

2nd Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.4.22

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.² 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.³ 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;⁴ 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.⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.⁶ 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.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 asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "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.'"⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.⁷ 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?⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance.⁹ 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.¹⁰ Even 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.¹² 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." (564)

John the baptizer is the herald of Advent. He's the one who comes at this point in the season of Advent. While we of the church are awaiting Jesus' arrival on Christmas, always here comes John, always on the second Sunday of this short season, this strange season.

In this way, too, of course John is the herald of Jesus—but not just in this way, not just liturgically.

No, for, as his cousin who was born some six months ahead of Jesus, John is the son of old Elizabeth whom young Mary visited while each were pregnant. These two women were themselves

cousins, “kinswomen” is the word. Old Elizabeth’s baby jumped in her womb upon hearing young Mary’s voice.

So goes the story.

Their intertwining, then, (Jesus’ and John’s) started early and would only continue. Really, it’s always worth noting where John appears in the gospel narrative. It usually comes just prior to some action Jesus takes, or some re-action Jesus feels. John’s appearing in the gospel narrative is usually as spur to response from Jesus. Ever the herald, ever the way-maker.

That said, they were also different from one another.

This is a fact John didn’t fully anticipate though he roughly knew. “...one who is more powerful than I is coming after me,” John rightly claimed. “I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” He wasn’t wrong. “I baptize you with water for repentance,” he explained. “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” This, as a rough outline of how things would play out, was right.

And yet, John had clear ideas of who the Messiah would be, of how exactly Jesus as Messiah would behave in the world. “His winnowing fork is in his hand,” John seems fairly sure would be the case, “and he will clear his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the granary,” John seems convinced would be the case, “but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Do you assume John got it right about Jesus? Do you assume he got it right about the Messiah?

Dramatic irony is when a character in a story asserts as true something that the audience knows is wrong. In a tragedy, dramatic irony is often at the heart of the tragedy. Othello didn’t *know*, didn’t know not to trust Iago. King Lear didn’t know, didn’t know not to trust his own ego-needs. Romeo and Juliet—neither knew what the other had been up to, what the other had planned. In a comedy, dramatic irony often the source of the hilarity, the wellspring of joy.

As a family, a number of years ago, we watched *Cheers*.

The great sitcom of the 80s, *Cheers* owned Thursday nights, as I remember, for nearly a decade. A retired baseball star whose career was ruined by alcohol addiction opens a bar. In Boston, called Cheers, it employs one other bartender, whose dim wits but sweet heart are always good for a laugh, and two waitresses, one a townie from Boston proper, and the other an academic who came to Boston by way of one of its many colleges and universities. There are three “regulars,” all men, one a middle-manager whose wife, Vera, we hear about but never meet, one a postal carrier who lives with “ma” whom we hear about but never meet, and one an egg-headed psychiatrist who loves the finer things in life and wants everyone to know that’s true about him.

Back in the day, my dad loved this show, and I adored my dad, so we watched it every week and, when it came up as available on Netflix and it evoked all that nostalgic coziness, I urged it upon us Goodmans. We decided to give it a go.

It's still an exemplar of the form, which form has seen its day.

One of the ways an episode often plays out is that someone who's always in the bar is waiting for someone who's never been to the bar to stop in for some stated reason. And we get all this anticipation about it. Norm's waiting for his boss, Frasier's waiting for some colleague who bested him in medical school, Sam's waiting for an ex-girlfriend who wants to return his record collection. And in the anticipation, we get a picture of who's coming. Norm's boss is a strict, scary monster. Frasier's rival is a square-chinned Ivy Leaguer who was born to humiliate everyone around him. Sam's ex-girlfriend is a manipulative harpy who only wants Sam to suffer.

And then, after long minutes of build-up and prolepsis, the person comes in.

And they're nothing like what we anticipated.

Which casts the question back on the one who outlined what we should expect: What's wrong with you that you got this person so misunderstood? What does that say about *you*?

That, too, was always good for a laugh.

We're dealing with a few levels of voicing here in Matthew's telling of John's anticipating Jesus.

As for John's expectation, it's worth considering what here we've learned about John.

He was the son of a priest. Zechariah was an established, likely respected member of the power structure whose own anticipation of the birth of his son John was interrupted by his own hedged belief. An angel came to Zechariah while he was serving in the Temple to tell him about the coming of his son, and Zechariah asked a follow-up question—that how would this happen, that both he and Elizabeth were old? For this mild bafflement, the baby yet would come, but Zechariah would be made mute for the long months of waiting.

Meanwhile, John's lineage on his mother's side went all the way back to the prophet Aaron, Moses' brother.

John was, then, we're to understand, a strong mixture of prophet and priest. He was formed and informed to be full of holy certainty, fierce righteousness.

And, look, he certainly dressed the part, wearing camel's hair, which was course, and eating locusts and wild honey, hardly the refined stuff of cities, more the rough stuff of the wilderness. He took his father's Temple priesthood and raised him a wilderness prophet.

So, it follows that the one who is coming, and is even more powerful than he, will be just so: more powerfully certain, more powerfully fiercely righteous.

Like John, but *more*.

That just stands to reason.

There's also in this Matthew's voicing. The gospel narrative which we'll follow this year, Matthew is one of four narratives who fill out the person and power of Jesus. And each of these four has their voice, has their bent—a fact we can see all the more when it comes to stories that all four tell, like this one.

Such a situation gives us good material for compare-and-contrast.

Mark's gospel, which is thought to have been the first written, makes it clear that John offers a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

Luke's gospel, which comes in time around when Matthew's does as well, makes it clear that John offers a baptism of repentance, though with no mention of the forgiveness of sin. His is just repentance, that changing of mind, that turning and returning to some original state. (Wonder? Awe? Love?) Luke's John does, though, come with an outraged response from John, outraged at the gathering crowds. These, Luke's John calls a brood of vipers. The crowd: they're the brood of vipers.

As for Matthew, this likewise considers the baptism John offers as one of repentance, that change of mind, that enlarging of the mind and imagination, and returning to some state of origin, though also with no mention of the forgiveness of sin. Matthew also has John as similarly outraged, but not at the crowd in general, instead at the Pharisees and Sadducees. These are whom he deems as a brood of vipers: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

It's as if these people in particular provoked in Matthew a response of outrage. "Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 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. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree..." It's as if these people deserved a special helping of wrath.

And it might be worth noting that the Sadducees and Pharisees had little in common with one another. Sadducees, a small sect, served only in the Temple, and they believed as authoritative only the first five books of the Bible. They were at the pinnacle of power and their narrowness of belief and practice helped keep them there. Meanwhile, Pharisees were to be found throughout the land of Israel and Judah; there were as many Pharisees as there are lawyers throughout our land,

for it was the Pharisees' job to interpret the Law for adhering to it amidst actual life. These two, then, had as much in common as Supreme Court justices in our day do with lawyers whose faces grace every bus stop bench in every city. Some had integrity, some likely did not.

That said, what they *did* have in common was that they were each considered, in their own way, religious authorities, which we shall see throughout this year is something the writer of this gospel finds particularly provocative.

“Matthew” has very little patience with the religious authorities, *his* religious authorities.

For this, the Gospel According to Matthew has been felt as particularly antisemitic—though, to be honest, each of the gospels can be read as antisemitic, if for different reasons. This is the terrible fact about the New Testament. It was written about Jews by Jews though from a time when a fault line was erupting among Jews, which separated them into two groups—Rabbinic Jews and Jewish-Christians. The animosity grew between the two groups, and, over time, what was once like a family fight became an intra-group conflict on a global scale—and with horrifying effect. Antisemitism has become one of humanity's most enduring and most destructive sentiments. We of the Church must take great care with this tendency of ours.

As for what in Matthew has been felt as antisemitic, it can be boiled down to our writer's deep disappointment—heartbreak, outrage—that the religious authorities have betrayed their original purpose. They seem as cynical as they do righteous. They seem as much about earthly power as they do about the holiness of God.

Matthew, for his apparently taking such personal offence at this, is fairly understood to have been a practicing Jew who came to follow in the Jesus way. This, perhaps in part because he was so offended by the corruption that he perceived at work among his religious authorities. These were people whom he'd have admired. These were people whom he'd have *trusted* and counted on—and they were, it turns out, often just power-players like anyone else.

To be as angry at the religious authorities as “Matthew” seems to have been, you'd have to care, to care *a lot*.

We'll hear this anger a lot this year. We should be careful not to take it up as our own, except as might pertain to religious authorities of our day, *Christian* religious authorities.

Sad to say, there's no shortage of such as these who've betrayed our trust and their authority in just the same way.

These are the two voices who get us ready to meet Jesus, who is coming, who is coming, who is not yet here.

What will be like?

This baptism of repentance operates ironically. As so much does in this life of faith, the baptism John offers, according to all four gospel witnesses, this baptism of repentance: it operates ironically. Repentance, *metanoia*, is best heard in contrast to the one word in English it's related closest to: paranoia. *-noia* is knowledge. *Meta-* is that which is behind and before and beyond. *Para-* is that which is beside. Paranoia is a sort of knowledge that comes from beside you, whispering, sneaking a glance. Separate from you but close to you, paranoia most often names something menacing, threatening. You know this. *Metanoia*, which is the Greek word that translates into the English repentance is a grander sort of knowledge, the knowledge that comes of beyond, behind, before. It is to know God and to know what God knows, to adopt the mind of God as best as any person can. Paul encourages such a thing in his letter to the Romans, that those reading "not be conformed to this world," that they—that you—instead "be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

This is repentance, or at least one essential quality of repentance. And it operates ironically in this text because the one urging repentance, John the baptizer, might himself be in need of repentance. And the one writing of the one urging repentance might himself be in need of repentance—to renew his mind, to be transformed in his thinking about who God is and what God does in our lives. Really, they might need less paranoid thinking about the one who is to come, more metanoid thinking about what effect he'll have, and how.

So what about you? Is your religion more paranoid than metanoid?

We won't meet him this week, not in story, though we will in sacrament. We'll gather at his table where is host. What is he like? How shall he be? And what will that feel like for us as we come in close?

We shall see, for he is coming.

Thanks be to God.