

Expectation

Matthew 11:2-6 Isaiah 11:1-6

For the four Sundays of Advent, we will be reflecting together on 4 readings from the prophet Isaiah, which are customarily associated with Advent and Christmas. These readings may sound familiar from past Advent and Christmas observances and services, or from Christmas carols, from Handel's Messiah (if you're into classical music), or even from some Christmas cards.

These 4 passages from Isaiah speak to the themes of: expectation, preparation, salvation, and illumination, which will prepare us for the Christmas eve celebration. So, I'm not strictly following the traditional themes of hope, peace, joy, and love in the messages, but those themes are very much present in all of the readings, and they will emerge in our reflections as we go along. And, they are the focus of the Advent wreath and the liturgy each Sunday.

There isn't a title to this series, but if there was one it might be, "Isaiah's greatest hits for Advent." Many musicians or bands seem to have a greatest hits album, or a Christmas album, so why not Isaiah?

Isaiah 11:1-6

11 A shoot shall come out from the stump 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.
- ³ 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;
- ⁴ 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 slay the wicked.
- 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.
- ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
- 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.

This is the word of the Lord.

After church one day a young boy was asked by his mother what he had learned at Sunday School that morning, and the 8-year-old said, "Well, our teacher told us about when God sent Moses behind the enemy lines to rescue the Israelites from the Egyptians. When they came to the Red Sea, Moses called for the engineers to build a pontoon bridge to the other side. After the Israelites had

all crossed, they looked back and saw the Egyptians coming. So, immediately Moses radioed headquarters to send bombers to blow up the bridge, and the Israelites were saved.”

“Bobby!” exclaimed his startled mother, “Is that really the way your Sunday School Teacher told that story?” “Well, no,” said Bobby, “but if I told it *her* way, you would never believe it.”

And how true that is of this Isaiah passage! This image of a peaceable future. An image that some may believe is a fairytale, pie in the sky, a far-fetched idealized moment as captured by an artist living in a fantasy world.

This passage, however, is a broad stroke of an image of hope that empowers us to walk into a hopeful future, in the midst of our present reality. Even in the midst of troubled times we are called to hold onto this image of a peaceable future. This, like the others we will hear, is a passage often heard during Advent, so let us consider what God, through Isaiah, has to say to us in this season.

First, a reminder about the prophets, in general: That is, they employ a lot of imagery, and metaphor! As poets do (and the prophets were poets), they invite us to use our imaginations to envision a hopeful future, and, they provoke us to open our hearts to be moved. They invite us to use our imaginations to

envision a future with hope, and provoke us to open our hearts in order to move us. Which means that they will sometimes startle us awake and aware, so that we may take action to live into that future hope, and not just see it as sentimental greeting card material. Like poets, the prophets sometimes employ imagery that appears unrealistic or ridiculous, even startling, but nonetheless paints a picture for us of what is possible.

And while some of the imagery of this particular passage from Isaiah 11 may seem unrealistic or idealistic, a shoot growing out of a tree stump is a *common* image—especially around these parts in the PNW!

This image of a shoot growing from a tree stump is an image of hope. What looks like it's dead actually contains the stuff for new life to emerge. Stumps still contain life because the tree still has roots that have stored energy and nutrients and can re-grow a new tree from the stump. It's also possible, even after a stump has begun to decay, that, over time, seeds carried by the wind or deposited by birds and other critters become embedded in the stump, which is still full of nutrients—maybe even *more* nutrients because of the process it undergoes during decay and because it gathers all kinds of other organic material through the seasons and cycles of the years.

So this is our first image of hope from this passage: a shoot growing from a stump.

In Isaiah's time and context, the stump likely represented Israel during or after the exile in the 8th century B.C., when the Babylonians conquered Israel and deported a significant portion of the population to a foreign land, and occupied their homeland for 70 years. So, in a sense, Israel was cut down as a people. And God wanted to instill hope in them: that what appears dead isn't really dead; there is life! Something new will emerge, and it will be harmonious and abundant. And, there will be a future leader who will bring this to fruition.

And it needs to be noted (parenthetically) that some of Israel's most assertive, hopeful, and imaginative poetry was written during the dark days of Israel's 70 years of exile. And the 4 readings from Isaiah that we will reflect upon together during Advent come from those dark days—or, as a result of them.

Just like we might be feeling we are living through dark days, experiencing an exile of sorts, a time of disorientation, when so much that we have held dear and have experienced as normal has been shaken or has seemingly been obliterated. And we, somewhat like Israel in exile, feel like we are living in a strange land.

So these images, this poetry, these messages from Isaiah and from others like Mary and Zechariah (who we will also hear from in coming weeks) will provide images of hope for us.

Back to this imagery of a shoot growing from the stump. Isaiah says that it is the stump of Jesse; Jesse being king David's father. David became Israel's most famous and beloved King. And, as we are told in the Christmas readings from Luke's and Matthew's gospels, Jesus is descended from David, born in the city of David (Bethlehem). So, this is how the dots got connected from this reading in Isaiah 11 to the season of Advent. Because, it has been understood, it foretells the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, the "son of David."

In its time and context, Isaiah's prophecy in the 8th century B.C. was indeed a message about the coming of a Messiah from the line of Jesse and David. Yet this messiah was thought, or hoped, to appear *imminently* on the scene. And because the Messiah didn't appear right away, in their time, the Messianic hope and expectation increased as the years passed, and by the time of the 4th century B.C. the messianic expectation had reached a fever pitch.

Read Malachi, from the 4th century, the last book of the Old Testament and the last of the prophets that were heard from in Israel for 400 years, and there is a palpable sense of something—or *someone*—coming. If you listen to Handel's

Messiah at this time of year, Handel uses passages from Malachi in a series of pensive and anticipatory oratorios. For example, he says/sings: “The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come into his temple... and who shall abide the day of his coming, and who shall stand?...” If you listen to that string of pieces, musically, you’ll hear that Handel rightly captures the intensity of the expectation: something is about to go down! And that’s in the 4th century B.C. Yet, for 400 years after Malachi the prophets were silent, and God was not heard from.

And then, by the time of the 1st century the Messianic expectation became an obsession.

When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, there were writings in those scrolls from sectarian groups from around the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C. who had gathered and sequestered themselves in caves in the hills, away from the cities and towns, and their communities were formed, mainly, around the expectation of the Messiah’s coming. They lived austere lives, observed strict rules, and devoted themselves to preparing for the Messiah, who they believed was to appear imminently. John the Baptist was thought to be a member of one of those communities at a place called Qumran, in what is today called the West Bank. Remember that the gospel writers tell us that John wore camel’s hair for

clothing and ate locusts and honey. That's austere! And, he preached fire and brimstone! As a way of telling the people, get ready! The messiah is coming!

Remember the old Flip Wilson show? He had this funny sketch with Sammy Davis jr dressed up as a judge, saying "You can testify, but you just can't win, cuz I'm here to tell you, you're as guilty as sin. Here comes da judge, here comes da judge, you better get ready cuz here comes da judge." That's John the Baptist.

So, the expectation of a Messiah was in the air. We get a hint of that in the gospels as people thought John the Baptist *was* the Messiah; and he had to tell people "I'm not the one!" And there were many false messiahs who claimed to be the one.

And what was their expectation of the Messiah? After centuries of buildup, what did they expect the Messiah would be and do? The Dead Sea Scrolls explain it in detail, but we can hear it in John the Baptist's preaching in the Bible. John the Baptist reveals the hopes and expectations of the people, including his own expectations, when he says (Matthew 3:11-f): *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with 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."* What does John expect? John

expects Rambo messiah. Here comes da judge! Who separates the good from the bad and brings judgment on the bad! Power to destroy enemies! That's why John the Baptist was so popular: he preached fire and brimstone. That's what the people wanted, and hoped for and expected.

But after Jesus begins his ministry and John sees and hears about him doing things like proclaiming good news to the riff-raff, exercising power, *not to destroy* but to heal and bless and reconcile, and choosing a path of humility, John the Baptist—who by that time is in prison—calls his disciples to him and asks them to send a message to Jesus: “*Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?*” John is disappointed in Jesus. You can hear the disappointment in his voice. Jesus was not what John, and most of the people, expected in the coming messiah.

Instead, what they got was a messiah who was all about wolves and lambs abiding together, and calves and lions *sharing* a table rather than one being the meal for the other. What they got was a shoot growing from a stump, not a replacement oak, already 70 feet tall. Jesus came to *inaugurate* a new era, and a new movement, not to divide and conquer and set the world right in one fell swoop.

And in the reading we heard from Matthew's gospel, Jesus reveals his self-awareness about all of this, that he is not what the majority of people expected, and so he utters this simple statement: "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." In other words, there will be people who *are* offended that he chooses a path of humility and hangs out with all kinds of different people. Yet for those who did have ears to hear and eyes to see so as not to take offense, their hopes and expectations *were* fulfilled in Jesus. Because he meets the true needs of every human heart.

This is a long way around to saying, this shoot emerging from the stump of Jesse, this first image of hope, carried a message of who the savior would be, and what this person's leadership and influence would be. And where their true power will come from.

Isaiah tells us it is the *Spirit of God* that will provide the wisdom, the strength, the leadership and the courage for the messiah—and the messiah's people—to do what is right and just. The prophet Zechariah, a contemporary of Malachi and also one of the last prophets heard from, captures this nicely and concisely with *his* version of this hope and expectation, when he conveys God's word, saying: "*Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord.*" (4:6) That's the prophet's way of saying, not by control or coercion or bullying or

lobbying or with money or force, but with humility and wisdom and spiritual strength will the David-leader create a peaceful Kingdom.

The other hopeful image here that stirs our imagination and invites our hearts to be moved, is that of all kinds of wildlife living in harmony, with a child in their midst in safety and, surprisingly, in leadership.

This vision of a reordered creation is remarkable: Predators dwell in harmony with their prey, carnivorous instincts are transformed, and a vulnerable human, a child, is free to play with venomous snakes. Interspecies violence effectively comes to an end, harmony ensues, and a child-leader takes center stage. This is audacious poetic and prophetic imagery that Isaiah unleashes on us. Imagery of hope, and peace.

Now, this sounds ridiculous and impossible. I mean, as much as I would love to see lions and lambs snuggling together, animal lover that I am, if I snuck into Woodland Park Zoo and put them together as an experiment, it would be a bloody mess before long.

But let's use our imaginations, as we're encouraged to, and envision a peaceful future where *all* predatory and violent instincts and practices are remade, transformed, or just eliminated. Because, no transformation of *nature* can be envisioned apart from a renewal of *human* affairs, right?

So, can you think of predatory practices or violence among human beings? And can we use our hopeful imaginations to consider ways that this humble leader, the Prince of Peace, can lead and instruct us in the way of peace, so that each of us could contribute toward a more just and harmonious society?

And, can we see that it is already happening?! If we only peruse the *headlines* there is little evidence to support the notion that better days are coming. Unless we only watch the little 30 second tidbit of a cheerful story at the end of the news about how, in spite of all the stuff they just told us about in the previous 29 minutes and 30 seconds, well, I guess there is some good going on.

But there is good going on! *A lot* of good. Those need to be the stories we go and find. Those are the stories that need to occupy the majority of our time and attention. Because they also spark our imaginations, and move us. And, they're happening all around us. We need to pray for eyes to see and ears to hear those stories; and... to *create* those stories.

Podcaster Krista Tippett, in her show "On Being," says in one of her podcasts that we are actually living in a *generative* time—and have been for decades, believe it or not. She's been a journalist for many years and has been elevating these stories and inviting listeners to take notice. So much good is being done and there are movements afoot that are taking root, springing up, bringing

equity, causing people to thrive, and strengthening our communities.

Movements that are sustainable and will be long-lasting.

But they aren't going to make the headlines right now because, like the roots of grass and trees, they are growing underground and away from the sound and the fury of what is typically vying for our attention. But some day—maybe in the near future, maybe longer—we will see the fruit of these movements, which began as a small shoot, or a young child (or children), and in the imaginations of hopeful persons who envisioned God's peaceful Kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

A couple of examples, from right here in our area. On Camano Island, there is an organization called Circlewood (photo with logo). My friend James Amadon is the director of Circlewood (he preached here a few years ago). Quoting from their purpose statement: "Circlewood is a community of people committed to cultivating a more ecologically-conscious faith." Their stated purpose is "Accelerating the greening of faith." Their goal is to help Christians read the Bible through an ecological lens, and work *with*, and *in* creation, in cooperation with God, to help the earth and its inhabitants thrive. They also work with schools, teaching kids about ecology and getting them outdoors (picture).

Circlewood is but one small organization, but James tells me that over the last 8 years, he has personally met or discovered at least 100 other organizations and communities doing grassroots work like this around the world—which means that there are probably actually thousands of organizations and communities doing grassroots work like this. James says, they all look different, but the common thread is that they are doing their part to create the kind of world Isaiah 11 envisions. They can't do it all, but they can do their part. Under the radar, not making headlines. Not yet, that is. That's encouraging.

Another local example (picture), whose story needs to be told, is about a church in Kent that became aware their neighborhood was changing, and becoming more multicultural and multi-ethnic, especially with refugees from around the world. They also noticed there was a food scarcity in their area, so... they de-paved their parking lot and partnered with a local non-profit organization called World Relief to build an enormous community garden, with water cisterns that gather rainfall, so that refugees and immigrants could grow food, especially food that they missed from their home country. The great side benefit of this—which is a potential side benefit of any community garden—is that it created... community! (next picture) People rubbing shoulders, telling stories, giving advice about how to grow foods and even teaching classes, learning about one another's

cultures. And, finding that they had much in common with each other. That was a bold venture, and one of the coolest stories I've heard in a long time.

This is but one example of churches across the country doing things like this, as they look around at their neighborhood and community and adapt their mission, their facilities, and their grounds, to help people and communities around them thrive (like we are trying to do...)

Good things are happening! Taking root, so to speak.

One last story, from the country of Columbia, that I just read about (last picture): Colombia just recently declared its entire Amazon biome, 42% of its territory, a reserve for renewable natural resources and will block all requests for oil and mining extraction, halting all new large-scale extraction. Let that sink in for a moment. **Colombia just declared all its rainforests, almost half its territory, a reserve.** Acting environment minister Irene Vélez is urging Columbia's neighbors to follow suit, framing the move as one of climate safety, because the Amazon rainforest is crucial to the planet's health and ecological balance.

Here is what's really cool about this story:

Who is protecting those rainforests? While in theory it's the government's job, in practice, **unarmed indigenous patrols have become the most effective forces protecting the Colombian Amazon.** More than 50,000 guards now operate

year-round where state forces cannot, and their unarmed, community-rooted patrols deter illegal extraction and safeguard isolated indigenous tribes. It's not just Colombia that's doing this: indigenous guards are coordinating across borders and training their counterparts in Peru and Ecuador.

There are hundreds of stories like this, here and around the world, of groups, organizations, and even entire countries, imagining a hopeful future, a future that the prophets like Isaiah imagined, where everyone thrives. And as I said, we need to go find these stories. They won't come up on your news feed, or in the papers or news broadcasts. If you want some help finding stories like this, check out the weekly email this week where I'll provide some links to websites where you can find them.

Advent carol (hear the anticipation in the music, and in the words): Now
the Heavens Start to Whisper