

An interesting selection of scripture readings for this second Sunday of Advent.

From the OT, a beautifully descriptive passage, a poem from the prophet Isaiah; a psalm of praise; a welcoming to the Gentiles into the family of Christ from Paul; and then fire and brimstone from John the Baptist. We've run the gamut of emotions today.

Each Advent we begin a new liturgical year, this is Year A, the year in which most of our gospel readings will come from Matthew. And throughout this Advent season, we read from Isaiah. Now, the time period in which the book of Isaiah was written was ripe with tension – wars and foreign occupation for both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah. Israel was defeated in their war against the Assyrian army and Judah instead of fighting the Assyrians opted to allow them into their country, deciding occupation was preferable to the destruction they witnessed in Israel. Judah then, became a country under control of a foreign power. And so now, their king was deposed --this then was the end of the monarchy from the lineage of the great King David. No longer would they be ruled by a King from the bloodline of David, who was you may recall, the shepherd son of Jesse. They had lost their land to the Assyrians—the promised land given to their ancestors by God. They were totally bereft –of their God given land, their God chosen ruler, they had lost their identity. Trying to come up with a comparator to help us understand their situation, the closest I could come was considering what it might be like if Canada was taken over by communist Russia—would we still be Canadian under that regime?

And in the midst of this turmoil, this occupation by Assyrian warriors, the prophet Isaiah brings the people of Judah a message of hope and peace for the future -- “a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (11.1). Literally a family tree will grow again, the family of King David's line, stemming from Jesse, King David's father. What will this new King be like? Isaiah says “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.” (11.2) So, a new King of David's line, but he will also be sent by God, a righteous King—empowered by God's spirit. What a message of hope for these people. And the prophet word paints for them the reign this King will bring forth -- beautiful imagery of a peaceable kingdom.

“In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all. <sup>7</sup>The cow will graze near the bear. The cub and the calf will lie down together. The lion will eat hay like a cow. <sup>8</sup>The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm. <sup>9</sup>Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the LORD.” (11.v. 6-9 NLT)

What an incredible picture that passage brings to mind! This apparently is one of the most painted images from the Old Testament<sup>1</sup> -- a new and radically different creation to come! It will be a time of peace and safety for God's people, a time when the stronger powers will not devour or dominate and all God's people will be safe, in the land God had given them; a time when their new ruler, of David's bloodline, filled with the spirit of God will come bringing a time of peaceful co-existence with previously vicious, stronger and deadly enemies. This new King will be a saviour to God's people.

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<sup>1</sup> Rolf Jacobson: Sermon Brainwave Podcast SB513 - Second Sunday of Advent 2016

The people of Isaiah's time were looking for a Messiah, someone to save them from their enemies, their life of hard scrabble survival. The Messiah, their Saviour King would come – like a fresh shoot branch from the base of a tree that was long thought dead. This was good news for the people of Judah—and still is good news for us today. God comes to us, even when all hope seems lost. God creates new growth, can bring new life even in that which seems dead. Our faith is in that hope of a peaceable kingdom, in our own lives and in the world.

Ok, so now, we fast forward to the time of another prophet, John, a cousin of Jesus' actually through their mothers-- John who also was known as the Baptizer. People today think baptism is a Christian rite, and yes it is, but it has roots in ancient Jewish tradition. This too was a time of oppression for the Jewish people, the Roman Empire was at full strength, taking nation after nation, storming across the countries of the then known world. And there was again a sense of expectation within the Jewish community for a Messiah—someone to come and save them from this oppression, this tyranny. And, as we know, John's primary prophetic calling was to announce the coming of this Messiah. Also a part of a prophetic calling is to call people to repentance for sin, to help people to acknowledge that they have missed the mark, so to speak, and repent for it. John baptized those who wanted to feel cleansed of their sins; those things they did—or didn't do, that went counter to the ways of the Lord, as per the Laws of Moses. This baptism in the waters of the river Jordon was a way of symbolically washing oneself clean of one's sins. Now, the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Saducees too had come to John for baptism and John sees through them, he knows their coming to be baptized is a charade. He knows their hearts aren't really in it and they're just hiding behind their "religiosity". And he calls them on it—calling them a brood of vipers, a bunch of poisonous snakes. Well, John, tell us how you really feel! Stop pretending how righteous a person you are, he says, and prove you mean it, if you really are repentant, it actually changes how you are living. That's what he means by 'bearing fruit of repentance'. I think today we'd say something like "put your money where your mouth is". Then he threatens them with burning in unquenchable fire if they don't truly change their ways. Another fiery joyous message for Advent!

So, where's the good news in John's repent or die in the fires of hell message? Well, it's actually in the repentance itself. Ok, how does that work, you might ask?

Well, it has to do with what real repentance is all about. It's not just about saying I'm sorry, promise not to do it again and feeling guilty about whatever you did—or didn't do. That's an apology, but not true repentance. Repentance is more about a genuine and true desire to make a change in our behavior, towards ourselves or others—and then to do, a transformative change of heart, a spiritual conversion. Which we all know is never easy. Repentance is "about a re-orientation, a change of perspective and direction, a commitment to turn and live differently. And so John challenges his audience not to define themselves or limit their hopes based on their ancestry as children of Abraham, or supposed pious living, but rather to dream a larger hope and grander vision and to work toward a better world by, everyone in their own way. That is what is meant by "bearing fruits worthy of repentance."<sup>2</sup> And John announces a new time is coming, when one more powerful than him will come and baptize with Holy Spirit and fire.

The coming of the Messiah signified the dawning of a new time, a time of true discipleship. So, consider your old ways, the ways that are not God's ways, things that pull you away from God, rather than those that draw you closer and deeper into your faith. And then change those destructive behaviours, those negative ways of thinking or being, because soon the Messiah would be here, and you will be judged on how you chose to live. Come and be cleansed of those destructive and hurtful ways, confess them to God, let them go, and start again. And the strength of the Lord will be with you.

Advent is the time for looking at ourselves in light of the coming Messiah, and preparing to bring Christ into our hearts, and letting Christ in, so that He makes the change in our lives. Advent's about finding and fulfilling our hopes and dreams, God's hopes and dreams for us. It's about the desire to find Jesus, the living God in our midst, working in our lives—the God who came to us as a babe in a manger. Amen *Rev. JoAnn Todd, Anglican Parish of Hanover - Durham*

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<sup>2</sup> David Lose, from his weekly blog via [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), for Advent 2 Year A 2013