because we follow Christ, we cannot follow Christ in good faith by caring for ourselves alone. What does bearing good fruit for ourselves and for others look like? We come back to Isaiah. We shall not judge by what our eyes see, or decide by what our ears hear. We shall seek justice for the poor, equity for the meek, a balance of power between those who are powerful and those who are

powerless. It is timely that this world has been giving thanks for the life and work of Nelson Mandela this week, for what was his life's work but to bring balance between those who had power and those who were powerless. Will you or I do it in the same way that Nelson Mandela did? Probably not. Does that matter? I don't think so.

We are preparing for God to do something new, to come to us as one of us. But we are also already living in that newness for Christ has come. It is, frankly, a strange time. Does that change how we should behave? No. In fact, we cannot go wrong, for to prepare for Christ's arrival, we seek justice and equity and equality, and to live into the newness that Christ modeled for us, we seek justice and equity and equality. God of creation has done new things and is always doing new things. We, as those who trust in Christ, who follow Christ, understand ourselves to be part of these new things. We look to the signal to the peoples as our guidepost, and we follow his way until the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, until the cow and the bear shall graze, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and children are not at risk and none are hurt or destroyed. We follow until we can say the knowledge of the Lord surpasses our knowledge, what God deems to be right and righteous is greater than what we deem to be right and righteous. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Let us walk in the light of the Lord. Amen.