

The Second Sunday of Advent

December 4, 2016

Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12

Today is December 4, and that can only mean one thing:

Christmas is three weeks from today!

If that thought fills you with a bit of panic,
you are likely in good company!

That mad rush towards Christmas

makes me grateful for Advent,

a season that calls us to set aside,

if only for a bit,

all the pressures of shopping and decorating,

cooking and cleaning, and all the rest

Advent calls us instead,

into a space of hopeful anticipation

as we prepare to celebrate

the birth of God enfleshed,

God incarnate in the baby Jesus;

Advent also calls us into deeper reflection

about what that means for our lives.

That call to hopeful anticipation and deeper reflection

is woven throughout our readings this week,

although it may not be readily apparent.

We are presented with two disparate images:

one of a peaceable kingdom,

where predator and prey lie side by side;

and another warning us

that trees that bear no fruit

will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Disparate as these images are,

they fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle;

and when they do,

a vision of that hopefulness
and anticipation emerges.

The first pieces of our puzzle come
from the words of the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah has been called to preach God's word
to a people captured, deported,
and exiled from their homeland,
their temple, the very house of their God,
sacked and left in ruin.
Isaiah comes into the midst
of this desolation and despair
to proclaim that a time of peace is at hand,
to proclaim the coming of a leader
who will restore things to their proper order.

*"A shoot shall come out
from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his
roots,"* he cries out.

Although it may seem obscure to us,
for Isaiah's original audience
this reference would have been crystal clear.

Jesse, of course, was the father of David,
the great king of Israel,
whose kingdom was ravaged over and over
in the generations following his death,
and the stump refers to Israel's political situation;
devastated, despoiled, exiled.

Isaiah's image of a tender branch
growing out from the stump of a tree
apparently dead and gone,
speaks to God's promise of new life
in the midst of this desolation,

not just a return to the status quo,
 but rather restoration
 of a world in which there will be true peace,
 a world in which the so-called
 natural order of things is overturned,
 and enemies live side by side in tranquility:

*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 next pieces of our puzzle come
 from the mouth of John the Baptist.

John is without a doubt a strange character,
 and if he showed up here today
 and started preaching,
 I'm not sure what we'd make of him;
 chances are that we'd want to run
 in the other direction as fast as we could.

And his message at first hearing
 doesn't sound all that hopeful;
 in fact, he's scolding, and chastising,
 and even insulting his audience.

John addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees,
 two groups who were leaders
 in the religious establishment,
 as a "brood of vipers,"
 not a flattering comparison, to be sure,
 and employing another tree metaphor,
 he warns them that they must bear fruit.

(This notion of bearing fruit

is a favorite image in Matthew's gospel;

listen for it this year.)

They must bear fruit and not just any fruit,
 but the fruit of righteousness,
 for it is those who are righteous
 - those who are **just** -
 who will inherit the kingdom.

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.

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees...

John's words sound more frightening than hopeful,
 but they are part of our puzzle nonetheless,
 building on the notion
 that out of dry stumps
 comes new life.

John continues by promising
 that another will come after him,
 one who will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit,
 one for whom John is preparing the way.

When we assemble the puzzle pieces
 from our readings this morning
 what we begin to see is a vision of HOPE;
 hope for a world in which God is with us,
 in which God's order is restored,
 hope for a righting of the wrongs
 that tear the fabric of our common life,
 hope for a time and place

in which God's kingdom
will come into full bloom.

We might stop there, but doing so would leave out one last piece of the puzzle,
a piece that I think is essential to make
these readings relevant for us
here and now, this Advent, 2016;
that missing piece is our context,
the world in which we find ourselves living.

When I have preached these texts in past Advents,
that last piece hasn't troubled me,
well, not like it does this year.
I've been able to speak of the hope
of the coming Jesus
as a vivid sign of God's love,
a love so intense that it became
enfleshed in an infant,
a human infant fated to suffer
from the same joys and hardships,
the same toils and trials,
and ultimately the same death
as all of humanity,
and who would do so
with an unmatched grace,
all the while showing humanity
what it means
to live as one created in God's image.
And I've talked of the eschatological hope
this enfleshed God holds out for us,
the promise that at some point
God's dream for humanity
will be fully realized,
that the earth and all it contains

will be fully reconciled,
fully restored with God.

All of that is still there for us.
The promises are real.
The hope is real.

And yet, this year, I feel a different kind of urgency
in these words.

I am prone to catastrophizing sometimes,
and what is to follow may, in some minds,
fall into that category

But for me, this year as never before,

I can **feel** the plight of the Israelites in exile,
feeling abandoned and afraid,

I can **hear** the power of Isaiah's words

crying out to the people
that all is not lost,
that God is still there
and that hope is on the horizon.

And I can imagine how hard it must have been

for those Israelites to believe it,

what a struggle it must have been
for them to NOT capitulate
to the powers of the Babylonians,
to just give in and worship Ba'al
and to let the temple, Jerusalem,
and all the rest become but a distant memory...

it would've been so much easier.

I can imagine the scandal the words

of John the Baptist must have caused,
as he called apparently faithful people to repent,
to turn back to God,
to prepare for a new world order;

scandal, and yet hope for them as well,
hope for a more peaceful world
for a people living under the thumb of
the Roman Empire.

I resonate with all this because

I believe that we are faced with similar struggles
as we seek to remain people of faith
in these challenging times.

During the year I've been with you,
you've heard me repeat the message
that God is calling us
to live fully as the people we are created to be,
that after loving God
the most important thing
we can do is love our neighbor,
and recognize that our neighbor
comprises the fullness of God's humanity,
not just those we pick and choose.

You've heard me say that we must be political
as Jesus was political,
caring about whether the hungry are fed,
the homeless are housed,
caring about gun violence
and access to health care,
and all the myriad things
that make up a life of dignity.

All of that still holds,
but with a new urgency,
and a new need to act on what we believe
in ways that are visible to the world.

Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourner Magazine, puts it bluntly
when he writes that, now more than ever,

we must resist accepting as normal
behavior that is antithetical to the gospel,
 bigotry, misogyny, hatred, xenophobia,
 racism, sexism, homophobia,
all those attitudes and actions
 that had been pushed to the edges of propriety
 and are now creeping back towards the middle.
And we must stand firm against all those forces
that would have us do otherwise.

As we strive to do that,
as we work to be light in the darkness,
to hold onto what is good and right,
 Advent fills us again with the hope
 that God's dramatic breaking into the world
 in the person of Jesus signals for us,
 the hope that God's realm,
 God's dream for humanity
 will someday be realized.

Advent fills us with anticipation for that day,
and reminds us that God is with us always,
even as we wait.

Amen.