

Sermon on Matthew 3:1-12
2nd Sunday in Advent, December 4, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today as we gather to prepare for the coming celebration of Jesus' birth, we hear a complicated mixture of messages, bringing warning of the coming fire of the Holy Spirit, the image of a branch coming from a stump – the root of Jesse, John the Baptist's call for people to repent, and the promise of a child, a sign of peace for all nations. That's quite a lot for one morning's sermon, in fifteen minutes or less! But all of these messages from God's prophets work together to form one underlying theme: that out of the burning fires of repentance and cleansing comes a promise of hope, peace, and new life. That's the good news, but we just have to dig a little deeper than usual to find it!

It starts with the prophet Isaiah's words of promise, for "*a shoot that shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*" Jesse was the father of the legendary Israelite king David. This verse from scripture has become a beloved carol, *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*", sung during this Advent season or at Christmas. On Christmas Eve we sweetly sing it as a lullaby to the new born Christ child – but to Isaiah it meant much more!

We don't know to what era the cutting of the vine of Israel comes, to reveal a stump. It could be from many times in Israel's history, when conquering nations like Assyria or Babylon came to bring destruction and exile. But to a community of exiles or a people mourning their desolation, Isaiah proclaimed a vision for the future that would come from God, who would send a Messiah, a descendent from Jesse's line – just as once God had sent them David to be their king. On this one "*the spirit of the Lord shall rest, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*" (Please note how these words are the blessing we use for every person baptized!)

We also hear from Isaiah how this new king will be unlike any other ruler imagined or experienced before! For this one *with righteousness shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth...Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.* (Do you hear in these words hints of John the Baptist, seen by the gospel writers as the forerunner of the Messiah? So he is also in this text – if you look for him there! It probably wasn't Isaiah's intention, centuries before the Baptist or Jesus were born!)

But the real words of hope come from the new era of peace that will come through this root of Jesse, this new king of righteousness and peace:

"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; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and the nursing child shall put its hand on the adder's den." With poetic imagery, Isaiah shares the strange vision of the fearsome symbols of mighty nations: lions and bears, for example, fierce predators coexisting - lying peacefully with the domestic animals - like the cow and the ox. *"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."* And then there is the good news: *"On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign (a signal) to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious."*

Isaiah goes on to say how the Lord will gather the remnant outcasts of the people of Israel from Assyria, from Egypt, from Ethiopia, and other places with strange names to us, and build a highway to bring them home. This was the promise which God laid out for the people of Israel and Judah, through the prophet Isaiah. This promise of a messiah to set exiles free, bring outcasts home, and begin a new era of peace gave God's people hope for the future. What does it do for us? Can we share this vision?

For us who are Christians, we hear today how Matthew's gospel introduces John the Baptist, who appeared as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness", bearing a message of repentance - of turning around our lives - for the coming realm of heaven that is coming near. Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah, in the 40th chapter, who spoke words of comfort to Jerusalem, to people who had suffered greatly, whose time of exile was at an end, and would now be invited home. To Matthew, John the Baptist was *"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."* Of course, Isaiah spoke of a voice calling the exiles of Israel to come home, to prepare a way through the desert from far away places back to Jerusalem. Matthew uses this voice of the Baptist to prepare the way of the Lord - the Messiah of God, who would be Jesus,

John the Baptist's appearance was like that of the ancient prophet Elijah: In 2nd Kings we read Elijah's description: *"a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist."* In that chapter Elijah brought down fire from heaven to consume the prophets of Baal, the rival Caananite god of the God of Israel. (Later, the name of the god *Baal* or *Baalzebub* would become a synonym for prince of evil forces.)

But today Matthew introduces John the Baptist, who wore clothing made from camel's hair, a leather belt around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. (Try sharing *that* dessert recipe over the holidays!) Like Elijah of old, John spoke about God bringing judgment to those who did not repent, like fire from heaven. Matthew tells how people from Jerusalem and Judea came to John in the wilderness of the Jordan to be baptized by him, and confess their sins. But when John saw Pharisees and Sadducees who also came to be baptized, without turning from their sins, he said, so John called them "a brood of vipers!" He said that the ax was lying at the

root of the tree, ready to cut them down just like the root of Jesse once was cut down and thrown into the fire. *“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming...[who] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with 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.”* And then, with the next verse, Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John in the Jordan. But this we will read AFTER Christmas, in January, after an interlude of birth narratives and our celebration of Jesus’ birth. As for now, we are in the midst of preparation, which according to John the Baptist, means repentance of our sins and turning our lives toward God.

So what does this message of repentance, judgment, promise and good news mean to you and me today, many centuries after the words were first spoken? For the fires that burn and destroy still come, not from God in judgment, but as the consequences for the sins of people who have hatred, greed, and the lust for power boiling in our blood. Of course, it is tempting for us to call forth fires of judgment upon others for the evil of *their* sins – but that would not be the truth. We all have these sins within us, which in our best moments may be overcome with love, compassion, and mercy from our faith in God.

We know the fires that rain down today on the people of Syria, like fire from heaven in the bombs that drop on hospitals, schools and homes, killing children, women and men who now are fleeing for their lives. Like the prophet Jeremiah, who wept for Jerusalem as the city was destroyed, we lament for the people of Syria, and Aleppo, today. *“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician here? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?”* (Jer. 8)

We see the gun violence that continues in our own nation’s cities, the innocent injured or killed in the crossfire between gangs of young men, the black men who are killed by police and the police who are murdered by those with a twisted view of revenge or retribution, and the children who die because guns are kept unsecured in their homes. We witness the consequences of poverty and white privilege for the many people who are left poor in our nation’s cities and on reservations, without clean water or whose water source is threatened – and the lack of justice which we have overlooked or felt powerless to change for generations. And now we have millions of undocumented immigrants, our neighbors, living in fear across this country, because of hateful words spoken during the past election year – warning of mass arrests and deportations even for those who have been building our homes, cleaning our hotels, and preparing our food for generations. We have plentiful sins to confess and lifetimes of errors to repent – which can become an overwhelming burden, leaving us immobilized by despair. Where is the good news in that? So as individuals, you and I should focus on one thing in our lives for which we need to

repent, and ask God for the strength to change. As a people, and a church, the work is much more complicated.

But thankfully, John the Baptist is a bringer of good news, not just gloom and doom! His message of repentance is not a threat, just the truth of the consequences we have brought on ourselves – with an invitation to change – to repent – to turn our lives around and follow the one who brings us hope and new life forever! It's like an intervention – when an addict is confronted by a circle of loving family, friends or colleagues, he or she may not like it and resist, but the intervention is an invitation to live a new life! Getting there may be painful, but there is life in the end – like a light at the end of a tunnel! The ax that John the Baptist says is lying near the tree cuts down or prunes the branches, not to kill the tree, but to give it new life through new shoots, branches and stems.

And so it is with us, in the promise offered you and me today. Our nation is in great need of an intervention, or at least, a heart transplant. We are all in need of repentance, to turn our hearts around to compassion and justice for all, and I think that God is calling people of faith to take the lead. So we, and many people of faith, can stand with water protectors at Standing Rock, to claim the rights of native people to have a voice in their future, to save the purity of their drinking water, against corporations and a state that seeks profit over all else. We also can stand with immigrants for their right to live here with us as neighbors and friends, just as our grandparents did, even if our broken immigration system fails to grant them legal status. But we can speak on their behalf, and offer to open our doors for sanctuary to families who are threatened with deportation. This is a long standing tradition of the church, to offer sanctuary and safety to refugees, immigrants and travelers, just like the Mary and Joseph found shelter for the baby Jesus in a barn with a manger, when there was no room for them in the inn.

So the repentance we are offered is in the new course of peace, unity and welcome we can take in a divided, violent world. We hear it in the words of Paul to the Romans – the Jewish community of Christians who lived as immigrants and exiles in Rome. When Gentiles and Jews understandably lived in distrust and misunderstanding, the apostle Paul gave a reason to hope. He prayed: *“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus...Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God....and again as Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles,[the nations] shall hope. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believe, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.’”* Amen.

And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.