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Advent 2 Series A 2016

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Second Sunday in Advent, Dec 4

We light that second candle of the advent wreath this week. The light of the world draws a little closer, the light gets a little brighter. This is a good thing. This tired old world in which we live seems to be creaking along toward its final end. The Syrian civil war grinds on and as it does it grinds up people. The North Koreans and Iranians play dangerous international games with nuclear bombs as chess pieces, the polar caps are still melting, and there are thousands of U.S. servicemen and women hunkering down for the winter in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not much has changed this Advent from last Advent.

But we don't really know the half of it. The texts today point us to a faith in a coming Christ whose kingdom doesn't really meet our expectations. Last week we heard Isaiah speak of a world in which no one learned the craft of war. Such a world, in which violence is unknown, sounds like a good place to us, especially if there are young men and women from our congregations and families who are overseas. It is such a universal dream that the UN has put it on the front of their building. But today, Isaiah gets odd. He envisions a ruler who alternates between comfort and terrible. He judges on behalf of the poor and meek, with righteousness and justice, but his breathe slays and his word destroys. Do I really want this guy?

Then, Isaiah seems to jump right off the edge of sanity. The wolf and the lamb lie down together in this king's realm. The lion eats straw like an ox; the child plays over the adder's nest and is unharmed. This is not even what I am expecting. I just want the wars to stop, I want to live my life in peace, I want the world largely to stay the same, but I want the creeps and the criminals to be taken care of, so I can... what? So I can do what? Go on a peaceful safari to watch the lions eat the gazelles? I normally define peace by the absence of the negative things, but do I really even have the ability to talk about what would take conflict's place?

Isaiah is given by God to see that the problems which afflict this world and its inhabitants are not just a few bad apples. This world is fundamentally broken. Even the things we think are normal, the things we might even think are beautiful, the sleek cheetah racing across the plains of the Serengeti, even that, are not the way they are supposed to be. They are not the way God made them to be.

Ultimately this boils down to me. I may have a rather constricted view of my life and really just want to be left alone, but God loves me and will not leave me like this. I may be happy enough with things the way they are, but God knows that an eternity of being like me is hellish. My coping skills are just not that good. The whole universe needs to be renewed, not just the things that irritate me. Isaiah notices that the diet of lions and the very relationship between the species of animals will need to be renewed.

This puts a little different cast on the preaching of John the Baptist today. He is the fiery-eyed preacher of repentance and he declares that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, the very kingdom which Isaiah saw, but what then does repentance mean? I think we have so often understood

repentance in a purely moral sense that we have rather lost sight of what he had in mind for our repentance. God is just as grieved by the brokenness of the world, its predations and problems, as it is by my moral failings. His gracious and loving response to my naughtiness is mirrored by God's response to my weariness, illness, or struggles. In the same way sent his Son to die for the whole world. We heard that reading just a few months ago (Pentecost 9, July 17 for those of you who keep track of such things), in which Paul tells us that Jesus shed his blood to reconcile the whole creation to himself.

Collect of the Day

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds, through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Like many of these Collects, it is often much easier if I don't think too much about them. This one has always disturbed me. I don't know about you, but when my heart is stirred up, that is usually not one of my better days. That is usually a day when I am frightened, confused, challenged, or even hurt. What are we praying for here? A heart that is stirred up is beating fast. Those who study such things tell us that our stress system kicks in and we are essentially still running from some wild beast like our parents long ago may have had to run. Stress is not a good thing for most us.

Of course there are other ways that a heart gets stirred up, aren't there? My heart can race and flutter with love as well. Does your heart still "flip" when you see your bride? Is this the sort of stirring up that the prayer has in mind? Is that just another form of stress? For the chronically shy, love can be a pretty painful experience, if Garrison Keillor is to be believed.

Does this stirring mean that we are able to see/feel something that a complacent heart simply doesn't see/feel? The opposite of love is not hate, but apathy. We almost have to love the person we hate, or at least care about them and what they do. The real opposite of "I love you" is always, "I don't care."

Is a stirred up heart more open to something? Is it out of the "rut" of normal experience and suddenly able to experience and perceive the world differently? Is this a prayer really to wake up from complacency so that we are ready to receive this coming king? Do we need to be shaken up/woken up?

We pray for our hearts to be stirred up to make ready the way of God's only Son. The first Christians were called "followers of the Way" before the folks in Antioch coined the term "Christian." Of course that way has already been blazed when he died, and the preparation for the judgment all happened when our sins were paid for. How do we make ready for him? Why does that take a stirred up heart? The result of the prayer is most interesting. We make ready so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve God with a pure mind. I thought we were talking about hearts here? Somehow the authors of the prayer have connected heart and mind and

noticed that the heart stirred up and prepared for the coming of Christ renders the mind pure. How does that happen and what does it look and feel like when it does? If someone were to ask me, what description of that would I give? I usually think of a heart that is pure and mind that is stirred up, but that is simply my modern way of thinking asserting itself, imagining that my heart somehow obeys the master which is my mind. But that is just bad psychology which has been appropriated by the world around us and too often by us. Our minds are not the masters here, often it is our hearts and what is really odd, often it is whom we serve and that very service which is the determining factor of both our minds and our hearts. We are acculturated by what we do much more than what we feel or think. If you want to read something along these lines, I recommend Augustine's "Confessions." If you would like a more modern take on this, I commend to you the works of James K. A. Smith, a professor of philosophy and religion at Calvin College in Michigan. His latest is "You Are What You Love" and I recommend it.

Another way to phrase this is that the way/path which is ready for Jesus is an attitude of the heart. This Christ – way is shaped by him. He treated all the same, rich and poor, sinner and church goer, they were all loved by him and all ate together when he fed the multitudes. His way was marked by gracious love for all in meeting their needs. The early Christians who followed the Way practiced radical hospitality, a spirit filled prayer life which was marked by an eager expectation for Jesus to come today. Did they see every guest as a foretaste of Christ?

Some years ago when we thought about this prayer we remembered an incident in which one of us had a near accident. A fellow driver ran a red light and nearly hit this fellow at an intersection. The following intersections were surely approached with a great deal of caution all the way home. We get a little complacent when we have gone through an intersection 1000 times without an incident. But after our heart has been stirred up by a near miss, we find our senses and minds are much more focused than they were before.

But we still need to ask what is meant by making ready the way of Jesus? How does one prepare for that day? Is it the last day or is it every day? That is a false choice. We have often said in these little essays that the person prepared is the one who is about their Christian duty when Jesus arrives. Jesus is now and not yet here. Advent focuses us on the 'not yet' of Jesus, that we cannot see him with our physical eyes, but it does not forget the actuality of his presence right now. He has arrived and he will arrive. Thus, it is not the extraordinary we are called to be, but the loving, caring and Christian parents of our children, spouse, citizen, church member, etc. That is the person who is prepared for the last day, the person who is living Christ now.

Yet, there is also an extra-ordinary call extended to the Christian. The fallen world is fundamentally at odds with this returning Lord. At times we are called upon to struggle against it, both as it manifests within our own lives through repentance and as it manifests in the world around us. Can we really sit idly by while people starve and die? Can we cluck our tongues at the 12 million who died in the Nazi holocaust and be silent about the 40+ million children who have been legally aborted since Roe V. Wade? That example is just too easy. Perhaps closer to

home, do we actually engage as congregations in the community around us? Do we corporately do anything to try to make our public schools better? Do we fight the problems that are in our own neighborhoods? Do we befriend the little, least, and lost in our neighborhood? Do we have a care for the folks who are in critical need? Are there lonely people in the nursing home down the street while our congregational fellowship is rich? Do our hearts need to be stirred up so we can serve God with minds focused on his kingdom and His goals? He fed the hungry, he healed the sick, he comforted the grieving and the sinners regardless of their denominational affiliation or even if they had ever gone to Church. Are we called upon to a corporate confession of our self-centeredness? Do we pray here for this sort of stirring? Is this the sort of stirring that our congregations need? What if it is?

I think that as I consider my own ministry among the people of God, we too often have thought about these texts in terms of the individual. The scholarly term for that is “existentially” but too often that just means self-centered. Is it time to ask how we corporately, congregationally repent? My prior parish shared a long fence with a really troubled middle school. I don’t know that the students of that school were especially glad to have us there. I think for most of them, we were simply another building next to the one they called “school” and hated with a passion. How could we have supported the teachers, the students, the parents of that school? How could we have made a difference for them, instead of wondering how we were going to continue the ministry which struggled to attract folks in that town?

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Isaiah 11:1-10

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

² And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,

⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

⁶ The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,

and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.

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

⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.

⁹ They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰ In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

¹¹ *In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.*

¹² *He will raise a signal for the nations
and will assemble the banished of Israel,
and gather the dispersed of Judah
from the four corners of the earth.*

¹³ *The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart,
and those who harass Judah shall be cut off;
Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah,
and Judah shall not harass Ephraim.*

¹⁴ *But they shall swoop down on the shoulder of the Philistines in the west,
and together they shall plunder the people of the east.
They shall put out their hand against Edom and Moab,
and the Ammonites shall obey them.*

¹⁵ *And the LORD will utterly destroy
the tongue of the Sea of Egypt,
and will wave his hand over the River
with his scorching breath,
and strike it into seven channels,
and he will lead people across in sandals.*

¹⁶ *And there will be a highway from Assyria
for the remnant that remains of his people,
as there was for Israel
when they came up from the land of Egypt.*

We thought that if we had preached the “Dressed” theme from last week, we could continue this week with the idea of what Jesus wears. Isaiah tells us he is girt with righteousness and faithfulness. His words have power and even nature itself must obey him, a hint of which we get in the calming of the storm and the cursing of the fig tree.

I have included the entire chapter here because I think the readings are prone to be cherry picked out of their context. The God whom Isaiah proclaimed was not entirely safe. Yes, the news in the first part is good, but what about the Philistines, Egyptians, Chaldeans, Moabites, and Edomites in vss.14ff. It is important to remember that this is the God whom John preached in the Gospel lesson. Just because we don’t like to think about this element of revelation does not mean we can ignore it, especially the preachers.

When we turn our attention to the actual text we will read we find a very familiar passage to anyone who has attended Church, especially at Christmas time. The promise made here seems to be almost an outline of the description of Jesus which the Gospel writers portray. Indeed, some have suggested that the Gospel writers actually have Isaiah in mind as they paint the picture of Christ that you and I know.

But of course, not all of this shows up in our picture of Christ. The only wicked he seems to have slain with his breath were exorcised demons and a fig tree that did not produce in a timely way. And we are still waiting for the peace to obtain between all the animals. The earth still is not full of the knowledge of the Lord as waters cover the sea.

For the people of Isaiah’s day, this was all part of a process. As their fortunes declined in the 8th and 7th centuries BC, they were increasingly looking to their own roots and to the covenant which God had made with Moses. The hard times were beginning to have their salutary effect, repentance was in the air. This would not come to its end until the trials of the Exile would purge the Baal impulse from the Jewish people once and for all, but it clearly was starting before that. Yet, as they looked back, they began to wonder where the miracle working God of old was? Where were the Moses and Joshua characters? Where were the pillar of fire and the pillar cloud and the clarity provided by a pursuing Pharaoh and the open way between the waters of the Red Sea? They apparently did not remember the fact that their parents in the wilderness spent a great deal of time complaining and struggling too.

One of the answers to which the prophets directed the people was an expectation of a great deliverer to come, a true son of David who would lead the people. Isaiah paints this son of David, this root from Jesse’s branch, he shows us a king whose reign has cosmic consequence. We call this expectation the “Messianic Expectation” and it really first appears in Isaiah’s writings, and some of his contemporaries among the prophets. They are looking for a son of David to arise who will change everything.

We of course name that son of David, Jesus. But we also look forward to that cosmically significant rule. We have not yet tasted all the fruit of this realm, but we have only seen it in part.

Advent will focus our attention on those parts that are missing. We know something of the peace between Christians which passes understanding, but we also look forward to that peace being universally recognized and observed, so that even the animals and nature itself are profoundly altered. I have no idea how a lion is going to get by eating straw like an ox. A simply look at his teeth suggests that God will have some serious remodeling to do. But is it just possible that Jesus even died for the stuff we call natural? Did he die for the predation which we consider normal?

This text raises some very interesting questions that way. So much of this world is going to pass away. Even things we cherish as beautiful and natural and good are all tainted by the brokenness of sin. If even death is undone, does that apply to the whole of creation? What are we repenting of, or perhaps better said, what evils are we expecting Christ to repair on the last day? Will we even recognize the world that he has restored?

Psalm 72:1-7

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal son!

² May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice!

³ Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!

⁴ May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor!

⁵ May they fear you while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations!

⁶ May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth!

⁷ In his days may the righteous flourish,
and peace abound, till the moon be no more!

⁸ *May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth!*

⁹ *May desert tribes bow down before him,
and his enemies lick the dust!*

¹⁰ *May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands
render him tribute;*

*may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts!*

¹¹ *May all kings fall down before him,
all nations serve him!*

Again, the whole psalm, not just the excised verses, is here for you. The same issue applies here as it does in the OT lesson. God has a universal goal in mind. We need to read the sweet news of the reading in light of its larger context. Yes, he wants to help the poor and needy in vs. 4, but this involves the submission of kings and desert tribes, even those long bearded and wild-eyed types from the “ungoverned” tribal areas of Pakistan.

What makes the Psalm so interesting for me are the “May...” phrases in here. The king, the earthly ruler is prayed for that he may resemble the heavenly one. There is no need to pray that God be like all these things, but we pray for the man in charge now to be a little like that. And we pray for the day that the rightful king of the world exercises his dominion. The psalm has a wonderful here and now and eschatological sense to it that way.

Romans 15:4-13

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³ For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”

⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

⁸ For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

*“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,
and sing to your name.”*

¹⁰ And again it is said,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”

¹¹ And again,

*“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples extol him.”*

¹² And again Isaiah says,

*“The root of Jesse will come,
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;
in him will the Gentiles hope.”*

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

This marvelous ending to this section in Romans is quite appropriate for the day. Like the Psalmist and Isaiah, it revels in the now and the not yet of our existence. Paul wrote these words to a community he never visited. He wants them to support him on a missionary journey to Spain, but before he can ask them to be his sending congregation he needs to let them know what he teaches. Perhaps there is some misinformation out there or perhaps this is best understood as the case narrative for a grant request. In any event, Paul speaks of some things generally in this last section of Romans, not about the congregation specifically but about all congregations. He is writing these words as he sails for Jerusalem with the offering for the saints there at the end of his third missionary journey. He has just toured through Galatia, Corinth, Ephesus, and the rest of his congregations and undoubtedly seen many problems similar to what he found in Corinth. As a case study for what his Gospel means, he chooses to discuss the new relationship that now obtains between the Jew and the Gentile.

These words are the conclusion of that lengthy section which really began several chapters before. Paul prays that they would sing together with one voice in praise of the God who has saved them all. It is ordained in Scripture and Paul earnestly prays for it. It is a real and attainable goal for them; indeed most of the churches are filled with Gentile Christians.

And then the last verse is really sweet: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope.” You could do a whole sermon just on that one little verse and it would be a great Advent sermon for this second Sunday of Advent. This Hope is integral to the whole season. The God of hope fills us with joy and peace as we wait on the Lord. That waiting is always abounding in Hope, we are looking for good things to come, perhaps unrecognizable as Isaiah sees it, but good things to come. We hope for it! We probably need to do a little education on the word hope here. The Greek “elpis” was much stronger than many use the word today. “I hope my friend comes to see me today” almost implies an expectation that he won’t. In Greek, the word is much stronger than that. Hope implies that you really expect this to happen, it just hasn’t yet. I rather like to think of it as working all week, and, upon the promise of the employer, “hoping” that he will pay you. We would much more likely use the word “expect” for that sort of situation. However, “may the God of Expectation fill you with all expectation” just doesn’t cut it for Sunday morning reading, does it?

My friend Herb Hoefer talks about the Christians in India, he says that you can tell that they have hope. You can see in them as walk down the street, they simply smile, walk with confidence, they have hope. What does hope do for us that Paul wants us to be filled with it? Despair shuts the door, and hope is the window that lets the light into our lives. Hope, while not tangible, is potent. They cannot get a grasp on it and rip it from us, but it frustrates our enemies no end.

Faith hopes. It is one of the things that faith does. Negro spirituals were written by folks who had nothing, were being crushed under their burdens, and they had hope. The last verse of our reading tells us that the God of hope fills us with joy and peace in believing, so that in the power of the Holy Spirit we abound in hope. The joy and the peace lead us right back to the hope, our

God is a God of hope. Hope trumps joy and peace, it gives them to us, but even when joy and peace are impossible, or seemingly impossible, hope abides. It is the bedrock thing that faith, the relationship we have with God, does. Paul speaks about perseverance/endurance earlier in this passage. The hopeful are indomitable. Torturers and oppressors are always seeking to crush a person's hope. When they have done that, they have won, but it is exceedingly hard to do, and the smallest glimmer of contrary news will bring hope roaring right back. Whether the oppressor is cancer or some jailer, hope is really resilient.

We might also be attracted to the “welcome one another” exhortation in vs. 8 and the exhortation to love one another and get along with each other. This seems to be picking up on the prayer of the day that our stirred up hearts would make ready the way of Christ. This could be a very practical sermon. But in order for this to work, we need to proclaim the one who gives the hope which is the engine that drives that radically re-imagined life that Paul sees here. He prays in the last verse that the God of encouragement would give them his gifts in order to overflow their hearts/lives with hope. If we just proclaim the way of the new life without proclaiming that gift of God, then we are no different than any moralizing religion. All religions encourage me to live a better life. But Christ gives me something which enables me to live that life.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”

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

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to 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 he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John the Baptist is the last of the Old Testament prophets and the central figure of this season. He prepares the way for Christ with fiery sermons calling for repentance. Looking like the popular image of Elijah, he walks out of the desert and into the imagination of people and strikes terror into their hearts and they flock to him. He baptizes Jews, which is different. Normally the Jews only baptized the proselytized gentile as an entrance rite, in addition to circumcision.

The language of John shocks us. Doesn't John realize that these guys are not going to pick up their box of envelopes if he talks to them this way? He almost sounds like he doesn't want them to come to him? Of course, while it sounds off-putting, the reality is that this sort of speech has a strange effect upon people. Fire and brimstone preachers are often hugely successful.

To whom is he really speaking here? Is his audience the folks who are standing at his side? Are they cheering for this wild man who excoriates the religious leaders? Is this more like a demagogue who stirs up the crowds by railing against the 1% who run the banks and corporations? If not, what about the rest of the folks there? If these guys get this sort of reception, what about the poor tax collectors?

I also think it is important here to remember Matthew's audience. The Jewish Christian audience he was writing to were being persecuted by the Pharisees. Is Matthew simply noticing that they have been problematic for the people of God for a long time? Is he really telling his original audience that these guys were at odds with the OT prophets too?

He notes the Pharisees and Sadducees coming and enjoins them to works which are keeping with repentance. But notice, it does not say he does not baptize them. If they heard his word and accepted it, did he receive them too? He calls them to a genuine repentance, not some ritual which depends upon their relationship to Abraham. Children for Abraham are easy, but creating living hearts from the stony hearts of impenitent people is a harder thing.

Does this resonate a little with the Isaiah text this way? We have a hard time imagining that God could really use/save me if I honestly tell him what a mess I have made of my life? But God has much more imagination than I do. He can raise up a child for Abraham from a stone! He makes us into the living stones in which his Spirit dwells (I Peter 2:5 and Eph 2:19ff) Is the Gospel of this text to be found right there, in the heart of this accusation uttered by John?

The axe is laid to the root of the tree, the judgment is about to fall. John portrays the one who follows him in vivid terms. This one who comes will make John look like an amateur. The ancient rules which governed the relationship of a rabbi to a disciple said that the Rabbi could do many things, but he could not ask a disciple to tie his sandals or carry them for him. John is not even worthy of being a disciple of this one who is to come. (This phrase may be here because the earliest Christians, including Matthew's audience, were competing with a John movement. Of course, that movement has pretty well died out today.)

Yet the picture John paints is not the experience that we seem to have of Jesus. He does baptize us with the Holy Spirit's fire in baptism, but the whole axe to the root and the unquenchable fire

things are not what we see in the gentle Lord who healed the sick and fed the hungry and humbly died on Calvary's tree. Did John get it wrong, or like many of the OT prophets do we need to remember that John sees both comings at once and rarely sorts them for us? Do we need to remind ourselves and our congregations that John may not be talking about the first coming as much as he refers to the second coming of Christ?

Another way to look at this is to use Luther's language for Baptism. He insisted that it was essentially a murder. The axe laid to the root of our old sinful man may be the gentle waters of our Baptism. God has declared war on the sin and sinner alike. He has brought his mighty power to bear in crushing the sinner that the new man be revealed.

It would seem the great question for the preacher of the Gospel lesson today is to what extent is the call to repent needful today? Where must we repent? I think we all agree that repentance is a good thing. The Church is always in need of repentance and reformation. But of what must we repent today? Repenting of the sins of our fathers does not seem like such a good thing; although, there is a recent tradition of repenting for the abuses of slavery, for the holocaust or even the more distant sin of the crusades. But Billy Graham used to say that God has no grandchildren, only children. God is much more interested in hearing us confess our own sins, and not the sins of someone else.

How does John's call to repent strike us? The common folk of John's day simply did it. They found their way to the Jordan and were received. The leaders, the churchly types are the ones who come in for the sharpest words, but we may not know what John said to others. Are our deeds not in keeping with repentance? If so, how so? Any good ideas? Isaiah has directed us to the much more general sins of a whole world that is gone amok. John seems to direct toward the more personal sins of our own moral failings. Paul speaks of the now/not yet of a perfect community that seems out of reach for us. The forgiveness has been given, how do we live that out? How do we realize that perfect communion among ourselves? Even if we cannot attain it, how do we actually strive to get there? How have we failed to get there?

It is only when we know what is forgiven that the sweet Gospel comes here. The broken creation is restored. The God of Hope infuses the community with His Spirit and His love and His joy. The one whom John expected has indeed come in grace and mercy, not with fire and brimstone and axe, at least not yet, but he has come in graciousness to receive every broken heart, to die my death, and feel my pain, and redeem my life from the pit. Yes, he comes again to judge the world, but my judgment is no longer in doubt.

John preaches a baptism for repentance. He warns the religious leaders of his day that this has to be more than simply lip service. His baptism is only precursor to that which follows. That baptism of Spirit and fire will have great consequence, the wheat will be gathered, the chaff unquenchably burned. Do we have to be careful here of equating our baptism with John's? Is not our baptism a baptism for the forgiveness of sins, not the repentance of sins? Yes, Baptism always includes repentance, but was John's actually a sacramental act that bestowed

forgiveness? Or did he have to wait for the baptism which followed his, the baptism which Jesus instituted?

Law and Gospel

1. The world can bite me hard sometimes. Whether it is the news that some friend has contracted cancer, lost a job, or is getting a divorce, or if the sorrow is much more general: the environment, the economy, the state of affairs, etc., there are lots of reasons to be discouraged about what I see. But God sees something else, a bright and beautiful future in which the king rules in justice and peace, there is no corruption or favoritism.
2. But what about that world which does not directly make me suffer? How do I even know the way things are supposed to be? What is normal? What is the way that God made this world and intended it to be? What if I have simply grown so familiar with the wrong stuff I don't even know what the problem is? Isaiah and Paul see radically transformed futures in which the very processes of predation are no more and ancient enmities are undone.
3. This all sounds rather painful. The king in Isaiah slays the wicked with his breath. I am not so sure I am looking forward to that. John the Baptist speaks of a winnowing fork and a great division between wheat and chaff. That sounds frightening. How will I get my house in order for this coming king? But Isaiah and Paul both speak of a root of Jesse, an ancient ruler who returns. This Jesus who comes works the transformation of his sacrifice and blood, a transformation he has already begun in us and will bring to completion on that day.
4. Now that we have that settled, I guess I can kick back and enjoy the ride at this point. After all, I am a Lutheran, I understand all this grace stuff – wrong! John preaches against such complacency. God can raise up children of Luther from the stones too. Living relationship takes time and effort, but John and Isaiah and Paul also speak of God's great effort on our behalf to build and maintain that relationship. Isaiah's and John's very presence as prophets is a testament to the love God has for his rebellious people.

Sermon Ideas

1. Abounding in Hope (From the Epistle Reading: That God would fill the hearer with a living hope/expectation for the kingdom of God which bears great fruit in our lives.)
¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.
 - a. The God of Hope fills us with all joy in faith Hope leads to Joy – we can think outside the gloomy box in which sin has trapped us: cancer, unemployment, marital discord, the problems of life. They don't define our lives, Christ does through that relationship we call faith. Isaiah has shown us that this world is far

more broken than we even imagined. We might find that we have grown quite accustomed to sin and its consequences. God has not. He gives us a hope which we might not have even realized we needed, and that gives us joy. Wouldn't it be fun to pet a lion? Safely! (Don't do it like the Las Vegas entertainer Horn and his tiger!)

- b. The God of Hope fills us with all peace in faith. Hope leads us to peace – because we have this hope which thinks outside this box, in that joy which comes to us, we can encounter the conflicts and storms of life and greet them with peace instead of vengeance. The wolf and the lamb dwell together in this kingdom, the enemies, even such ancient enemies, know peace in this kingdom, and that is not just until the wolf gets hungry. We will be hurt by our neighbors, even worse by our friends and family. The God of hope has filled us with a peace that lets us deal with that in forgiveness and love, not the vengeance which the world expects of us. Have you ever had a situation where a relationship which seemed beyond repair has seen a breakthrough because God wrought something new within it? Often a relationship which has seen conflict and then forgiveness ends up being far stronger than it ever was before. We can come to conflict hopeful and expectant, eagerly anticipating what God will do in this situation. The preacher will want to remember the exhortations in the Epistle to welcome one another and to live in peace and unity with one another.
- c. The God of Hope, through His Holy Spirit, fills us with Hope that abounds or overflows. Hope is not something that I clench my teeth and create through some force of my will. The hope I offer you, I give you, in the hearing of this word, because I know, I expect, God is working through this word, His Spirit is right here, right now, as he promised us. I am excited to see how this will play out. I know God will do this. This is a perpetual motion machine of a sorts, a closed loop. The God of hope fills us with hope in the God of hope who fills us with more hope!

This sermon will want to make sure it defines hope for the hearer. Our common usage is not really adequate to the task. I believe that Satan has worked overtime in corrupting the understanding of these good theological terms. Hope is a much stronger word that we are used to. (See my textual notes at the end of the Epistle reading)

The Isaiah reading might be a good way to introduce this. Paul quotes it here, and the situation of the Jewish people long ago, and the strange “hope” that he gives them is a possible way to introduce this. Walt’s congregation has a present under the tree with the baby Jesus for the crèche. All through the season the holy family is moving along the wall toward the empty stable. We know what is in the package, we know there is a great gift for us in that wrapped up package, but we cannot see it.

Hope is a realistic expectation based on a history of dealings from the past. The hopeful Christian is not just a dreamer who has his head in some narcotic cloud. He has a track record of God's behavior on which to base his hope. He knows that God rescues enslaved people and frees captives. He knows that God has healed and that he loves little people whom the rest of the world often despises. The hopeful Christian is no fool, but he also has to admit that God is not entirely predictable and that this may turn out very differently than I want or pray for at the moment. Hope is in this sense humble.

The hopeful Christian is always thus also a trusting Christian. This is in God's hands. I don't know exactly what God has in mind for this situation, but I ultimately know it will be something good. He may rescue me from death by raising me from the grave. He may rescue me from death by miraculously curing my cancer. But I know he will rescue me from death, I hope in him.

The person who abounds in hope has heard the promises of God and believes them, trusts them. You will create such a person in your preaching when you proclaim the promises, not by browbeating folks to hope more. That is impossible. Too often our people simply don't know the promises which God has made. You might want to incorporate the vision of the future which Isaiah uses for this part of your sermon. God has made some amazing and wonderful promises to you and to me. Do I even know them?

2. The Fruit of Repentance (Gospel: That the hearer would bear the fruit of penitence: trusting prayer, merciful deeds, and peaceful actions/words.)

This sermon really needs to pay attention to that line in the prayer in which our stirred up heart results in a service rendered to God with a pure mind. We are not proclaimers of repentance, but proclaimers of the Gospel. Simply urging folks to repent does not get us there, we proclaim the one to whom we repent or it is not a Christian sermon.

We should also say that this sermon is not entirely safe. John is really calling his hearers out on the basis of their hypocrisy. Remember the Pharisees and Sadducees were the religious types of the day and he wants them to bear the fruit of penitence. We can also believe that we are saved because we are Lutheran, just as much as they thought that they were safe in their Jewishness. John rather knocks the legs out from under that one. This could go fire and brimstone pretty quickly – be a little careful with that. Remember the Law changes no one. Only the Gospel really accomplishes anything. We are preachers of the Gospel.

If you have the mind stirred up and muddled about this, it can get perverse very quickly. Our human predilection is always to work our penitence into some sort of an economy with God. God somehow looks upon me as more worthy of forgiveness if I am really, really sorry. This was the downfall of the pietistic movement of the 19th century in

Lutheranism and it is still bedeviling the dominant metho-bapto-costals today in North America. If you read the NT papers I get to grade every week, you would not be sanguine about minds of the folks who are sitting out there.

John exhorts his people to repent, it is the Advent theme, perhaps a little out of step with our folks, but if they blew their budget on Black Friday, perhaps they are in a bit of a penitential mood. But Advent penitence has always involved some very interesting and good things.

But first one really has to ask what penitence is. I would guess our folks would answer that it has everything to do with feeling miserable, admitting we were wrong, and really, really, being sorry about some misdeed. That is not wrong and indeed those things can be elements of anyone's penitence, but they are not really repentance. Repentance is first and foremost the recognition that there is something wrong, it could be a moral wrong, it could be sickness, it could be an earthquake, it could be just about anything. Then it involves turning from that wrong for help. In a sense, if you are having chest pains, dialing 911 is akin to repentance, stubbornly denying you have a problem and being tough is not only foolish but very much like impenitence. What I am trying to get at here is that repentance is often much more than simply on a moral plane. I might show up at church and simply confess to God that I am exhausted, I am lonely, I am afraid, etc. These are not moral states, but they are also part of living in a fallen world.

Such repentance bears a number of fruit, a few of which we might proclaim and enjoin upon our people.

- a. Penitence has always meant we prayed more. The Advent services we enjoy are really vestiges of a European practice, but even though our forefathers in America set aside the daily vespers services, in Advent and Lent they brought them back, at least one day a week. Advent meant a time to pray. Penitence leads to prayer, not because penitence is ultimately rooted in fear, but because penitence is rooted in trust and prayer is an act of the trusting faith which turns to God for the solution to every problem. Prayer is the 911 call we make because we know something is wrong and God is the solution to our woes.
- b. Penitence leads to merciful deeds. Have you seen the guys with the pot and the bell outside the stores yet? I bet you have too. This too is a vestige of our Advent practice. When I come realize that I am utterly helpless before my foes, and that I have to have God, and that he has mercifully heard me and helped me, then I see my neighbor and his needs differently. It is not a competition for resources, but it is one beggar telling another where to find that hot meal. When I know that God hears my prayers, I can give freely, even when I am not flush. He will help me.

- c. Penitence also leads to peaceful words. Penitence is the opposite of a sinful pride that believes that I am the solution to my problems. Such pride needs to maintain the façade of “right-ness” and dares show no weakness. But penitence means that I am helpless before God, and I don’t have to be right, I don’t have to be strong, or have some stout wall around me. I can be simple and genuine in my conversation, I can be gracious and merciful in the words I say. I have one who has heard my worst and loves me despite me, for Jesus sake.

Could one find more fruits of penitence? Sure. And perhaps we will on Tuesday. But three is really enough for a sermon.

- 3. What will Jesus wear? (OT – That the hearer would eagerly expect Jesus to come both today and on the last day because he comes in righteousness and faithfulness.)

Last week we suggested a sermon which picked up on the Dressed theme from the Epistle. You might just develop a follow-up sermon based on the OT lesson which would ask what Jesus will wear on that day. Isaiah portrays the son of Jesse/David adorned in righteousness and faithfulness.

The preacher will have plenty to do just explaining and proclaiming those terms and what it means for us that the one who comes wears those belts about his waist and loins.

Jesus wears righteousness, the very garb which is given to us. Jesus wears faithfulness, the relationship with the Father which he has given us in our baptism and which allows us to call God: “Father.”