

2 Advent, Yr. A.

December 4, 2016

Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

It's said that without a vision the people will perish. That seems pretty commonsensical, doesn't it? Your vision, your understanding of the world and of your place in it, sets the direction for your life. On a larger scale, it sets that direction for a people, or a society. And the same vision or understanding gives us standards by which we can judge a current state of affairs. This is where I am – this is where I'm trying to go – how can I live my life so that I get there? In this morning's readings, Isaiah, Paul and Matthew are all setting out a vision for God's people.

Isaiah first. In the midst of turmoil, warfare, exile and horrible leadership, this part of Isaiah is about hope. He paints that picture of the peaceable kingdom. We heard part of it last week: that when people walk in God's ways, they'll take instruments of death like swords and spears and pound them into instruments of life – ploughshares and pruning hooks. And today we hear more about that kingdom where no harm will be done, even to those who are most vulnerable. The accepted understanding that there will always be strong against the weak, and predators destroying prey, is gutted – no more, Isaiah says. We're probably all familiar with the painting by Edward Hicks – which shows not only the animals at peace and the child leading them, but also in the background, colonists and Native Americans co-existing in peace. And, as we heard last week, Isaiah thinks that there's a certain kind of leadership that is essential to this state of affairs. He talks about the stump of Jesse and about a branch growing out of that stump. It's a reference to the House of David (you'll remember that Jesse was David's father) and to the expectation that the House of David would provide that kind of leadership that would be characterized by justice and righteousness. In his current situation, Isaiah looks around and sees that there's not much left of Jesse's lineage – instead of a strong, flourishing tree, there's a stump that's almost dead – and yet, he says, yet, out of that stump, God will honor his promises to the House of David, and a tiny tendril of new life will come forth and, when it does, we'll have a leader who is filled with the Spirit of God. And, because of that spirit, he'll lead with wisdom and understanding, with knowledge and reverence for the Lord. He'll judge, not by appearances, but with righteousness and equity. Isaiah is looking forward to a Messiah who will make this new way of life, this new understanding possible. Here it's called the peaceable kingdom. In the NT, it's called the Kingdom of God. All of the images in this passage are beautiful, but the sentence that really touches my heart is the one about the earth being full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Creation filled with the presence of God.

This past week, I was one of the readers for diocesan canonical exams and one of the questions had to do with the meaning of baptism and of the ritual, part of which is the priest blessing the water in that powerful prayer of Thanksgiving over the water. At a break, I told the group about the birth of my oldest daughter's first child. At the time they were living in HI and it was our plan (my daughter's and mine) to baptize the baby in the Pacific Ocean. For a number of reasons that didn't happen. But, when I told the story, the Bishop said something to the effect of that prayer blessing the water – "Imagine," he said, "you would have been blessing the entire Pacific Ocean!" My first thought was, "Wow, yes, that's right" and my second was, "I really

missed an incredible opportunity” but my third was, “Doesn’t matter, it’s already blessed – all of creation is and we’re walking around in a God-saturated, blessed creation. I don’t have to do it – I just have to wake up and see it!

And we do have glimpses of that blessedness, don’t we. I remember telling you, when we got back from Israel, about celebrating Eucharist on the shores of the Lake of Galilee, struggling a bit to see the words because it was pitch black and we were using just a flashlight, but then, at the moment of the consecration, holding up the bread and wine and seeing the entire sky filled with stars – and knowing, knowing in the deepest part of me, God’s presence, God’s blessing, God’s goodness.

But we know, too, that we’re in a broken creation, not the one that God intended from the beginning and so we called to work toward that healed and harmonious creation that Isaiah is talking about. Someone has said that it’s a bit like an artist’s diptych – one panel showing the mess we’re in, but the other showing that peaceable kingdom we’re heading for, signs of which are already all around us.

And then we have John. His message – Repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near, is the same message as Isaiah and, later, Jesus. That word “repent” we hear more often in Lent and you’ll probably remember that the primary meaning isn’t feeling sorry for something you’ve done or feeling guilty or ashamed. Instead, it’s about that waking up we talked about last week – waking up and realizing that you’re walking in the wrong direction and changing course – orienting yourself back towards God. Retired military in the congregation will get that one translation of the word is “ABOUT FACE!” It’s about recognizing that things aren’t right and then making a choice to realign yourself – to work for that justice and righteousness that God is about, to work against oppression and violence. John was in the Jewish tradition and was in line with what the rabbis had taught about this. There was a whole literature around the process of repentance: you washed yourself as a symbol of being made clean, then you were to “remove the evil of your days from before God’s eyes, to cease doing evil and learn to do good, to seek justice, correct oppression and defend the vulnerable. You hear that in John when he says that it’s about repentance, but it’s also about bearing the “fruit of repentance” – LIVING differently, not just thinking or talking about it. There’s a rabbinic story about that – about a selfish, curmudgeonly fellow who’s at the pearly gates and the angels are there with a scale, weighing his good deeds against his bad. But, even with their thumbs on the scale (and, after all, how much would the thumb of an angel weight?) they can’t get the right results. And then one of them remembers that one time he helped someone whose wagon was stuck and he got a bit of mud on his coat – the angel put that bit of mud on the scales and that did the job! God is ever merciful.

Scholars think that Jesus was originally a disciple of John’s, but that at some point they parted ways. There’s quite the difference, ultimately, in their messages. John comes breathing fire, talking about judgment and winnowing forks and axes. But then, Jesus – never in his ministry does he burn anything down. Sure, he gets angry, but in Jesus’ story everybody lives and no one, to go back to Isaiah’s peaceable kingdom, no one has to devour anyone else to do it. No bringing fire, no laying waste – instead of all that, Jesus comes with love, forgiveness, healing,

acceptance – instead of that ax and winnowing fork he has a basin and towel and bread and wine. His way is still demanding – all those kingdom actions and attitudes at every corner – service, love, inclusion, forgiveness – none of that is ever easy. But, as someone said, in a contest between John and Jesus, it's perhaps still easier to choose wine that had once been water than a locust smoothie.

And finally, a word about Paul because in Romans, he's hitting the central Advent theme of hope and anticipation. We're hopeful because the Scriptures tell us the story of a God who is steadfast. It's God's promises, after all, that allow us to have that sure and certain hope that gives us the encouragement to live as God intends. Paul is particularly talking to the Christians of the Roman community – a community made up of both Jews and Gentiles. And it's that kind of diverse and yet loving community that Paul says will glorify God. Welcome one another, he tells them, because Christ has first welcomed you. In this season when gift-giving is uppermost in our minds, these scriptures give us the incomparable gift of a vision of a world filled with the knowledge of God, a world of hope and harmony, a world whose future rests in the hands of a trustworthy God. And that vision not only gives us comfort, but is meant to give us courage as well – the courage to live those kingdom lives right now. In every action, in every decision, in how we spend our time, our talents, our energies – all of that is to be held up and judged by whether it's furthering God's kingdom. In this vision, in this calculus, there's nothing too small, nothing mundane – everything and everybody matters. So, we're called to wake up, to look for those tendrils, those shoots that are the kingdom breaking in, to nurture those shoots and to plant a few of our own. We have been given the vision as well as the necessary grace and the courage. Now we just need to act in accord with it. Amen.