

Isaiah 11: 1-10 Water, Spirit and Fire

Around this time of the year, I seem to start to hear the phrase “the real meaning of Christmas” a lot. It comes to us at the end of holiday feel-good movies old and new, or we may read it in the concluding paragraph of a heart-warming story. We might be reminded of it even in TV ads. In the hustle bustle of the holiday season into which we are moving, we bump into these occasional claims to the “real meaning of Christmas,” and every time my ears perk up; oh, what is it? I was tempted to use it as my sermon title but that would be a bit too cocky, and to me, nobody tells it better than John the Baptist, who tells it like it is: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Yes, it’s the return of John the Baptist. Every year, on the Second Sunday of Advent, he makes his wild appearance, crying out in the wilderness, calling us to repent and calling religious leaders names, and speaking of wrath and ax and unquenchable fire. Wrapped up and hidden somewhere in there is the real meaning of Christmas, waiting for us to discover and open.

To the writers of the New Testament Gospels, John the Baptist represents the tradition of Hebrew prophets, like Isaiah and Elijah. They recognized John the Baptist in the words of Isaiah, “A voice cries out: in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” As for his outfit of camel’s hair with a leather belt, it could have been a hand-me-down from Elijah. He is the bridge between the eras in Israel’s history. His message that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” unites him with the longed-for hope of Israel and connects him to those who came to listen to him in the wilderness, and to those early churches of the Gospel writers, all the way down to us, awaiting the fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven. And how is this the real message of Christmas? Because the kingdom of heaven is coming in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, whose birth and whose return we await.

Before exploring deeper what this might mean to you and me, personally and as a community, let us first turn again to this vision of the kingdom of heaven. Let’s recall the image the prophet Isaiah gave us last week. I see God’s holy mountain, Zion, and the nations who were at war with one another going up to it all together to receive instruction, so they can learn the ways of God. And having learned God’s ways, they started to beat swords into ploughshares and the spears into pruning-hooks, turning the tools of destruction into the tools for sustaining life. It’s a vision of peace among all peoples that is the destiny to which God is calling us.

And then, there is this image of the Peaceable Kingdom we heard from Isaiah today. In this vision, under the rule of the ideal king emerging from the stump of Jesse, the lineage of the king David, the whole earth is filled with the knowledge of God, just as the waters cover the sea. The people, vulnerable as children, live in safety with other creatures, animals both domestic and wild. It's a vision of peace not only among peoples but also among all creatures.

And from there, it is not a stretch to imagine our relationship not only with other animals but also with inanimate, natural world. In a way the people in the Biblical times did not know, we know today that when we destroy the ecosystem, it comes back to haunt us. This image of the peaceable kingdom with focus on peace and security for all of God's creation, this, too, is the destiny God promises God's people. It's our Advent Promise.

So, when John the Baptist cries out "the kingdom of heaven is near," it is this peace and tranquility that is coming into being. Then, why this mention of wrath, and ax, and burning in unquenchable fire? Here is where it gets tricky; coming of this peaceable Kingdom involves judgment. In both these images Isaiah holds up before us, God of the House of Jacob on the mountain of the Lord and the ideal king filled with the spirit of the Lord and who does God's will, they judge.

And these days, many of us have allergic reaction to the word "judge," especially in the church. Even though we are taught God is the only judge, we have judged and have seen others judge; we have been judged and have seen others being judged, in the name of God and in the church (oh, not here in Jemez Springs, you know, but the churches everywhere,) and it has not brought us into a peaceable kingdom; far from it. It has driven countless people away from the church, and many of them left badly wounded and broken.

Because we don't like the word judge, when we hear it or any images and metaphors we associate with it, like ax, wrath, and unquenchable fire, we don't get close enough to the text to see what's really going on. The meaning the word has been hijacked by the fire and brimstone preachers and the "let's scare them up to heaven" kind of God-talk. But that's not what God's judgment does.

Going back to both these Isaiah passages, it is when God judges between the nations and arbitrated for many people, that they start to beat swords into ploughshares. And it is when the ideal king judges, not by what his eyes see but with righteousness, he decides for the meek of the earth with equity and justice. In this judgment of God, what is taken out or destroyed, or even

killed, is anything that resist or block the coming of the kingdom of heaven, whether it is in our hearts or in our community, and we are made free and empowered to pursue God's peaceable kingdom. God's judgment liberates us.

And "Sin" is the biblical name for whatever is in us that resists or opposes God's will, which is always our well-being, individual and communal. While the language of judgment and fire is intimidating if not outright scary, because we're quick to assume that "I" as a person stand accused and made the target of the unquenchable fire, it is God's love to remove from within us that which would derail us from the life-giving path God has set before us, the path that leads to the kingdom of heaven. God's judgment transforms us.

So, John cried out "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Repent is another word that could trigger allergic reaction in some of us, if we thought that repent meant to just feel very bad about the way we are and be very, very sorry about being who we are. But John's command to "repent" wasn't that. Repentance is the basic reorientation of one's life. So, John's call to repentance was his invitation to notice that the paths you've chosen are taking you in the wrong direction, and so turn around and come follow God's way, because the kingdom of heaven is coming. Here is your chance. Come, confess your sin, that is, tell me whatever it is you're carrying that is blocking you from following God's way, and I'll wash it away for you, so you are free to follow God. That's what John's baptism with water for repentance was all about; a ritual washing that gave the people hope. John did not scare them into getting baptized.

John did have harsh words for the religious leaders, however, because he knew they opposed him and opposed the coming of the kingdom of heaven. But even those harsh words are aimed at their transformation. John challenges the religious leaders' assumption that faithfulness is a matter of inheritance, that they are "in" the kingdom because they descend from Abraham. Knowing they are gravely mistaken, John tells them to "bear fruit worthy of repentance," and that calls for transformation on their part.

John baptized with water in the Jordan River as a ritual sign of repentance in the light of the approaching kingdom, and he tells the world the one who baptizes with "the Holy Spirit and Fire" is coming. The Holy Spirit is the power of God that moves within us, searching every corner of our being for that which is waiting for redemption. And the fire is the fire that burns up what needs to burn in order for the good to live in us, and that is what our transformation looks like.

The Kingdom of Heaven is coming near in Jesus. Jesus took on all that opposes the reign of God, in us and in the world, even death. What will finally be true in God's future for the whole creation is a present reality in Jesus, who embodied and expressed the peace, love, and mercy that God wills for all people. The nearness of the kingdom in Jesus is the gift of total healing for the world.

As we await the coming into our world of this Christ, let us prepare our hearts, searching for and offering up to God anything, grief, despair, regrets, anything that is holding us back from making the room for the kingdom of heaven within us.