

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

“The lion shall lie down with the lamb”, isn’t that the way we hear the quote from Isaiah’s text? It is metaphorically more accurate to think of Jesus as lion and lamb, two competing forces, lying in peace next to one another, isn’t it? We think of Jesus symbolically as the lion from the tribe of Judah: strong, kingly, a ruler. And Jesus symbolically is the sacrificial lamb, the one who was the last blood sacrifice. Thinking of the two lying together gives a feeling of peacefulness.

Yet, the actual reading from Isaiah is far more peaceful than even that symbolic vision. The wolf lives with the lamb. The one the shepherd protects and the one the shepherd protects his sheep from are living peacefully together. Children are playing near poisonous snakes, and they are not bitten. Leopards and baby goats play together. Cows and bears are peacefully sharing the same space. What a vision!

When will this all take place? When Jesus comes. And since Jesus has lived on the earth and wolves aren’t roaming with lambs, nor are cows living peacefully with bears, we need to look at this reading as an eschatological one, one that will take place after the second coming of Jesus. That is what makes this time of Advent such a special season, we are celebrating what has taken place in the birth of Jesus as our Savior, and we are preparing our hearts and maybe even our world, for the second coming of Christ. A time that will not be hidden in a manger, witnessed only by Mary and Joseph, shepherds and possibly the innkeepers. The entire world will know when Christ comes back in glory, and all the earth will recognize him for who he is, God’s son who comes to reclaim all the earth.

But until that happens, we will remember. We will remember that God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save the world from sin. From that which separates us from God. Each year we light our candles on our advent wreath to chase away the darkness and bring us closer to the light, closer to Christ who is the light of the world. We are Christ followers; even though the darkness surrounds us, we walk in the light. Each year we go through our traditions so that we are brought back to the beginning of our Christian faith.

After the manger, after the angels sing and the shepherds visit, after the wise men bring their gifts and the holy family flees to Egypt, we learn of how John, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, has matured. If you remember, Mary went to the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth when she discovered Elizabeth was also with child. Zechariah was speechless at the time since he had been struck by God’s angel Gabriel because he laughed in disbelief when told Elizabeth would bear a child. When Mary arrived the baby in Elizabeth’s womb jumped for joy. John, before he was born, recognized Jesus before he was born. Their lives were intertwined from that moment on.

John took a strange turn. Rather than following in the priestly order of his father Zechariah, he moved into the wilderness to get the world ready for the one who was to come. John knew his purpose from the beginning, and he followed God’s will for his life. He set himself apart, living in an unconventional way, but he must have had charisma because even the Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized. John wasn’t afraid to tell it the way he saw it either. He recognized those religious men for who they were... a brood of vipers! He recognized that they were religious men, but not caring, compassionate men. Perhaps he even recognized that they would be the ones who were so caught up in keeping the holiness laws that they would not be

able to accept Jesus for who he is, the Messiah, the Savior. The one who cares more about saving people than he does about following the rules.

Put yourself back in time, imagine yourself in the wilderness with the people who are coming to John for a baptism of repentance. Everyone is dressed in soft, flowing cotton with sandals if they have the money, or barefoot if not. Perhaps an outer, sleeveless jacket completes your outfit. You're listening attentively to John preach of repentance, his invitation to get into the Jordan River and be cleansed from your sins. Baptism isn't a new concept to you; it's practiced in your time. But John has such an urgency to him, it's as though something new is taking place. And you are caught up in the excitement.

What did you feel as he berated the Sadducees and Pharisees? Did you side with the religious men, realizing that someone has to keep the laws even if it means condemning other people? Are you a keeper of the law? Do you think it is more important that those who break the law be punished rather than showing compassion and understanding when someone breaks it?

Or, do you see yourself as a John the Baptist type, offering a renewed relationship with God, and pointing out the other's sins, not to condemn them, but to offer a way of forgiveness?

Perhaps you just see yourself as one of those drawn to hear what John was preaching, neither condemning nor offering a new way of life?

One Advent, while serving my first church out of seminary, someone stole our outdoor Christmas decorations. Do you remember those lights that were woven together like a web, making them easy to decorate bushes? We had those draped over the bushes outside the front of the church. One night when I took my dog for his walk, I noticed it wasn't as bright as normal in front of the church. I wondered if the lights had become unplugged or if they had burnt out. Upon further inspection I found there were no lights there. Someone had taken them.

Upon a quick meeting of the council it was determined that we should report the theft to the police. The officer came and took our report and said he had a good ear to the ground in the community and he was sure he would find our lights. Within the next few days he brought them back to us, explaining that one of the kids had taken them and strung them up on their porch. When his mother was asked about it she said he told her he found them.

The church decided, after speaking with the police officer, that the boy should be charged with theft, hopefully to keep him from branching out into more criminal activities as he grew older. We were keepers of the law. Yet, we didn't want to completely dash this young man's future by giving him a juvenile record.

When we arrived at the District Justice's office, we made sure we were there before the young man so we could speak with the District Justice in private. He was a very nice person, and he agreed with the way we chose to handle the offense: If the young man apologized and agreed to do community service hours at the church, we would not press charges against him. He was not let off the hook for his act of breaking the law, but he also did not leave with a fine or a juvenile record. We showed compassion while expecting him to understand the gravity of his actions.

When are you able to look at the stranger and act with compassion? When are you able to be Christlike? I invite you to again, for the first time, follow the light this Advent season, to prepare the way for the Lord.

All glory be to God.