

Expectation

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

For the four Sundays of Advent we will be reflecting 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 certain Advent & Christmas cards.

These passages from Isaiah speak of: expectation, preparation, salvation, and illumination. 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." Every musician or band seems 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 kill 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 on his walkie-talkie 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 kingdom. 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 the future in the midst of our present reality. Even in the midst of troubled times we are called to hold that image of a peaceable kingdom. 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 word about the prophets, in general: That is, they employ a lot of imagery, and metaphor! As poets do, they invite us to use our imaginations to envision a hopeful future, and, they invite us to open our hearts to be moved. They invite us to use our imaginations to envision a future with hope, and open our hearts move us and sometimes startle us awake and aware, so we may take

action to live into that future hope, and not just see it as sentimental greeting card material—sometimes using imagery that appears unrealistic or ridiculous, 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 from a tree stump is a *common* image—especially around these parts in the PNW! Which is why I love this image on the screen and bulletin cover; it's contextual to our area.

This image 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, once 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: 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 dead; there is life! Something new will emerge, and it will be good and right and peaceful. 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, imaginative, and audacious poetry was uttered 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 the prophet and from 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 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 very likely 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, 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: "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 around the expectation of the Messiah. 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 the West Bank.

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? You heard a bit of it from the Isaiah reading: the much-anticipated savior's job was to straighten everybody out, and, kill the wicked. We also hear it in John the Baptist's preaching about the

coming messiah. John the Baptist reveals the hopes and expectations of the people, including his own expectations. Listen to what 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. The terminator savior. 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 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 is now 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, or most of the people, expected in the messiah.

Instead, what they got was a “soft” 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 all at once.

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 the appearance of weakness. 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.

This is a long way around to saying, this shoot emerging from the stump of Jesse, this first image of hope, carried a lot of expectation of what (or who) it would be, and what this person's leadership and influence would be. And where their true power and intellect 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: "*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. And by association, his people.

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. And although a different image is used in this second image, it connects with and naturally flows from the first one.

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.

Additional insights emerge when this text is read against its broader ancient Near Eastern background. In the royal propaganda of the ancient near East, royal figures frequently encounter predatory animals, especially lions. And so, it is no surprise to find a royal child depicted as a shepherd among lions. What is

surprising, however, is the way in which this young shepherd from Isaiah interacts with them. In general, kings would be depicted fighting and killing lions, not leading them or living among them. Images on screen...

The killing of lions demonstrated one's worthiness to rule, and was a sign of divine favor (thus, in this last image, the boy is looking heavenward and raising an arm up, as if to say, "Here I am; I am worthy." (back to tree and stump image)

An excellent Biblical example of this is young David, in his bid to fight Goliath. Young David demonstrates his royal credibility when he says to King Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this barbarian Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God." Then David said, "The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine" (1 Sam 17:34-37). David was not only acting like a shepherd; he was acting like a king who believed that God's favor was upon him.

Unlike his ancient Near Eastern contemporaries, however, the Davidic ruler of Isaiah 11, this shoot from the stump of Jesse, does not *hunt* lions. Rather, he

mysteriously *remakes* them. And he does so in a way that utterly eliminates predatory violence from the food chain.

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, 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 Davidic 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 on¹.

Those need to be the stories we go and find. Those are the stories that need to occupy our time and attention. Because 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 a recent podcast that we are actually living in a generative time—and have been for decades. 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 springing up, taking root, 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 because, like the roots of grass and trees, they are happening 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), in the imaginations of hopeful persons who envisioned God's peaceful Kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

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