

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

Last Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, we heard apocalyptic scripture that reminded us of the dire and precarious circumstances of this life and our hope for a world that will be better...a world that is, in fact the kingdom of God...where there will be justice and safety and equality...where there will be no weeping and no broken hearts. We lit a candle of hope to remind us of what we have waiting for us...of what we have to look forward to. This Second Sunday of Advent, we light a candle of peace that is beautifully described for us in the passage from Isaiah: the wolf shall live with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid. But the world we live in now is not this peaceful one we long for. We know that. We can see glimpses of hope and we can see charitable and life-saving acts by individual people, but we can also see a world that seems all too precarious and chaotic...anything but peaceful. If we want to make our preparation for the coming of the Messiah...the birth of Jesus...first we have to be willing to stare into the dark. And we don't have to go far to do that. All we need to do is to turn on any news channel in any part of the world to see the breadth and depth of the darkness that is there.

But we need to look beyond the darkness that we can see out there. John the Baptist is challenging us to see the darkness that is in here in order to prepare for the arrival of Jesus. He doesn't mince words either. Staring at the Pharisees and Sadducees, he bellows, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" This is *not* what we want to hear just two weeks before Christmas. Listening to this is like having someone throw cold water in our faces. It's unpleasant...but it certainly gets our attention. Hearing the word 'repent' immediately dredges up feelings of guilt and resistance in us. It's easy for us to feel like we're being told that we aren't good enough...we don't measure up...we aren't bearing good fruit and the judgement to come from the one who is coming will be ruthless and unforgiving. This is *not* what we want to hear while we're stringing Christmas tree lights and wrapping gifts that have been carefully chosen for loved ones. We would much prefer to hear, "Deck the halls with boughs of holly" which we will cheerfully do, rather than the charge from John the Baptist that we are doing it wrong and that we are unworthy and that we can't take for granted that we are God's chosen people and will be exempt from all judgement. Quite the contrary according to John.

But the truth is, as we gather together here for Sunday worship, this may be the only hour of the week when we are truly challenged to dig deep within ourselves and look into the darkness within us that holds all our worry and all our pain...those places that we struggle with within ourselves...those things that we want to share with no one, least of all with ourselves. But those are the things that we need to change in order to embrace the true peace that Jesus will bring with him and provide to us.

Hearing the word of God is always Good News. That's what the gospel is: Good News. But sometimes what eventually ends up as 'Good News' is sometimes hard to hear...hard to contemplate...hard to take in. If we don't want to look ourselves in the mirror, why would we want anyone to hold a mirror up to us? But that's what John the Baptist does. He holds up a mirror that reflects what we do not want to see about ourselves. But the only way those places that we don't want to touch...that we don't want to look at...get healed is if we let God into them. John the Baptist is telling us to 'Get Ready.' The one with the searing gaze is just on the horizon.

Those of us who gather together on Sunday morning, who greet one another, who take a seat in one of the pews...we may not have a doctrine of sin, but we've all experienced it...in ourselves and in other people. If we are aware of our own sin, the chances are, we'd like to be rid of it. Where can we wash ourselves clean? Where's the garbage can for all the sin we want to get rid of? How do we take out the trash when it's time?

Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. We can get a glimpse of that in our relationships with other people. Sometimes we just don't seem to be able to get out of our own way. We may have some vague notion that we are somehow contributing to the angst that we grapple with, but we rarely, if ever, know how or why. When everyone else has stepped away, we have only ourselves to deal with. All of us live inside our own heads and own hearts. And each and every one of us struggles with what we find there. It's a wilderness. Compared to what God had originally planned for us, we living in a wilderness inside our own heads.

That famous phrase: "A voice crying in the wilderness. Prepare ye the way of the Lord." can have 2 different meanings depending on how you punctuate it: The one we are accustomed to hearing and this one: A voice crying. In the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord.

Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness. That's where we live.

John the Baptist has some pretty brutal things to say to the Pharisees and the Sadducees who have come down to the Jordan River to check him out. He doesn't mince words. He's serious. His imagery is not kind or gentle or reassuring. His imagery is jaw-dropping. His imagery is wildly critical. See what a mess you are? "You brood of vipers!" and "Every tree that does not bear

good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire!” “He’s clearing the threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” We certainly don’t want to be the chaff or even think of ourselves in that way.

None of this sounds like Good news. But John is getting us ready to welcome the Christ child when he arrives...to truly welcome him in. John is jolting us into the reality of how much we need the Messiah that is on the way. We can’t embrace him or welcome him in until we have cleaned our own house...until we’ve taken stock of ourselves...until we have looked in the mirror and seen ourselves as God sees us...and we have decided that we want Jesus to come in and help us clean house!

John tells us that we can’t rest on our laurels. We can’t rest on our pedigree. We can’t rest on the fact that we are baptized Christians. It’s what we do with that pedigree and with that baptism that prepares us to let the Christ child in.

We can’t make room for Jesus if we haven’t already surveyed the landscape and determined what needs to go. What needs to be set out on the curb? What part of our way of dealing with people needs to be put in the trash? Jesus is on his way, but he won’t force himself on us. We must be willing to give up some parts of ourselves that we can see in the mirror are not the parts of us that Jesus wants to nurture. If we ask him to, Jesus will take out the trash.

There is both gift and task in the life of a Christian, for it is a life that is gifted by the Spirit and that consequently produces the good fruits of the kingdom of God. What these good fruits will be can’t be specified in advance of their appearance, but they will emerge from those who are devoted to Christ and who exercise love for others. If we ask the Christ child to come into us, he will. And he will give us the power to take out the trash. He will show us how and he will help us do it.

As startling as John the Baptist’s tirade is, here’s one important difference between John the Baptist’s audience and contemporary Christians that is sometimes overlooked. John’s audience was still waiting for the first appearance of the Messiah. We’ve already been told that the first appearance is a matter of history. We are waiting for the return of the Messiah. We are living in the in between time...the time of already, but not yet. We need to heed John’s words, for we are still expected to produce good fruit. We are still expected to take responsibility for ourselves and not count on our Christian lineage. We are still expected to be accountable for the choices we make. But now have an advocate who is Christ Jesus. John’s original audience had not yet met the advocate. They had not been called to discipleship of the Lord. They had not been baptized into the body of Christ. And they had not been given the magnificent blessing of the Holy Spirit. They had not been taught about the fruits of the Spirit. They had not been guided by Jesus’ commandments to love both God and neighbor. And they had not

witnessed the example he set for how God expected us to live our lives. All of those differences are important.

But even our advocate...our friend...our master and teacher has told us to be vigilant. He expects us to be prepared at all times. We do not know when he is coming back. In our preparation we need to remember that we can not cause the kingdom of God to appear. Our preparations don't make it happen. But our preparations make us ready to participate in it when it comes. Only God can make it happen. When God does make it happen, Jesus wants us to be ready. He doesn't want us to be caught flat-footed or off guard. He loves us and wants all to ultimately go well with us. We are his sheep and he tends to us with loving care.

His desire is to hold fast to each one of us and to not lose us in any way.

So let's clean house with his help and make it possible for him to do just that.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.