

The Peaceable Kingdom
Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3:1-12
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Second Sunday of Advent
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Some of you know (or will recognize) the name William Willimon. He's a bishop in the Methodist Church in the U.S., and for 15 years he was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, also in the U.S.

You might be interested to know, by the way, that Luke Powery, who was once an intern here at IPC, in the days before IPC called its first associate pastor – Luke Powery is now the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University.

In any case, Willimon is retired now, and occasionally he reflects on his ministry in his personal blog, and this week I was interested to see what he wrote. His sermons during Advent all those years ago at Duke Chapel, he said, often drew negative responses.

Overall his preaching was very well received and over a thousand people would gather each week to hear him preach, including my brother-in-law and sister-in-law who lived near the chapel, but during this one season of the year, people were not impressed.

And he remembers one person in particular saying to him, **“Will, isn't this supposed to be one the most joyous season in the Christian year? Then why are you reminding us of God's judgment? Why are you gloomy?”**

And that little story struck me, I think, because our New Testament reading for today – this story I am going to read about John the Baptist announcing the coming of the Savior of the world – is also kind of gloomy.

Actually, not “kind of” gloomy at all.

John the Baptist, as Matthew describes him here, is scary. And here's the thing: he means to be scary. He's trying hard to be scary.

John the Baptist always turns up in Bible readings at this time of year – although he never turns up in children's Christmas pageants, have you noticed? – but he turns up in Bible readings at this time of year because his job, the purpose of his life, was to announce the coming of the Christ.

And that was good news, of course, obviously, but it was also news of judgment. The Christ that John the Baptist was imagining was going to come into the world with a winnowing fork in his hand. He was going to come along and separate the wheat from the chaff. And the chaff would be going into an unquenchable fire.

You don't want to say something like that, I suppose, at a children's Christmas pageant. In fact, those are not the words that we want to hear at this time of year – am I right? – but they are Christmas themes. This is what it means that a Savior will come among us, that a light will shine in the darkness, that a baby will be born who will save his people from their sins.

You know, in some ways, this is a message for mature audiences.

But – oh my – the world is desperate to hear this message. We think we want the twinkling lights of Christmas, and the smell of *Gluhwein* in the Christmas markets – and don't get me wrong, I like the smell of that myself at this time of year – but what the Bible presents to us is the truth, the uncomfortable truth, the inconvenient truth, the truth that we protect our children from hearing.

Let's listen to this story together, as we find it in Matthew's gospel. I want to focus my sermon today on those words we heard from Isaiah, but as we'll see these two readings are closely tied together. Let's listen for God's word as find it here in Matthew 3:

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”³ 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.’”**

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

⁷But 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? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do 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. ¹⁰Even 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.

¹¹“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. ¹²His 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.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

In the 19th century there was a pastor – a Quaker pastor – with the name Edward Hicks, and you may not immediately recognize that name, but you may have seen one or more of his paintings.

Hicks was called to serve his first church in 1812, and he quickly ran into financial difficulties. He and his wife had five children, which may have been a factor in their financial difficulties, and the church could not pay him enough to cover his most basic living expenses, so to support his family he began to paint.

And one of his favorite paintings was the scene described by Isaiah in chapter 11, the one you heard earlier, where **“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.”**

Hicks painted that scene – which he called “the peaceable kingdom” – more than a hundred times over course of his life, so the chances are actually quite good that you’ve seen one of them, a print maybe. These paintings hang in pastors’ offices and Sunday school classrooms and even in some museums around the world.

And even though Hicks came back to this scene from Isaiah again and again throughout his life, one thing about his paintings never changed: the eyes of the animals are unusually big, they are wide open. Someone has said that the animals look surprised or astonished. And that seems to have been Hicks’ intent.

This is not something you see every day. Animals do not behave in this way, and so even they are surprised.

The American comedian Woody Allen – a few of you may have remembered this before I mentioned it – Woody Allen once said that when the calf and the lion lie down together, the calf doesn’t get much sleep.

And it’s funny line, in a way, because what Isaiah is prophesying here is beyond anything his readers dare to imagine. There is within every human heart a longing for peace – peace within ourselves, peace with those who are close to us, and peace in the world around us – but here’s the thing: we don’t imagine that we’ll ever see it. We despair that we will ever live long enough to experience it.

By the time Isaiah wrote, the great kingdom built by David, and then expanded by his son Solomon, had deteriorated and crumbled. There wasn’t much left of it, and times were grim. Foreign armies were ready to march on what was left of the country.

And then it was Isaiah who asked us to imagine a scene of devastation. The armies have burned and destroyed everything. Trees in his imagination have all been cut down. Nothing of any worth is left.

But then you look closely, he writes, and there is a stump which looks dead like all the rest, but a green shoot or a sprout is growing out of it. A living thing. And that shoot, he writes, will one day bear fruit.

Sam reminded us last week that Isaiah is different from what we might expect. It’s a book that is filled with words of condemnation and judgment. We do our best to avoid all of those chapters, of course, but the truth is that Isaiah contains a great deal of judgment.

Read the first chapter sometime. God says there, among other things, that he hates our “solemn assemblies.” Our offerings are “an abomination” to him. You read that chapter, and you come to the conclusion that God is sick and tired of us, his people.

But then, in the middle of all of this gloom and despair, we find these brief and unexpected passages of soaring beauty and hope. I think you know them because those are the ones we always turn to.

Chapter 7: "...therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." *Wow, we didn't expect that.*

Chapter 9: "The people who walked in darkness – *that's us!* – have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – *yes, that's us!* – on them light has shined."

Chapter 35: "...waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.... A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray."

And one more ... Chapter 40: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"

Tell me, what do you make of this? Seriously. How do you explain a book like Isaiah?

You know, Isaiah was (and in some ways still is) one of the most popular books of the Bible. Along with the Psalms, it was the one book of the Bible that was preserved in caves at Qumran along the Dead Sea, forgotten and undisturbed for nearly 2,000 years.

What book were they studying and drawing comfort from, as the Roman armies were heading in their direction?

Well, it was Isaiah. For them this book described their lives like no other.

And I think it describes ours too. Maybe, like my friend Will Willimon, I am being too gloomy. Maybe you were hoping for something to make you feel good today. Only the good parts, none of the bad.

But sorry. That's not how the story was written. And it would be dishonest of me to present the gospel in a different way. The gospel comes to a world that looks very nearly defeated. And if it didn't, then that gospel wouldn't sound like good news.

This is what I want to leave with you today, a mysterious dimension to our faith – the hope we have, always in the middle of the judgment; the light we see, always in a world of darkness.

I have a colleague – we serve together on the same board – who is one of the leading worship scholars in the world today, and my hope has been to bring him here to teach and preach. (We have not been able to work it out.) His name is John Witvliet, and ten or 12 years ago he noticed what I've been describing this morning – namely, that believers like to read from Isaiah at this time of year, but only certain chapters. The English idiom for this, by the way, “cherry picking.”

You can blame it on the composer Handel, and his magnificent work *Messiah*, but we all do it.

And so, my friend John wrote a scholarly account of what he called the “pretty texts” of Isaiah.

And what he recommends is that we look at Isaiah the way we look at a Rembrandt painting: **“vast stretches of darkness, and shadows, and judgement [these are his words]...dramatically punctuated by shafts of light and grace.”**

In fact – this is my amateur observation, since I am not an art historian – the darkness of those Rembrandt paintings – and maybe the paintings have become even darker with age – but the darkness makes the light seem all the more dramatic and stunning. Don't you agree?

You see a collar, or some hair, maybe a face, and it looks as bright as the sun at noon precisely because it is surrounded by so much darkness.

Look, I think that's the way God comes to us. That was the way he came to us in Bethlehem, and that is the way he comes to us today. It's always a light shining in the darkness, and unless we see the darkness, unless we acknowledge its presence around us, we can't really appreciate the light.

As you know, there is no scholarly agreement on when, exactly, Jesus was born. It seems unlikely that Jesus was born in December because sheep would not have been grazing in the open air at that time of year. They did that in the spring, but not in December.

And frankly, the exact date of Jesus' birth doesn't matter, but early on, certainly by the fourth century A.D., Christians began to celebrate the birth of Jesus in December – at one of the darkest and gloomiest times of the year.

I suppose that there were lots of reasons for that, and all of the historians here could probably fill in the details, with stories about pagan holidays, but I have a guess as to why this month feels right for celebrating the arrival of the Savior of the world, and my guess is guided more by spiritual insight than by historical records.

It feels right to talk about God's arrival when things around us are getting darker and darker, colder and colder, when days are getting shorter and shorter. It even feels right that God should come among us when we are distracted by all of decorations and smells that are associated with this time of year.

Deep within we know that all that glitters is not gold.

Deep within we know that God is not to be found in the lights and the Christmas markets and the Christmas sweaters and brightly-wrapped presents.

So, Christians began celebrating at this time of year because we know, in our heart of hearts, that darkness will never overcome the light, that cold will never overwhelm God's warmth, that hatred will never prevail over love, that repression will never triumph over freedom, that the armies of this world (no matter how sophisticated their weapons have become) will never have the last word.

At the darkest, coldest, shortest, most miserable time of the year, it is Christian people, people who always defy the popular wisdom, who stand and sing – what? – **“Joy to the World.”**

And why? Because we know something that the rest of the world does not know. A baby has been born. And that baby grew to be the man – the Son of Man, as he liked to say – a man who would show us a different way to live.

That man of course is Jesus, light of the world, savior of his people, the one who invites you now to surrender your life and your stubborn will to him.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come.

Let earth receive her King

Let every heart

Prepare Him room

And heaven and nature sing

And heaven and nature sing.