### “Prepare the Way” Steve Finlan for The First Church, December 4, 2022

**Isaiah 11:1–10**

1 A shoot shall come out from the stock 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. . . 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. . . 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. . . 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; and the nations shall inquire of him.

**Matthew 3:1–11**

1In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 3This 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.’ ” 4Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him . . . 6and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 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? 8Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9Do 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. 10Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree 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.”

These passages are so rich with meaning, that each deserves its own sermon. I encourage you at your leisure to re-read them and ponder the spiritual significance. Here, we have one of the greatest of Isaiah’s messianic prophecies, culminating in the promise that “the nations shall inquire of him” (11:10), that is, of the Messiah. And we have John the Baptist’s rebuke to the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the inspiring promise of One coming who will do more than baptize for repentance, but “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt 3:11).

The coming One will not be impressed by anyone’s claim to be a child of Abraham. What will matter is whether a person bears good fruit. Those who do not will be cut down. The common idea that the New Testament is more peaceful than the Old Testament doesn’t hold up in this particular case. There is a much more threatening tone to the New Testament passage. John has a pretty stark vision of good and evil, and of divine judgment. John is like an Old Testament prophet, himself. Maybe his ascetic living conditions in the wilderness helped contribute to his harsh distinctions.

The Isaiah passage, on the other hand, is full of promise, including a promise of peace. It starts very spiritually. The promised descendant of David—for Jesse was David’s father—will have a sevenfold spirit upon him: the spirit of the Lord, the spirit of wisdom, of understanding, of counsel, of might, the spirit of knowledge, and of the fear of the Lord, which means reverence. This recalls the seven lamps which are said to be the eyes of the Lord in Zech 4:2, 10, and the seven spirits that occur four times in Revelation (1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). For, in front of a heavenly throne are “seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God” (Rev 4:5). However, in Isaiah, the emphasis is not on the seven spirits, but on the justice that will be practiced by the descendant of David. This is not a harsh justice but one that arises from love and the promise of peace to the nations.

He will not judge by appearances, but will judge righteously (11:3–4). He will *create* peace. The idea of the wolf and the lamb, the calf and the lion lying down together might be metaphorical, or it might be literal. Even today we sometimes hear stories of unlikely animal friendships. In India, there was a leopard who would come into a farmer’s cattle compound and cuddle up with one particular cow. They think this cow might have nursed the leopard when it was a cub. In any case, they were astounded that this leopard was so friendly with one cow, and ignored all the other cattle.

In the Isaiah passage, I think the point is that the Messiah will bring unexpected peace where there had been enmity. It will seem like a miracle. The passage culminates with a promise that the whole world will be in peace and reverence: “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (11:9). Even the Gentiles will worship God and inquire of him. *Everybody* will know God! This is one of the most important and most optimistic of all the prophecies in the Bible. Imagine a world that is truly at peace. That day will come.

John’s prophecy in today’s gospel passage is much more pessimistic. Baptism symbolizes a firm decision, a turning away from sin, but John can sense some serious sin when the Pharisees and Sadducees show up. He shoots down the relevance of their claim of being children of Abraham. It was a way for them to boast of their superiority. But, there is a coming judgment. In fact, the axe is already at the root of the trees, and bad trees will be cut down. Lies and boasts do not help to grow spiritual fruit.

There is One coming who will baptize people with the Holy Spirit and fire. Fire, in this case, probably indicates spiritual power. It makes me think of Peter’s fiery preaching on Pentecost, when he was filled with the Spirit, gaining three thousand converts at once. That is the day when the Spirit was poured out, and Peter’s listeners also would have received the Spirit at that time. Then “deep calls to deep” (Ps 42:7), as they respond to the gospel.

John didn’t know much about Jesus’ forthcoming ministry. He wasn’t even sure at this time if Jesus was the One he was thinking of. But he hit the nail on the head when he said that One would baptize people in the Holy Spirit and fire. And indeed, the eleven loyal apostles were filled with spiritual fire on the day of Pentecost. Besides Peter, Philip also went out, filled with enthusiasm, preached to the Samaritans, and “the crowds with one accord listened eagerly” (Acts 8:7). Philip also preached to an Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza, and baptized him.

In those days, Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles mingled in an unprecedented way in the early churches. This echoes the promise of Isaiah, “the nations shall inquire of him” (Isa 11:10). In this way, the early church was a model for what will happen in the future: the coming together of people from all nations to worship God and learn the teachings of love and faith. And “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” (11:9). The Spirit-filled Messiah will lead the human lions and calves, the human wolves and lambs, to live peaceably with each other. The Messiah will be “named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6), as Isaiah 9 says. And there will be an end to war. It says “For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire” (9:5).

The messianic prophecies of Isaiah find some of their fulfillment in the life and person of Jesus, some in the day of Pentecost and the baptism of the Spirit, and some in the future attainment of world peace and an end to strife between nations. The latter promise gives us hope for eventual world peace.

The great promises of Isaiah are part of our faith, and should be revisited frequently. Jesus constructed his own message out of the greatest promises of the prophets. In John 6 we see Jesus saying “It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (John 6:45). When he announces the beginning of his mission, he quotes Isaiah 61 about being anointed with the Spirit and proclaiming good news to the poor and release to the prisoners (Luke 4:18; Isa 61:1).

When he cleanses the temple, he quotes both Isaiah and Jeremiah, saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mark 11:17; Isa 56:7; Jer 7:11). Jesus fulfills the hopes of the prophets, although there is still some fulfilling that is yet to happen, when humanity proves more receptive to the Spirit, more amenable to the ways of peace, and more desirous of the living waters. May we all do our part to further the advance of love and truth, so that that day may come.

Today, may you feel the fire of these words. May you be blessed with spiritual energy, and may the peace of Jesus reside within you, now and always.