

LOUD AND CLEAR

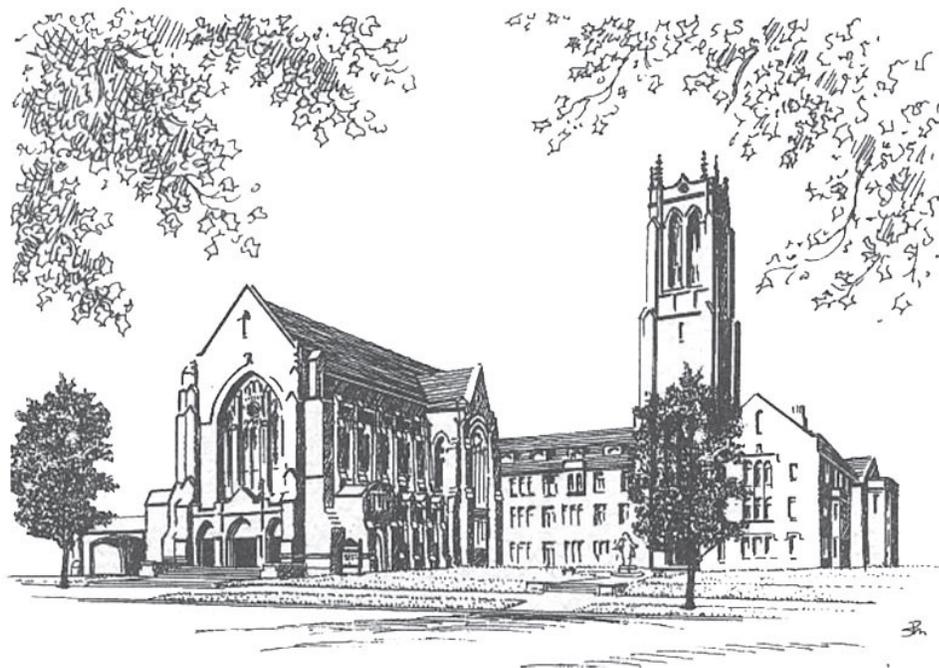
by

Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

December 4, 2016

Second Sunday of Advent

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 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. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 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 cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 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.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Psalm 72

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.

May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.

In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.

Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth.

Amen and Amen.

Romans 15:4-13

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

This 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.’”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But 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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do 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. 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.

“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. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John the Baptist is loud and clear with the message: repent for the kingdom of God is here...

There once was a man who was sick and tired of society, so he went to a monastery. He met the abbot who was in charge of the monastery, and the abbot said there is rule that you can say two words every 10 years.

Ten years went by, and he went to the abbot and said, “Bed hard.”

Ten years later he went to the abbot and said to him, “Food bad.”

Ten years after that he went to the abbot and said, “I quit.”

The abbot said, “I’m not surprised, you’ve been complaining ever since you got here.”

No matter which lectionary year it is, the second Sunday of Advent gives us John, and he sounds like someone with a bone to pick. But in fact he is representing the hopes and expectations of the people pent up for thousands of years. He is the culmination of the prophetic voices calling for people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

The four Gospels offer a wonderful variety of versions of the Christmas story. Luke gives us shepherds; Matthew brings the magi, but Mark and John have none.

The first thing they all agree on is John the Baptist. In all four Gospels John is in the same place wearing the same clothes with the same message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven draws near! Prepare the way of the Lord.” It doesn’t matter which Gospel you read; if you want to get to Jesus, you must pass by John.

John the Baptist is significant because he is the last in the line of prophets. Although he does not call himself one, John is the embodiment of the whole tradition. He is dressed like Elijah and he sounds like Isaiah. He is the bridge with the prophetic tradition. And that’s important, because Jesus is not a one-time healer or miracle worker or teacher passing through. No, John has come to tell the world that Jesus is the branch that grows from the root of Jesse, father of King David. Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise.

There’s another reason that John the Baptist is significant. Listen to those words again: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. John may look like the prophets of old, but there is something new about his message.

I am indebted to a number of insights on John the Baptist for this sermon especially the Rev. Dr. Shawnthea Monroe who notes, “Much of the prophetic tradition is instrumental in its approach. It’s almost an equation of sorts. If we sin, then God will punish us. If we repent, then God will forgive. From Isaiah to Ezekiel to Joel, there is an on-going theme of ‘Shape up...or else.’ The variable that determines the outcome of this holy equation is the behavior of humanity — the faithfulness, or faithlessness, of Israel and Judah — but that is not John’s message.

“John doesn’t say, ‘Repent OR the kingdom of heaven will come near.’ That would be in line with the prophetic tradition, which often portrayed the coming of God as a day of judgment.

“One might assume that the kingdom of heaven coming near was something to be feared, not welcomed — IF John was using it as a threat. But that is not what he’s saying.

“Nor does John use the kingdom of heaven as a reward. He does not say, ‘Repent AND the kingdom of heaven will come near.’ That would be in line with a more merit-based approach to faith, which sounds a lot like the prosperity Gospel.

“Prosperity theology views the Bible as a contract between God and humans: If humans have faith in God, God will reward us with security and prosperity.

“No, what John the Baptist has come to tell us is that we are no longer the key variable in this equation. What is happening in Jesus Christ is God’s doing. The kingdom of heaven has come near. John is proclaiming a new reality. We can choose to be part of it, but ready or not, here it comes. It is time to repent.”

Repentance is not our favorite. It is like the full doctor’s appointment — exam, diagnosis and medication. The exam only does so much, the diagnosis only does so much; it is with the medication that things start to heal. To repent is to take relationships with God and self and others all the way to the finish line — a whole-sale change in mindset.

John the Baptist’s message: We need to reorder our lives, reset our priorities, and return to God...for the kingdom of heaven is here...and we don’t want to miss it.

This message is good news for us.

God’s coming this Advent and Christmas is not dependent on our faithfulness or anyone else’s. There is, however, a desire on God’s part for us to prepare and participate in certain ways through repentance and reconciliation.

This prayer was found written on the wall in Mother Teresa’s home for children in Calcutta:

“People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.

“Forgive them anyway.

“If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

“Be kind anyway.

“If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.

“Be honest and sincere anyway.

“What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.

“Create anyway.

“If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.

“Be happy anyway.

“The good you do today, will often be forgotten.

“Do good anyway.

“Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.

“Give your best anyway.

“In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.”

We prepare by our everyday faithfulness. Each reading today illustrates what God has done and is doing in Jesus — the People (and animals) who don't ordinarily go together go together — oxen and lambs and lions, elephants and donkeys, tea party and establishment, and democrats, Methodists and Baptists, Sadducees and Pharisees, then and now.

This is the world God is making. It will involve some pruning and recovering. The beloved community of reconciliation is what is coming.

There is a story about Martin Luther who read the scripture “Do not worry about what you are to say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say” (Lk 12:12). He decided to take it at its word and so he worked all week on his commentary on the Psalms and did not work a bit on his sermon for the Wittenberg Cathedral that coming Sunday.

He recounts later that when he climbed into the high pulpit and looked out over the sea of faces, the Spirit did indeed speak to him. It whispered in his ear these words: “Martin, you didn't prepare.”

Whether it is a sermon for the preacher, or life and the kingdom of God for any of u, it is coming. Embrace it or not, it will come. This is Advent. We might as well prepare for it.

Amen.